

Early intervention is key: CAS

Oct 14, 2006

by Chris Traber

[More from this author](#)

(York Region) - A simple phone call 14 years ago changed the course of Karla Pearson's life.

In fact, it may have saved it.

In 1992, Ms Pearson was 11. She, along with three sisters and a brother, ranging in ages four to 13, were in forced hiding by their mother and stepfather.

He was evading the law and abuse charges.

For 18 months, the children were kept out of school and denied medical and dental attention.

Someone alerted the York Region Children's Aid Society, which intervened with help from police.

The stepfather was eventually convicted of charges relating to Karla and served time in prison.

The five children were taken into the society's care and, soon after, were entrusted to foster parents Frank and Jane Kennedy, a Newmarket couple who have fostered more than 100 children. The Kennedys took the children in as their own. The youngest is still with them.

"The Kennedys are my parents, my family, in every way except legally on paper," Ms Pearson said.

"With them, I learned to trust and was able to love again. If I hadn't been saved, I believe I would have followed in my (biological) mom's footsteps. She wasn't well. They (Kennedys) allowed me to become a different person."

The anonymous call revealing the Pearson children's plight — not unlike the more than 8,000 the society receives annually — made a difference.

Yet, not enough of those alerts are made by York Region residents, a new survey suggests.

After an Ontario Incidence Study of Abuse and Neglect found public reporting of child abuse didn't increase significantly between 1993 and 1998, the York Region Society undertook a survey to understand the community's knowledge of duty to report child abuse, as well as the barriers to exercising that responsibility.

The local findings, filed last August, suggest 62 per cent of respondents know what the Children's Aid Society does and almost nine of 10 people support its work. Some 87 per cent of participants know they have a duty to report child abuse.

Two thirds of respondents would make a report only if they were certain child abuse was occurring and one in three said they would not report if they only suspected child abuse was occurring. Respondents reported they were more likely to report physical and sexual abuse and less likely to report emotional abuse and neglect.

The survey identified barriers to reporting child abuse, York Region Children's Aid Society executive director Martin McNamara said. Obstacles include being afraid of being wrong, not knowing where to call, fear of retribution and being afraid of making the situation worse.

During Child Abuse Prevention Month in October, the society has launched the Use Your Voice campaign to inform the public of its obligation to report suspected and known signs of child abuse.

"Each of us has a responsibility to ensure that children and youth are safe," he said.

"Abused children are often silent, powerless victims. We hope the campaign will help break down barriers that are preventing people from coming forward while children needlessly suffer."

Anyone, including victims, can call. Calls are confidential and society staff investigate thoroughly at the point of intake.

Early intervention is key, Mr. McNamara said, adding the society works with various social services agencies, school boards and daycare facilities.

The society is legislatively mandated to protect children from birth to 18 and sometimes beyond to 21, Mr. McNamara said.

The Kennedys are among the most prolific of the 154 foster families in York Region. Since the mid-1970s they have cared for many of the children under the society's protection in addition to their own three offspring.

Mrs. Kennedy, also a post inquiry assistant with the CAS, briefs families on the obligations and joys of being foster parents.

"It sounds corny, but you have to have a genuine love of children and want to do something to help, to make a difference," she said. "You have to love them, raise them, provide nurturing and protection and help them grow into a whole human being.

"Would I recommend being a foster parent? I try and persuade people all the time. What's it take? You need patience, a sense of humour and a bit of insanity. You have to give the children rules and lots of love to temper them." For Ms Pearson, the Kennedys are more than kin.

"They've given me the opportunity to be more in life," she said. "They've done a great job. I'm closer to my mom than anyone. She knows more about me than anyone. She's also my best friend."