

Study charts course to meet challenges to Valley's children

(January 20, 2010) – A study by the Central California Children's Institute at California State University, Fresno concludes that children's relationship with their parents is the paramount concern about the eight-county region's youngsters.

Conclusions and recommendations of "Children of the Valley: Framing a Regional Agenda" are based on 1,201 telephone-survey responses and interviews, focus groups and roundtable discussions with child-serving organizations and their representatives.

The study recommends greater coordination and collaboration among institutions and organizations that touch the lives of children to mount a sharply focused, San Joaquin Valley-wide response to the most pressing challenges.

"The parent-child relationship and the family system are the core issues that determine the paths that youth ultimately take," the study says.

Poverty in the region plays a key role, say the study's authors. "The trajectories that often accompany poverty – teen pregnancy, gang involvement, high school dropout rates and lone-parent households – converge to produce a region that is fraught with challenges to the health and well-being of its young."

The study was conducted in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties.

Other key study findings:

- At least half of Valley residents believe their communities don't offer opportunities for youth to serve, useful roles for youth or neighbors that care or assume responsibility for children.
- Nearly half (47 percent) of respondents volunteer to help youth in their community and 92 percent of those not volunteering said they would if given the opportunity.
- Families expressed a high level of need for sports and recreation, after-school and preschool programs.

In the study, health and human service professionals offer three key recommendations about how the region should address challenges facing children and families:

- Start young, when families are most receptive to help and may be easier to reach, and while children are in their formative years.
- Help parents, who are a child's first teacher, but need information, tools and encouragement to effectively promote child well-being.

- Focus on policy advocacy, improved systems and collaboration among agencies so there is a unified voice, supportive policies and people working together throughout the region to help solve problems facing families.

The study recommends that the Children's Institute put early psychosocial and emotional health, youth social behaviors, parent engagement and support and childhood poverty at the top of its priority list for action. Those issues will guide the institute as it convenes regional leaders during the next year to produce the Valley's first regional children's agenda.

One goal is to expand the region's capacity to better prepare professionals working with newborns to 5-year-olds and their parents as a primary prevention strategy.

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The research and report were made possible in part by The California Endowment's financial support with technical assistance from the Central Valley Health Policy Institute.

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The study is available at www.centralcaliforniachildren.org.