

## **Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough County-City Health Unit**

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### **Community Supports Help Protect Our Children**

October is Child Abuse Prevention month and a reminder that we all share an important role in helping parents and families raise the next generation! Perhaps the most compelling reminder of the critical role parenting plays in future wellbeing is the legacy of residential schools on Aboriginal children in Canada. Children were forcibly removed from their families and generations have suffered ongoing trauma. Recommendation #5 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's total of 94, calls upon all levels of government to develop culturally appropriate parenting programs for Aboriginal families.

Aboriginal parents, like all parents, want the best for their children. And all parents deserve to be supported in carrying out one of life's most complex and physically exhausting tasks. Having a baby is stressful for any new parent, but even more so when families have personal, financial, housing, and other challenges. Often, the challenges of transition to parenting can be addressed with simple recommendations such as developing a circle of support, working as a team with partners and other caregivers, and self-care strategies including adequate sleep and nutrition.

Sometimes though, life circumstances make it difficult for parents to be the nurturing, caring parents that they would like to be, and this is where Public Health can assist. When a parent or expectant parent faces challenges like inadequate housing, poor health, drug or alcohol misuse, or anger management issues, our Family Health staff take a family-centred, strength-based approach that helps them access information and identify their supports.

Generally speaking, early intervention programs are protective against potential neglect and child abuse. Home visiting programs are effective at increasing parental knowledge and reducing unhelpful parent-child interactions. When a family becomes involved with the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program, a Public Health Nurse (PHN) will arrange a suitable time to make a home visit. During this visit, parents are helped to make plans that lead to the best outcomes possible for themselves and their children. Specially trained Family Home Visitors work closely with the PHN to provide ongoing health information and support.

Exposure to violence in the home, even if the child is not physically harmed, is a form of child abuse due to the emotional impact on the child. Referrals to community agencies for safety, and post-exposure trauma support for both parent and child should be routinely made under these circumstances. Thank goodness for partners like the YWCA and all those who participate in local intimate partner violence prevention and response programs.

For years, Peterborough has been advocating on behalf of new mothers. We know that about 12% suffer from postpartum depression. Moms who are depressed may be more withdrawn and detached from the infant, provide less responsive caregiving, or may be irritable and use more punitive parenting. Fathers with babies and a partner who is experiencing a mood disorder have higher incidences of depression;

they may also use inconsistent, less responsive, and harsher parenting practices. The negative health consequences of postpartum depression for women and their families have been well documented.

Peterborough is blessed with a number of agencies that support parents, including those who are dealing with mental health concerns like postpartum depression. Public health staff network with Kinark Child and Family Services, the Kawartha-Haliburton Children's Aid Society (KHCAS), the Peterborough Family Resource Centre, and Tri-County Community Support Services to ensure that parents can access services that are well-tested and of proven value. Local practitioners of these agencies work 1:1 or in group settings with parents of children up to the age of 18 years.

Child abuse is preventable. Children deserve to be cherished and protected. Parents deserve our support and respect as the future is in their hands! To learn more about the supports available, visit [www.pcchu.ca](http://www.pcchu.ca).

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