



Educating youth and their parents

As discussed in the "Participants" section of Chapter 5, children can play a role in protecting themselves from abuse. Your organization can give them the information and skills they need for that purpose. Moreover, the education you provide may encourage children to disclose that they have been abused. A disclosure puts you in a position to prevent further abuse.

As discussed in Chapter 1, comprehensive child abuse prevention includes measures designed to prevent abuse in families—where most incidents occur. Educating parents, not only about abuse, but also about appropriate care for children, can reduce the toll of child abuse in society. In addition, communicating with parents about child abuse can help them understand the need for your rules—such as insisting that parents pick-up their children at the appointed hour so they are not alone—and may even motivate more parents to become involved in your program. The more adults, the lower the risk of abuse.

EDUCATING CHILDREN

Adults, not children, are primarily responsible for preventing abuse. Nonetheless, children can play a key role. Involving children in their own protection is especially important as their age increases and other safeguards become less practical.

The rationale for educating children rests on one of Finkelhor's preconditions for child sexual abuse (see Chapter 2). The fourth precondition is that "*the child molester needs to overcome the child's resistance.*" By educating children about child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, you strengthen their ability to resist the abuser and avoid situations with a high risk of abuse. For this reason, many, but not all, school-aged children receive child abuse prevention information at school.



Many child abuse prevention programs are devoted exclusively to child *sexual* abuse prevention. These programs have the greatest benefits for children between 7 and 12-years-old (Daro 1994). They have been particularly successful in encouraging children to disclose past or present sexual abuse.

Features of Effective Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs for Children

- ✓ Practicing prevention strategies
- ✓ Providing age appropriate information
- ✓ Applying generic concepts such as assertiveness and decision-making to abuse prevention situations
- ✓ Empowering children to seek help from adults

(Daro)

Depending on the age of the children in your program, you can either work with them directly or enlist their parents for help. In a nationwide survey of children between the ages of 10 and 16, Finkelhor found that parental involvement in the education process significantly improved the results. Children who received parental instruction remembered more of the information. When confronted by a potential abuser they were more likely to avoid an assault and to escape injury. They were also more likely to report an incident (Finkelhor, 1995). For younger children especially, parents should be the primary providers of child abuse prevention information.

INFORMING PARENTS

There are several ways to involve parents in your organization's child abuse prevention efforts.

- Inform parents about the organization's child abuse prevention policies and ask them to help the organization by monitoring their child's participation and reporting any problems to the organization.
- Invite parents to help supervise activities in which their children are participating.
- Inform parents about any specific risks related to activities sponsored by the organization and request them to sign a consent and liability waiver statement that indicates their acceptance of the risks.
- Provide information to parents for them to share with their children.
- Teach parenting skills related to the needs of children at various developmental stages.

Surveys indicate that parents, while very concerned about the danger of their children being abused (particularly sexually abused), feel inadequate to take action. They may lack information themselves or lack materials for educating their children. Organizations serving children and youth can help to fill this void by providing child abuse prevention information to parents.

BASIC CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION CONCEPTS

Research has found that children with strong self-esteem are less likely to become victims of child abuse (Cohn). Therefore, one way your organization can help protect children from child abuse is to do what you may already do best—provide opportunities for children to develop positive self-esteem. Most organizations offer programs designed for that purpose, but, in today's world, that is not enough. Specific child abuse prevention education programs are likely to be more effective, though, if they build on a base of positive self-esteem.

Studies have documented that child abuse prevention education received at school is more effective when parents reinforce it at home (Finkelhor, 1993).

Child abuse prevention efforts have developed in two directions. The most common approach aimed at children is strengthening their ability to resist sexual abuse. For other forms of maltreatment — physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect — the target is modifying the behavior of the abuser (Daro). Because the approach to sexual abuse prevention differs so substantially from the approach for preventing other forms of abuse,

you will need to select specific programs that are appropriate for your intended purpose.

Sexual Abuse Prevention

The focus of most child sexual abuse prevention programs for children is to enable them to recognize what sexual abuse is and the situations which place children at risk of sexual abuse. These programs also stress that if the child resists the sexual abuse, most child molesters will leave them alone. And finally, these programs encourage children to seek help from a parent or another adult they trust.

Information provided to children concerning child abuse needs to be appropriate for the age and developmental level of the children receiving it. Many resources are now available for teaching children about child abuse. Several dozen are listed at the end of this chapter. The better ones do not focus exclusively on *stranger danger*, nor do they rely primarily on cartoon animals as helping resources. Effective prevention programs focus on the actions of the individuals, not whether or not the child knows them. Young children may not be able to associate the help provided by a cartoon animal with the assistance they can expect from a trusted adult. The better prevention resources for children also provide an opportunity for the children to practice the skills being taught.

Stranger danger is an inadequate safety message.

Preventing Other Forms Of Abuse

The prevention of emotional abuse, physical abuse and neglect depends upon changing the behavior of the adults responsible for the care and welfare of children, usually parents. Organizations can help to change abusive behaviors in several ways. The National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse suggests eight strategies.

- Support programs for new parents
- Education for parents
- Early and regular child and family screening
- Child care opportunities
- Programs for abused children and young adults
- Life skills training for children and young adults
- Self-help groups and other neighborhood supports
- Family support services

It is unlikely that your organization would find it appropriate to address all eight of these strategies, however, you will probably be able to find some that may be within the scope your organization's mission.

Age-Related Prevention Concepts

The following tables provide child abuse prevention concepts for pre-schoolers, 6 to 10-year-olds, 11 to 14-year-olds, and 14 to 18-year-olds. The tables list concepts for parents and children. Ideally, parents will be involved in assisting their children with the relevant concepts.

Child Abuse Prevention Concepts for Pre-Schoolers

For Parents

- Bonding
- Child development expectations
- Health care needs/immunizations
- Quality time activities
- Parenting skill development
- Appropriate discipline techniques—NO BABY SHAKING
- Indicators of abuse
- Stress management

For Children

- Infants and toddlers are reliant on parents and caregivers for protection
- They are loved and will be protected
- Body ownership concepts
- Helper identity—telling parents or caregivers if someone hurts them or asks them not to tell
- When children begin to talk, they can learn the names of body parts including genitals

Children in this age group are nearly always under the direct care of their parents or a surrogate parent such as a baby-sitter or daycare provider. Therefore, the responsibility for protecting these children is almost entirely the responsibility of those adults. Opportunities for accidental injuries are limited in infancy but increase with the mobility of the child. A lot of the physical abuse of children in this age group is related to toilet training and the stress it causes. Another cause of physical abuse of children in this age range is frustration over incessant crying. Emotional abuse and neglect may result from lack of parenting skills. Most child abuse-related deaths occur in this age range (Faller).

Child Abuse Prevention Concepts for 6 to 10-Year-Olds

For Parents

- Importance of involvement in school and other activities with their children
- Awareness of signs of abuse for this age group
- Developmental needs and expectations for these children
- Sensitivity to helping vs. hurting words
- Fair but firm disciplining techniques

For Children

- Appropriate and inappropriate touching
- Reliance on parents for permission to go places and to associate with other children and adults
- Recognition of abusive situations
- Assertive resistance skills, "No! Go tell!"
- Building friendships with peers—experiencing growth in self-esteem as part of group experience

Children in this age group are beginning to experience a limited degree of independence, for example, when going to and from school with a group of other children. They think in very concrete terms and have limited skills in generalizing from a non-specific situation to other applicable situations. Consequently, child abuse prevention education for these children must be specific and concrete. The parent is usually the best person to teach children of this age about sexual abuse and should provide an opportunity for the child to practice whatever skills are being taught. Organizations with child abuse prevention information for this age child should include parents in the process of communicating concepts to the child.

Child Abuse Prevention Concepts for 11 to 14-Year-Olds

For Parents

Helping children cope with physical and emotional changes accompanying puberty.

Accommodating child's needs for increased privacy.

Maintaining lines of communication with children concerning sensitive topics.

Involving child in setting guidelines for behavior and negotiating consequences.

For Children

Recognition of situations that place the child at risk.

Realistic understanding of vulnerability to abuse.

Identification of adults who can be trusted to help.

Recognizing manipulative and exploitative behaviors in self and others.

Children in this age group tend to become more involved with their peers. They are very concerned about what their peers think of them and are pre-occupied with physical appearance. Children will form close friendships and consult with friends, rather than their parents, for help in solving interpersonal problems. This is the peak age of vulnerability for both boys and girls to sexual abuse (Finkelhor 1994). The onset of puberty and the hormonal changes which accompany it bring about sexual feelings and experimentation. This experimentation may make some children vulnerable to sexual abuse. Because they are beginning to develop independence, they may not tell their parents about being sexually abused. The fear of being labeled "homosexual" deters boys who have been sexually abused by a male from reporting sexual abuse (Gonsiorek). Sexual abuse of girls is most likely to occur in the home, while sexual abuse of boys is usually outside of the home, but perpetrated by someone the boy knows.

Child Abuse Prevention Concepts for 14 - 18 Year Olds

For Parents

Helping with the transition from adolescent to young adult

Use of non-violent conflict resolution

Maintaining open communication with teens about important, sensitive areas of life

For Children

Acquaintance rape awareness and prevention

Developing positive inter-personal relationships

Development of peer support skills

Youths in this age group must be prepared to assume adult roles in society. Parents are less and less involved in their children's decision making. Peers are often the first ones teens turn to for help during a crisis—including abuse. Their assertion of independence causes conflict that may lead to physical confrontation. Parents need to allow adolescents to make decisions about the low-risk areas of their lives such as choice of music, clothing and social contacts, but reserve the right to set boundaries in higher risk areas such as drinking, curfews, and school. Parents may get so involved in minor conflicts that they lose the ability to talk with their teenage children about more important matters (Urquiza).

Beatings and assaults of adolescents by parents are a common form of physical child abuse (Faller).

CONCLUSION

Irrespective of the age or gender of the children in your organization, you can help protect them by educating them and their parents about abuse prevention and child development. Child abuse happens to children of all ages from birth through adolescence. By definition, child abuse interferes with the normal development of the victims. Some studies indicate that individuals abused as children are higher risks to become abusive parents (Wolfe). By making a small investment today, your organization may help not only this generation of children, it may also help prevent the transmission of abusive tendencies to future generations.