

## OPINIONS



## ON PREVENTION

By ERROL LOUIS

# Saving kids by healing families

*Child abuse hotline isn't the only way – or best way – to prevent tragedies*

In the wake of the soul-searing, violent deaths of 7-year-old Nixzmary Brown and 4-year-old Quachaun Browne at the hands of abusive parents, the public has binged on child abuse reports. That's an understandable reaction, but the ease with which anybody can call in a report to the state hotline can backfire.

More than 9,000 calls to the hotline poured in the month after Nixzmary's killing — 71% more than the same period in 2005 — in a wave that overwhelmed the police and the Administration for Children's Services, which can't thoroughly investigate so many cases.

And even though reporting is easy, many people still hesitate to call, since this "nuclear option" can result in the forced removal of kids from families that are not abusive, but poor, stressed and disorganized.

Those of us who care about children need a solution midway between doing nothing and calling the cops. That's where groups like the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service come in.

The 140-year-old nonprofit agency — which began providing housing, meals, medical care and foster care to children short-

ly after the Civil War — has a sensible, forward-thinking approach to aiding families in distress that goes well beyond what overburdened city caseworkers can do.

"We're one of the few agencies in the city doing preventive work with master's degree-level social workers," says Donna Santarsiero, the bureau's executive director. "You have to make really sharp assessments around risk and safety. It takes a lot of skill."

Skill — and common sense. Santarsiero and her team pride themselves on avoiding the traditional caseworker approach, in

which families in distress get referred to a dizzying succession of external programs for job training, psychotherapy, treatment for addiction, help with housing and the like.

Instead, the bureau, with a staff of 500, handles most of its work in-house with a focus on weekly family counseling ses-

sions that get troubled families functioning in a hurry. Kids are taught that their parents — even parents who have been incarcerated, addicted or neglectful — must be respected as the "CEOs" of the family.

The parents, in turn, get counseling to teach them how to express emotions other than anger. And using the 12-step method made famous by Alcoholics

Anonymous, parents learn how to make amends to their kids for past failures.

The method works, which is why some Family Court judges order families to work with Santarsiero's group. In fiscal 2004, according to Santarsiero, the bureau served 408 families with 1,031 children struggling

with everything from drug abuse and depression to violence in the home, but only seven kids wound up in foster

care — less than 1%.

And keeping families together saves the city a whole lot of money. The bureau spends about \$5,600 a year for every family it keeps together, compared with the \$14,000 it costs to keep a kid in foster care.

**Skill and common sense  
have helped make  
a Brooklyn nonprofit  
the model to follow**

The good news is that the Bloomberg administration has seen and understood these numbers, and is putting more money into preventive services that help families before abuse begins.

The city funds, along with a gala fund-raiser the bureau will hold May 2, will help the program shoulder its annual burden of raising \$25 million to do its good works.

Santarsiero is looking for volunteers to help with mentoring, job training and other programs. Most important, she has what so many of us need: a phone number — other than 911 — that anybody can use to help families that seem to be falling apart.

In Brooklyn, at least, if you see a neighbor or a kid who may need help, give them the number to the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service: (718) 310-5626.

It could end up doing a lot more good than an anonymous tip to the hotline.

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