



[close window](#)

## Combating child neglect by education

November 6, 2006

In a strange but fitting coincidence, a group of more than 350 people met to discuss child abuse issues on the same day Christian Gauvin was convicted on one count of child neglect -- a verdict that could send him to prison for up to 50 years.

On Thursday, Gauvin was convicted in connection with the death of his daughter, 4-year-old Aiyana. In October Gauvin's wife Michelle was sentenced to life in prison for the child's murder.

That same day organizers of the second annual Child Abuse/Neglect Summit reported progress in the year since the summit was first held, spurred on by four child deaths caused by abuse and neglect.

The progress made since March 2005 will -- we hope -- continue. But as we consider the plight of the county's abused and neglected children, we must also be aware of the many factors that contribute to parents' behavior.

For some, it is their youth.

On Nov. 1, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy released a report detailing the nationwide cost of teen pregnancies. The numbers are staggering.

Indiana's teen pregnancy rate is higher than the national average, though it has fallen in the last decade. The burden to Indiana taxpayers in 2004? More than \$195 million.

That same year child welfare costs associated with Indiana teen pregnancies topped \$40 million, the report said.

Teen mothers lack the educational and economic benefits of mothers who delay pregnancy. The majority lack the economic advantages of a two-income household. These young mothers are developing developmentally as well.

They face stressors that in many circumstances are precursors and contributors to neglect and abuse.

To ignore these facts is inexcusable.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reports that for every 1,000 families headed by a teen mother there are 110 reported incidents of abuse and neglect. The rate is less than half that for families where the mothers delay childbearing until their early 20s.

Children of young teen mothers are more likely to be placed in foster care, according to the center's research, and more than half of these placements "could be averted by delaying child-bearing, thereby saving taxpayers nearly \$1 billion annually in foster care costs alone."

It's imperative that when summit leaders and Tippecanoe County officials confront the very real issue of child neglect and abuse that they examine ways to prevent teen pregnancy. That is part of the solution.

Prevention comes in many forms, but education is an important component.

School corporations need to examine how best they can reach adolescents and the families they serve. By honestly confronting issues surrounding teen sexual behavior educators can help further reduce teen pregnancies.

The county also needs to address those teens who have already given birth by using available dollars to coordinate support services for these families.

A clear effort to inform young mothers about where they can get help should involve social service agencies, health care facilities, educators and religious communities.

The Child Abuse/Neglect Summit's goals are worthy ones. But to combat abuse and neglect its participants must also prioritize the problem of teen pregnancy.