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Creating a Circle of Protection for Vulnerable Children

Early in my career as a protective social worker in Massachusetts I would routinely handle cases of child abuse and neglect. It was a hard job emotionally. A question used to run through my head: what is a parent's first responsibility – to love the child, or to protect the child? I know it's not an either/or question, but it is something I thought about a lot in those days. I concluded it was a parent's first responsibility to protect the child.

Thirty years later I still feel that way. I also recognize that the vast majority of parents I met back then didn't want to abuse or neglect their children. Their own lives were so chaotic that they were incapable of being a good, protective, loving parent without the help of others. The same is true of many of the parents ChildFund works with around the globe.

Growing up in deep poverty can rob an adult of the knowledge and skills to be a good parent, in large part because they are so focused on survival. Living in poverty also adds a lot of stress to the parent/child relationship. Teaching mothers and fathers good parenting skills is, therefore, a priority in ChildFund's early childhood development programs. A parent assisting with one of our youth programs once told me that learning how to show love to her children was a huge benefit she received through ChildFund.

When I became a parent, a second question formed in my head: What is a parent's deepest fear? If protecting your child is your biggest responsibility, then being helpless to protect your child from harm is a parent's worst nightmare.

A threat to a child anywhere is a threat to our future everywhere. Whether a newborn child to a family displaced in Afghanistan; a school-aged girl from northern Uganda who survived the horrors of being a child soldier and sex slave; or an adolescent boy in Honduras desperate for a way out of domestic violence—effectively protecting children starts in families, includes communities, and continues with all levels of government working together to protect all children from harm.

The U.S. government launch of the Action Plan on Children in Adversity is truly a ground-breaking effort that helps to complete the circle of protection for vulnerable children around the world. Effectively protecting children from harm throughout their childhood is not a solitary effort; it does not rest with one person, at one time, or with one government agency. Protecting children is and must be a comprehensive and collective effort that can never end. By involving all of the relevant government agencies to encourage a strong beginning for children and support for strong families, as well as strengthening effective prevention and response measures for child abuse, neglect and exploitation, the U.S. Action Plan on Children in Adversity helps parents in their own responsibilities and also begins to address some of their worst fears.

To me, protecting children is not an abstract concept. Every day, ChildFund makes sure child protection is an integral part of all our programs. On this day, I am really glad to see the U.S. taking concrete action on behalf of vulnerable children.

Anne Lynam Goddard is president and CEO of ChildFund International, which has been serving the world's vulnerable children for 75 years.