

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Issues Final Recommendation Statement: Primary Care Interventions to Prevent Child Maltreatment

WASHINGTON, D.C. – June 11, 2013 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today released its final recommendation statement on primary care interventions to prevent child abuse and neglect, also called child maltreatment.

“No child should suffer from abuse or neglect,” says Task Force member David Grossman, M.D., M.P.H. “We know there are children suffering abuse who don’t show obvious signs of mistreatment, and the Task Force wanted to learn more about what primary care practices can do to help them.”

The Task Force found that although child maltreatment is a very serious problem, there is not enough evidence to determine how primary care practices can prevent abuse or neglect of children who do not show signs or symptoms of maltreatment. Therefore, the Task Force issued an I statement.

Child maltreatment is harmful actions or threat of these actions toward children, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. It affects more than half a million children each year. In 2011, about 680,000 children in the United States were abused or neglected, and over 1,500 of these children died. Children ages 5 and younger are at the highest risk for abuse and death from abuse.

The Task Force reviewed studies released since 2004, the last time the Task Force examined this topic, on how primary care practices can prevent child abuse and neglect. However, very little evidence was found about how primary care practices can prevent maltreatment in children who show no obvious signs of abuse or neglect. Due to the lack of evidence, the Task Force cannot make a specific recommendation for or against providing interventions to prevent maltreatment at this time.

“We critically need more research on how primary care clinicians can prevent maltreatment and protect their young patients when symptoms of abuse or neglect are not apparent,” says Grossman.

The Task Force calls on the health care community to conduct critically needed research to determine how primary care clinicians can effectively intervene to prevent abuse and neglect. Areas where more research is needed include how health care professionals can help support families to prevent abuse and neglect, how to identify children who are being mistreated, ways to prevent abuse of older children, and whether interventions to prevent child abuse could cause unintended harms.

“It will take action from every part of society, including families, schools, and health care professionals, to build a future where every child can grow up healthy and safe from abuse and neglect,” says Task Force chair Virginia Moyer, M.D., M.P.H. “While we learn more about what primary care professionals can do to help children, all health care professionals must continue to remain vigilant for signs of abuse and neglect and respond appropriately when they identify problems.”

The Task Force’s final recommendation statement is published online in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, as well as on the Task Force Web site at www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org. A fact

sheet that explains the recommendation statement in plain language is also available. Before finalizing this recommendation, the USPSTF posted a draft version for public comment in January 2013.

The Task Force is an independent, volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine that works to improve the health of all Americans by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medications.

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