

In Step With **JEANETTE HARDER** Child abuse and neglect prevention has a leader in Mt. Lake native

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Child abuse casts a shadow the length of a lifetime, wrote American author Herbert Ward.

That one sentence is often used as a base from which to build as to why there is an absolute need to protect children from, and prevent from happening, child abuse and neglect.

Abuse can happen in any home, any culture, any country, any religion, and any socioeconomic background.

Child abuse — be it physical, emotional or sexual, or any/or/all combination — along with child neglect — have been, and once again are, headlines in today's news in large, bold fonts.

As disturbing as these reports are in newspapers, on television, online, or on the radio, these tragic scandals provide a good opportunity to address this critical issue.

Stopping abuse is not only about intervention — but also prevention. Serving as a leader in providing information and resources in preventing child abuse and neglect is Mt. Lake native, Jeanette (Stoesz) Harder.

Dr. Harder, author of the the book, "*Let the Children Come: Preparing Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect*" (published by Herald Press) says "Churches need to do everything they can to protect children. This needs to happen within our own families and churches, as well as in the communities in which we live, work, volunteer, and play."

Harder, who is on the faculty of Grace Abbott School of Social Work at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, is also one of the founders of Dove's Nest, a Mennonite-based organization formed to help "faith

communities keep children and youth safe," according to their web site at: www.DovesNest.net. Harder encourages churches to draft child-protection policies and enforce them, such as doing background checks on anyone who has access to children, including pastors, youth ministers, Sunday School teachers, custodian, bus drivers, and nursery workers.

In addition, Dove's Nest offers the *Circle of Grace*, a Christian safe-environment curriculum that helps to form and educate children about the value of positive relationships with God and others.

Harder emphasizes, though, that "it is the responsibility of adults to keep children and youth safe, not the responsibility of the kids."

She goes on to say, "The church, unfortunately, in my experience, is in denial about child abuse. They tell me, 'We're good people here, it doesn't happen here.' And yet, I'm hearing from so many survivors and victims of abuse saying, 'Yes it does happen here.' In fact, they're saying the church sometimes re-victimizes them by not responding, by not listening.

Recently, Harder participated in a "Q & A" with the *Observer/Advocate*, in which she shared what led her to the work she is doing in researching and emphasizing the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

How did you get involved in social work with a focus on child abuse and neglect?

As a child, I was loved and cared for well by my family, church, school, and community. I always felt safe, and my gifts and abilities were nurtured. My childhood played a huge part in my becoming who I am today. While growing up and in my college years, I was blissfully oblivious to child abuse and neglect. I now know that children around me were being hurt by abuse and neglect, but I was blind to it. If we don't know what child abuse and neglect is or we don't want to see it, we won't recognize it and we certainly won't be able to keep children and youth safe.

After college, I began to get restless — wanting to do more with my life. My husband and I began volunteering at a children's home. We quickly grew to love the girls, and when the girls were unable to go home for weekends or holidays, we began taking them into our home

instead. We played games with them, went camping with them, took them to church with us, even took them home to our families at the holidays.

After getting my graduate degree in social work, I found myself on the job market. I came across a three-line ad in the newspaper looking for a case manager to work with families at risk for child abuse and neglect. Getting to know these families and coming to understand their plight changed my life. The risk factors of poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness are significant and very hard to overcome. It's only by the grace of God that I was not born into a family with these risk factors. But some children are, and I came to realize through entangling my life with these families that they need to be given a chance to see how things can be different and need help in taking steps in that direction.

After five years of working with families at-risk for child abuse and neglect, I had an overwhelming desire to learn more about what we can do to prevent child abuse and neglect. I went back to school again, got my PhD, and now I find myself on faculty at the Grace Abbott School of Social Work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. In this position, I am able to write, speak, and train extensively about the prevention of child abuse and neglect, the strengthening of families, and the overcoming of risk factors.

What is child abuse and neglect?

Neglect is the most common form of maltreatment; in your state, Minnesota, over 60% of all reports in 2009 were allegations of neglect. Neglect usually involves the failure of the child's caregiver to:

- Supply the child with necessary food, clothing, shelter, medical or mental health care, or appropriate supervision.
- Protect the child from conditions or actions that endanger the child.
- Take steps to ensure that a child is educated according to the law.

Exposing a child to certain drugs during pregnancy and causing emotional harm to a child may also be considered neglect.

Physical abuse is any physical injury or threat of harm or substantial injury, inflicted by a caregiver upon a child other than by accidental means. The impact of physical abuse can range from minor bruises to

severe internal injuries and death. Physical abuse does not include reasonable and moderate physical discipline of a child that does not result in an injury.

Mental injury is harm to the child's psychological capacity or emotional stability evidenced by an observable and substantial impairment of the child's functioning.

Sexual abuse is the subjection of a child to a criminal sexual act or threatened act by a person responsible for the child's care or by a person who has a significant relationship to the child or is in a position of authority.

As you shared, the abuse can be physical, emotional, sexual — or neglect — of a child's well-being. As a researcher, share with us how prevalent abuse of children is in this country.

Statistics for Minnesota show that each year, county and tribal child protection agencies throughout the state respond to thousands of reports of maltreatment of children. In 2009, over 17,000 reports of child maltreatment were addressed by the child protection system. Approximately 70 percent of the reports received a family assessment, while the remainder received a family investigation.

During Federal fiscal year 2009, an estimated 3.3 million referrals, involving the alleged maltreatment of approximately 6.0 million children, were received by Child Protection Services (CPS) agencies. Of these referrals, 61.9 percent were screened in for a response by CPS agencies. One-quarter of the CPS responses determined at least one child who was found to be a victim of abuse and neglect.

Is any community — be it by geography or faith — immune? Why or why not?

Sadly, child abuse and neglect is all around us. We just need to know what to look for. We need to have the courage to keep children and youth safe everywhere we go. Regardless of whether we live in the country, in a small town, or a big city, child abuse and neglect is present. It is also present in our schools and churches and families. No community is immune from child abuse and neglect. Certainly some communities are more susceptible, however. We need to do all we can to make sure everyone's needs are met, regardless of age,

race, disability, or sexual orientation. We need to watch, to listen, and to speak up.

The Catholic church has had to face the reality of child abuse; they are now doing great things toward protection of children. It's time now for Protestant and nondenominational churches to step up — to be proactive in protecting those among them who are vulnerable: the children, the elderly, those with disabilities. We must not wait for a child to be hurt and to have to be courageous enough to speak up — we must be that voice for children, and we must do so today.

Tell us about your new book.

My church, First Mennonite in Lincoln, Nebraska, invited me to teach an adult Sunday School class about the role of the church in preventing child abuse and neglect. When I went to look for a book to use in teaching this class, I only found books on sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is certainly very important and, I believe, the church is uniquely vulnerably to it. However, as a professional, I knew that many more children are affected by neglect. I also knew that churches are very concerned about emotional and physical abuse. Churches must be prepared to protect children from all types of child abuse and neglect.

So, I began writing my own curriculum for this Sunday School class. Given the positive response within my church and my desire to provide this material to other churches, I began writing more formally on the topic. Long story short, Herald Press (now MennoMedia) accepted the manuscript, and the book was published.

The name of the book is *"Let the Children Come: Preparing Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect."* We can read it as individuals, or we can study it in adult Sunday School classes or small groups. The book is filled with scriptures, resources, and ideas for ways churches can keep children and youth safe. See this website for more information or to order the book: <http://www.dovesnest.net/letthechildrencome>. For a limited time, the book is also available for purchase at Peterson Drug. The book is also available on Amazon.

I have been on an extended book tour for the last year. I have traveled all around the United States, speaking in churches, social services agencies, and communities about the role of faith communities in keeping children and youth safe. The response has

been phenomenal, and I have found people to be eager for this information.

What led to the creation of Dove's Nest? How did you select the name?

When several of us submitted proposals to speak at a national Mennonite conference on the role of the church in preventing child abuse, conference organizers suggested that we collaborate. We came together at this conference in 2009, and it just took off from there. We soon had a name, a mission, and a web-site. We're now a non-profit organization and have submitted our application for tax-exempt status. We've had many publications in Mennonite media and in professional social work journals. We are now broadening our focus to all Christian faith communities. All this can be found on our website: www.DovesNest.net.

We selected the name, Dove's Nest, because it reflects our desire for churches to be a safe place for children and youth — a place of protection and care. Just like our homes and communities, nests have many layers — a soft inner layer to provide warmth and comfort, and a tough outer layer to provide protection and support. Also, the dove is a symbol of peace — peace not only in our world, but also in our homes, churches, and communities.

What is the goal of Dove's Nest?

Dove's Nest mission is to empower and equip faith communities to keep children and youth safe in their homes, churches, and communities.

The goals are to:

- Educate faith communities about child abuse and neglect.
- Provide faith communities with worship, education, and outreach resources on how to keep children safe.
- Empower and equip faith communities to protect children and youth within their own congregations.
- Empower and equip faith communities to protect children and youth within the wider community.

Why did you and others develop the Circle of Grace curriculum? Who worked with you creating, testing, and evaluating the curriculum?

Circle of Grace was developed by the Archdiocese of Omaha in 2005, and is being used in (arch)dioceses and schools all around the United States. For more information: <http://www.archomaha.org/pastoral/se/circle.html>. The curriculum was named backed by the charter idea that, "For we must recognize that each of us lives and moves in a 'circle of grace.'"

What does the curriculum teach?

Circle of Grace is a Christian safe environment curriculum that helps to form and educate children and youth about the value of positive relationships with God and others. The *Circle of Grace* curriculum teaches children and youth how to identify and maintain appropriate physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual boundaries; recognize when boundary violations are about to occur; and demonstrate how to take action when boundaries are threatened or violated.

The *Circle of Grace* curriculum can be used to supplement your Sunday School or school curriculum. Lessons are self-contained and grade-specific, with 1-4 age-appropriate lessons each year for children and youth in kindergarten-through-12th-grade. The curriculum is available in English and Spanish.

What are the curriculum's objectives?

Children/young people will be able to:

- Understand they are created by God and live in God's love along with the love of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.
- Describe the Circle of Grace which God gives each of us.
- Identify and maintain appropriate physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual boundaries.
- Identify all types of boundary violations.
- Demonstrate how to take action if any boundary is threatened or violated.

Has Circle of Grace been expanded and customized for other denominations beyond that of the Catholic church?

Circle of Grace has now been adapted to be used in Protestant and other nondenominational Christian churches. For more information or to order: <http://www.dovesnest.net/circleofgrace>.

Have any local Mt. Lake, Butterfield or Odin churches utilized the curriculum?

None yet, although I emphasize it is available for use by any faith community. Bethel Mennonite Church in Mt. Lake has utilized information to protect children and youth. According to Pastor Galen Kauffman, "A year-and-a half-ago, we had Marlene Harder Bogard, a daughter of this community who is a Safe Sanctuary trainer, give us an introductory workshop. We had several guests from other churches in town as well, so we know there is a need for more training. Prior to and since that workshop we have taken some basic measures in response to immediate needs, including: all of our Sunday School classrooms for children or teens have clear glass in the doors which involved cutting a light in some doors and replacing translucent glass with clear glass in others; have required parental permission forms (for teens and children) for off-site church activities; limited access (closed off one of two doors) into a children's rest room; recently adopted constitution has a new Christian Formation & Education Board in it, which is currently being formed and will have this area of responsibility on its agenda. Due to a generous donation, the Circle of Grace curriculum is available to Mennonite church USA congregations free of charge for 10 years. Go to the Dove's Nest web site to make the request.

What are some myths of child abuse and neglect?

The biggest myth about child abuse and neglect is that a stranger is going to come out of nowhere, snatch our children, and do them great harm. While this does happen, it is much, much more often that a child is hurt by someone they know — a parent, an older sibling, a friend, or other family members or caregivers. And yet, so many of our efforts to protect our children are influenced by "stranger danger."

My book addresses many more myths such as: men do more abusing than women, all abused children grow up to abuse their children, children are eager to talk about the abuse they experience at home, and it's the government's job to protect children from abuse and neglect.

What does the Bible have to say about child abuse and neglect?

When we read the Bible through the lens of child abuse and neglect, we can learn many things about God's hopes for us in strengthening families and protecting children from abuse and neglect. We find stories of Jesus blessing and taking time for children. We find parents valuing and protecting their children. We find instructions for healthy

family relationships. Some Scripture passages are relatively straightforward, easy to understand, and pleasing to our ears. Other passages are difficult to understand, confusing, even shocking. The over-arching theme in the Bible is the importance of family and family relationships, and the valuing of children.

What are "red flags" for parents (or others) concerned about recognizing the signs of abuse?

Children and youth sometimes tell us about the ways they are being hurt. More often though, they don't outrightly tell us, but rather they show us through their actions. There are many things that should put us on alert that all is not well. Some of these are: sudden changes in behavior, fear of being around someone, unexplained injury or pain, or not having their physical needs met. For more information, see my book, or go to: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/signs.pdf>.

What are some risk factors for abuse? Does stress — like that of this holiday season — serve as an increased risk factor?

Yes, stress plays a huge part in putting a family at risk for child abuse. Whether that stress is positive or negative, it often distracts parents from being able to recognize and respond appropriately to the needs of their children. Other significant risk factors include poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence. No one risk factor "causes" child abuse; however, the more risk factors in place for a child, the more likely that child is to be abused or neglected.

What should be done if you suspect a child in your neighborhood or church is being abused or neglected?

The Minnesota Department of Human Services says to call the county social service agency or the police where the child lives if you believe that a child is being hurt or neglected . . . Professionals whose jobs involve the care of children, such as doctors, teachers and ministers, are required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect. Other people such as neighbors or relatives are encouraged to report if they think a child is being abused or neglected.

What about the offenders of abuse and neglect?

Few things make any of us more angry than the thought of a child being intentionally hurt, especially a child that we know and love. When we think about sex offenders, we often become even more

angry and disgusted. We must transform this negative energy into positive action toward keeping our children and youth safe. As a society and as churches, we also must help people who have made serious mistakes to find a new way in life. As churches, our doors are open to everyone – that is our mission. We must realize that being open to everyone means that we must take extra effort to keep our children and youth safe. When we know someone who has a history of hurting children and youth wishes to attend our churches, we must find ways to bring them into our churches while also not putting the safety of our children and youth at jeopardy. Now, if individuals do not follow the guidelines set out for them, they must be asked to leave. A child should never be asked to attend church (or be in any type of organization) where someone who has hurt them is also present.

What are some child protection/prevention policies communities, organizations, and churches should consider implementing?

There are many things our churches and organizations can do to ensure the safety of our children and youth. First and foremost, we must all get over the denial that child abuse and neglect exists; we must learn about the types of child abuse and neglect, the signs to watch for, and how to respond. We must always report to Children's Services or the police if we have reason to believe that a child or youth is being hurt. We should not investigate the situation ourselves. While programs like Circle of Grace are helpful in empowering children and youth, we must remember that it is our responsibility as adults to protect them.

We must alter our facilities in order to minimize the opportunity for an adult to be alone with a child; we should work for openness and transparency. This means interior windows in all rooms or keeping doors open. This also means doing everything we can to minimize the opportunity for an adult to be alone with a child, especially in a private area like a home or vehicle. Adequate supervision is especially important during overnight activities and transportation.

We also need to have a plan for responding to suspected child abuse and neglect, and to the presence of an offender in our organizations. Once we have concerns about a specific child or individual, our emotions take over and we may not be able to come up with a rational plan and act in a way that is the most protective.

A written child protection policy is absolutely essential as is implanting this plan. We have many sample policies on the Dove's Nest website along with a checklist to use in developing a policy: <http://www.dovesnest.net/policies>.

What are some contact addresses for yourself and Dove's Nest?

I can be reached by email: Jeanette@DovesNest.net. Let me know if you would like to know more about how you can ensure the safety of your children and youth.



MT. LAKE NATIVE Jeanette (Stoesz) Harder has dedicated her life to the protection of children and prevention of child abuse and neglect. As a social worker, president of Dove's Nest, whose mission is to help faith communities keep children and youth safe; and as an associate professor, she is an advocate for children in need, and the eclectic the "communities" in which they live their lives. (Kris Langland photo)

About Jeanette

Address: Omaha, Nebraska.

Educational background: Graduated sixth-grade from Mt. Lake Christian School; 1982 graduate of Mt. Lake Public High School; Member of Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church (now Cornerstone Bible Church) of Mt. Lake while growing up; Bachelor of Science in Bible from Grace University of Omaha, Nebraska (1982-1988); Master of Science in Social Work, University of Texas at Arlington, Texas (1994-1996); Ph. D. in Social Work, University of Texas at Arlington (2001-2004).

Work background (highly abbreviated): During high school and summer breaks, worked as a secretary at Balzer Manufacturing, Inc. of Mt. Lake and as a dietary assistant at the Good Samaritan Village of Mt. Lake; Senior Case Manager at The Child Abuse Prevention Center of Dallas, Texas (August 1996-August 2001); President of Dove's Nest; Mission is "Empowering and equipping faith communities to keep children and youth safe in their homes, churches, and communities — web site: www.DovesNest.net (June 2009-present); Associate Professor at the University of Nebraska at

Omaha, Grace Abbott School of Social Work (August 2004-present); and now a published author through Herald Press.