

Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

Raising awareness of the unacceptability of child sexual abuse, and promoting the notion that stopping child sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility.

All adults and adolescents need to know that child sexual abuse is a crime that often causes severe damage to children, that help is available for those who seek it, and that children can never consent to sexual activity.¹ Further, a comprehensive prevention strategy should include increasing parents' and other caregivers' awareness and knowledge of protective measures they can take on behalf of their children. A powerful public education message must be transmitted to the general public, encouraging society to recognize that child sexual abuse is both everyone's problem and responsibility. The goal of such public education efforts is to eliminate any tolerance for sexual abuse or confusion over what society condones as appropriate interactions between adults and children.²

Educating the public, especially policymakers, about the true nature of child sexual abuse.

The wide dissemination of accurate information to the public, especially to policymakers, will help break the silence and taboo that surrounds child sexual abuse, and may facilitate the formulation of effective solutions to the problem.

Rigorously evaluating and strengthening existing child sexual abuse prevention programs.

Current child abuse prevention programs are focused primarily on educating preschool and elementary school children on how to recognize instances of abuse and teaching them personal safety skills. Programs may also focus on helping children who are victims of past or ongoing sexual abuse by encouraging them to disclose such incidents to parents or other responsible adults.³ Research yields little evidence that such programs actually prevent the occurrence of child abuse. Although program evaluations demonstrate short-term knowledge gain, they fail to establish a link between such knowledge gain and the prevention of child sexual abuse. The lack of conclusive outcomes does not necessarily mean that such programs are

ineffective. Rather, demonstrating effectiveness is a challenging task, mainly because of the methodological shortcomings of existing evaluations. Such limitations include the absence of comparison groups, lack of pre-testing on measures of knowledge and skills, inadequate follow-up periods, and small sample size.⁴Future evaluations of existing child abuse prevention programs must correct such methodological shortcomings. Moreover, child sexual abuse prevention programs must be strengthened so that program strategies are more explicitly directed toward the goal of preventing child sexual abuse.

Shifting the prevention of child sexual abuse from children to adults.

Many experts are concerned that even when children retain the knowledge acquired through child sexual abuse prevention programs, such children are incapable of resisting abusive behavior directed at them by older and stronger offenders.⁵ Such concerns seem valid given that approximately 40 percent of child sexual abuse victims are aged 6 and younger, and thus may be especially impressionable and vulnerable to victimization.⁶Adults must exercise an affirmative obligation to safeguard children from sexual abuse. Therefore, while strengthening existing child sexual abuse prevention programs, efforts must be made to create programs that shift the responsibility of child sexual abuse prevention from children to adults and public institutions. One such approach includes widespread and intensive public education, such as the use of media campaigns, to increase adults' awareness and knowledge of child sexual abuse and to teach actions adults can take to protect children.⁷The signals of child sexual abuse are often subtle and frequently defy detection even by knowledgeable parents and seasoned professionals. Additional efforts are needed, including parent education in methods for reducing the risk of child sexual abuse and training for professionals and other caregivers who work with children to recognize and appropriately respond to sexually reactive behavior. In addition, training and education of parents, caregivers, and professionals must also focus on what to do when a child discloses sexual abuse, how to report sexual abuse, and how to respond to the child's needs when disclosure is made.

Exploring, evaluating, and strengthening new approaches to preventing child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse is primarily addressed by two systems – the child protective system and the criminal justice system. Both systems address child sexual abuse only after the abuse has already occurred. Moreover, both are concerned with dispensing justice rather than preventing child sexual abuse. As such, neither focuses on formulating solutions to reduce child sexual abuse or to heal the negative consequences of child sexual abuse. In addition, since the majority of child sexual abuse cases are not formally reported to either the criminal justice or child protective systems, neither the interests of justice or protection are adequately served by the current institutional response to child sexual abuse. New, cutting-edge approaches are being developed to prevent child sexual abuse. Such approaches complement the criminal justice and child protective systems, but focus more on accountability, rehabilitation, and restitution than on punishment. However, despite the great potential such approaches hold to preventing child sexual abuse, they are new and not yet fully tested. Such approaches, including fostering survivor leadership, circles of accountability and support, targeted public messages directed at perpetrators and would-be perpetrators of child sexual abuse, and child sexual offender treatment, should be further explored, rigorously evaluated, and strengthened.

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