

Drug prevention programs should start early

By Stefany Shaheen and Robert Merner

Posted Dec 31, 2017 at 3:01 AM

New Hampshire continues to have one of the highest rates of opioid related fatalities in the country. Ask yourself how often you have heard about ways to actually prevent addiction in the first place. Can you point to drug prevention programs in your community? How many? Who do those programs reach? Unfortunately, most discussions about prevention begin in middle school. This is simply too late.

Of course, drug prevention is critical in the middle school years. But, we must commit to protecting our children by working on prevention at a much younger age. To effectively prevent the addiction crisis we are now experiencing and reduce the risk of mental health problems, children need access to quality early childhood programs.

Research confirms that early experiences literally shape the architecture of the developing brain. Experiences such as abuse, neglect and exposure to violence can cause toxic stress. Toxic stress is damaging to the brain of a developing child and can cause lifelong consequences in health, learning and behavior. The key to healthy brain development, which is the very thing that protects against toxic stress, is the presence of a caring adult in the family or community.

Effective early childhood programs and services can help ensure that all children have the tools that they need to live healthy productive lives. Early intervention can prevent a child's developing brain from the devastating impact of toxic stress. Further, home visiting, high quality child care, preschool and Head Start can help promote the development of cognitive and social skills which protect against later substance use. These programs teach children to cope with adversity, and can help parents and other caregivers develop the skills to provide the support children need most.

The fact is that the best way to prevent a child from becoming addicted to drugs later in life is to make sure that that child is protected and has the chance to thrive. Children who do not feel safe, are habitually exposed to toxic stress, and not given the tools that they need to both protect and nurture the developing brain are at far greater risk of experimenting with and becoming addicted to drugs. As the New Year approaches, let's recommit ourselves to preventing addiction by making sure children have what they need to thrive.

Stefany Shaheen is a former Portsmouth city councilor. Robert Merner is Portsmouth's police chief.