

Sexual Abuse Prevention

Early programs focusing on prevention of physical abuse and neglect concentrated on changing the behaviors of adults. Parents were supported in using non-abusive methods of discipline and offered child development information. Early intervention programs were developed for pregnant moms and support and education offered to new parents. These programs did not place the responsibility of prevention on children. In contrast, when methods to prevent child sexual abuse first surfaced, professionals developed programs to teach children safety skills for preventing child sexual abuse, shifting the focus of prevention efforts on the child rather than on adults.

The two most common sexual abuse prevention programs developed early on were Astranger danger@ and Agood touch/bad touch.@ Both have limitations. Teaching children about dangers from strangers ignores the evidence that sexual offenders are usually not strangers to the child but are more likely to be someone the child knows and trusts. Traditionally, children are taught to respect adults and authority figures and to do what they are told, making it doubly difficult to tell.

AGood touch/bad touch@ programs teach children about types of touches that do not Afeel good@ or that make the child feel uncomfortable. The problem is in the language. These types of programs overlook the fact that sexual touch, even abusive touch, can sometimes feel good. Skilled sex offenders can trick children into thinking that the abuse is something positive, such as special time together, a game, or a way to show love. Also, sexual abuse often involves more than touch.

Both Astranger danger@ and Agood touch/bad touch@ prevention programs have suggested that children will be able to figure out that they are being sexually abused, to say Ano@ to an authority figure who is often a family member, and to tell right away. As an example, would anyone train bank employees that the way to stop a bank robbery would be to say Ano@ to the robber and communicate to the robber that they will tell right away? These early prevention programs suggested to children that all adults will follow safety rules and that the child has the responsibility to make sure that the adult follows the rules. They also assumed that if a child received prevention information that s/he was equipped to prevent being sexually abused.

It is important for adults to recognize that children and youth are not able to protect themselves from sexual offenders. While teaching children sexual abuse prevention along with other safety information continues to be important, children need to depend upon their caregivers to keep them safe. In order to protect children, adults must educate themselves on how offenders groom and set up children and families in order to offend.

The following two resources are helpful for providing important safety and prevention information to caregivers. Darkness to Light is an organization committed to confronting child sexual abuse. Their website address is www.darkness2light.org. The website includes seven steps to protecting children. The helpline number for Darkness to Light is 1-866-367-5444.

Another resource is The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The center has a 24-hour, toll-free telephone line, 1-800- 843-5678. The TDD line is 1-800-826-7653. Their website address is <http://www.missingkids.com>. NCMEC offers a number of educational publications which are free to charge.

Questions? Call Liberty House Child Abuse Assessment Center, Family Support Services, 504-540-0288