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# Isolated parents at high risk for abuse

*(Editor's note: This is the fourth in a series of five stories regarding National Child Abuse Prevention Month and the services available in McKean County to help parents through what the McKean County Collaborative Board calls "the toughest job you'll love" — parenthood. Five protective factors have been identified to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. This series identifies and explores those factors.)*

By **MARCIE SCHELLHAMMER**  
Era Reporter

Parents who are isolated from social connections are at a high risk for child abuse and neglect, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"One healthy thing for every parent is social connections," explained Lee Sizemore, director of the McKean County Family Centers. "You can't do it on your own."

"If you live in an isolated area, think about touching base with a Family Center because there is one in every geographical location," Sizemore suggested. Bradford, Kane, Smethport, Port Allegany and Eldred each have a center. "It's a safe place where you can get together with other parents and make connections."

"Know that it's very normal to need social connections, especially if you don't have a parent nearby," Sizemore emphasized.

Referring to the family development educators who travel to people's homes in the "Parents as Teachers" program, she said, "(They're) making human contact with someone. Sometimes that contact is absolutely life saving."

Sherry Rodgers, a parent who has been through the program, said, "I got a chance to talk to an adult and I didn't even have to leave my house to do it. I had a chance to talk to someone who was either going through the same thing or had seen it."

"We're talking about parenting, we're offering it to our children, why are

we not offering it to ourselves?" asked MaryAnne Polucci-Sherman, psychologist with Bradford Recovery Systems. "We have some of those very same needs for interaction, for communication, for eye contact, for physical touch."

Greta Billings, co-chair of the McKean County Collaborative Board, said many people feel that if they do go to a Family Center, they will be seen as having "a problem."

"It's not necessarily a problem-solving group," Billings said. Instead, people should want to go because they have something to contribute. "I've got to go because I've got something to share. That's a great feeling for us that we're wanted and needed."

"We have these five protective factors that all parents

need," Sizemore said — nurturing and attachment; knowledge of parenting and child development; parental resilience; social connections and concrete supports for parents — "and this is the easiest one."

"Social connections, you just step outside yourself and make connections," she explained. And this is where the community can come into play.

"We're trying to help the community realize we have to be here for the families," Sizemore said.

"Those supports can actually save a life," said Duane Wolfe, director of McKean County Children and Youth Services. "Babies are going to cry. You've fed them, you've changed them. Put the baby down in a safe place and go call a friend for five or ten minutes instead of standing there shaking them to the point where you're going to injure the child."

"It's OK to walk away. You'll still hear the baby. Maybe the baby will go to sleep," Wolfe said.

"Social isolation is depressing," said Gladys LeCourt-Pelka, family development specialist with Bradford Family Center. "It's just not healthy for anyone."

