

## We have power to change the world

"Never doubt that a small group of committed, concerned individuals can make a difference in the world. In fact it is the only thing that ever has," said Margaret Mead. Here in Benton and Franklin counties, we have what it takes to change the world. We have committed and concerned individuals.

This was evident recently when community leaders gathered at United Way to begin work on the details of the first Community Solutions initiative called Our Babies Can't Wait.

Community Solutions is a regionwide planning and implementation process that began in October 2006 involving more than 200 community leaders. Facilitated by United Way of Benton and Franklin

Counties, the first of its kind regionwide health and human services plan was completed in December 2007, identifying education, health, safety and self-sufficiency as the priority areas on which our community must work.



**Mike Schwenk**

In Focus

Our Babies Can't Wait addresses all four of those areas. It aims to provide the right environment and quality social experience for our children to grow up having excellent physical and mental health, have at least a high school education, have good skills and be gainfully employed. They also will grow up free from crime, neglect

and abuse, and will be fully engaged in their community.

There are approximately 3,900 babies born every year in Benton and

Franklin counties. For the past 10 years, the population in Benton County has increased by approximately 20 percent and Franklin County by 47 percent. The population growth brings greater opportunities and greater needs. One of the most significant opportunities before us is the opportunity to ensure our children are successful.

The vision of Our Babies Can't Wait is that by the time today's babies are 20 years old, they will be successful in school and in life because of the foundation we built today. The goal is to increase the skills of parents, caretakers and the community to maximize their physical, social-emotional and cognitive potentials.

This translates to understanding and meeting the needs of a child through things such as making a warm and loving home; creating regular rou-

tines; appreciating and responding to their developmental stages; and talking, singing and playing together.

Does this sound like no-brainer approaches? It is amazing how our parenting knowledge is limited by the way we were raised. We all have room for improvement. Make no mistake, it's hard to change habits, and we can all do better.

Businesses and organizations can play a part as well. They can celebrate the birth of children or grandchildren with a special parenting tip card. They can display Our Babies Can't Wait posters in the employee lounge. Or they can request a parent educator to conduct a brownbag "Lunch & Learn" for employees when they become parents or grandparents.

A 40-year longitudinal study that

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followed infants into adulthood shows that investing \$1 in early learning saves \$17 down the road, with tangible results measured in lower crime, fewer teen pregnancies and higher individual education and earning levels.

Community Solutions has made great strides in bringing the community together to improve community conditions and people's lives for the past two years.

Our Babies Can't Wait is a fine example of this effort. It consists of a communitywide education and awareness strategy as well as a start-up area in east Kennewick. The

goal of the strategy is to create a community environment and structure for success through community awareness, education and participation.

The startup area in East Kennewick will bring about individual and group services with the help of nurses, paraprofessionals and volunteers. Some of the services will also be provided through the Internet and 2-1-1.

Championed by Sandy Owen, Director of Preventive Health Services of Benton-Franklin Health District, Our Babies Can't Wait is not about creating new programs. It's about coordinating and leveraging what we already have.

Right now, over 20 organizations have pledged to be a part of the initiative offering help such as community education, marketing, family engagement coordination, referral, web-based resources, parenting workshops, educational materials, etc. However, more assistance from individuals and organizations is needed.

To raise a generation of healthy and successful 20-year-olds, we must acquire good habits and new skills in relating to our children. We must invest in and support the community in providing an environment for healthy development. And we must "catch one another doing something right."

Let's do our part to discover, love and nurture our children. The action we take with our youngest and most vulnerable will not only improve our community, it also will change the world.

Other communities are watching what we are doing here in Benton and Franklin counties and will take their cue from our success.

That's how a group of committed, concerned individuals will change the world.

► *Mike Schwenk is a member of the Community Solutions Blue Ribbon Advisors and the chairman of the Three Rivers Community Roundtable.*