



COMMUNITY NEWS

Help Here For The Child At Risk[Print Page](#)**By Leslie A.M. Smith**
Staff Writer

Published: Friday, March 26, 2010 10:39 AM PDT

For The Child, a Bixby Knolls nonprofit, is busy year-round. But April is special — it's child abuse prevention month.

"Parents have a lot of power and need to use it when they make decisions about babysitters, who sleeps in their home, childcare, their children staying at other people's homes and they need to have realistic expectations when it comes to child development," said Dr. Michele Winterstein, Ph.D. and executive director of For the Child, a Long Beach-based nonprofit organization.

"Strangers are just one piece of safety," Winterstein pointed out.

Winterstein said that much physical abuse on young children stems from potty training and learning to eat.

"Parents get frustrated and don't realize that if their child doesn't eat their peas, then taking away dessert is probably enough," she said.

Winterstein said that when the economy is not so great, parents are frustrated with job loss or other budgetary constraints. She said making decisions such as living with extended family or friends can pose threats to a child's

safety.

"A child has a 10 times greater risk of abuse when living in a home with their mother's boyfriend than with their own father," she shared.

Law enforcement agencies are the first responders when it comes to physical abuse. However, For the Child supplies child advocates as part of a comprehensive child sexual assault response team (SART).

Started in the mid-1990s, the program works with forensic nurses at three area hospitals, local police departments and the L.A. County Sheriffs Department.

"One-third of child sexual abuse involves juveniles molesting younger children," Winterstein said. "If you have a roommate, you need to know who they might bring into the home when they are there with your children. Eighty-five percent of sexual crimes on a child were committed by extended family or someone in their social network — someone the child knows. And 95% of the offenders are male.

"The child advocates are com-

munity volunteers who are screened and go through a 40-hour training," Winterstein said. "They complete an application, we interview each person and they have to provide three references. Then we do a live scan to make sure they have no criminal record."

A "live scan" replaces the ink fingerprint process, Winterstein explained.

"We electronically scan their fingerprints immediately into the system," she said

Each advocate is then clinically supervised each month with Winterstein. She said they currently have 15 advocates, but would like to have 20-22.

The 40-hour required training is paid for by the California Emergency Management Agency, and the next one will start in July. Winterstein said the advocates are teachers, retired teachers, people who sell real estate and others who want to give back to the community and do something valuable for children.

Under For The Child's SART program, there are two advocates on call each week.

"This has always been an adequate number, we have never had three exams happening at the same time," Winterstein said.

Each advocate carries a pager and responds to calls that there is a child on its way for a forensic exam at one of the three hospitals: Community Hospital of Long Beach, Little Company of Mary Hospital in San Pedro and the South Bay Medical Center in Redondo Beach.

"We believe that every child should have an advocate present,"

Winterstein said. "Our advocates arrive on the scene within one hour — sometimes before the victim — with a bag of activities for the kids and resource materials for the parents," Winterstein explained.

"The advocate comforts the family and supports the child as the exam is administered. The SART brings all the pieces together — law enforcement, medical, the district attorneys' office — it's a one-stop shop.

"Then we put them in touch with the appropriate resources, whether they need victim compensation, relocation, and we offer six weeks of free follow-up counseling and crisis intervention. If they are from a location too far to come to Long Beach, we put them in touch with services that are convenient for them."

"This has been an excellent experience for me to help children," said Lorraine Pittman, a paralegal in a family law practice by day, and an advocate for more than 10 years. "The child having an advocate helps to take out the pain and suffering of the incident. It is probably the worst day of their life — both the parents and the child.

"We make the process easier. Some people have said that telling the story over and over to the different agencies was worse than living through the crime itself. It can be very intimidating for a child."

Winterstein said there are usually 105-110 callouts per year (8-10 per month) from Long Beach Police, L.A. County Sheriffs, Maywood Police, Signal Hill police and others. She noted that there were none in January 2010.

"Whether an exam is necessary is determined by law enforcement," Winterstein pointed out. "It is strictly for evidentiary information."

To become a SART advocate, visit www.ForTheChild.org.

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