

MEASURING ACTUAL REDUCTION OF RISK TO CHILD ABUSE: A NEW APPROACH

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Abstract—Previous efforts to measure the effectiveness of child abuse prevention programs have relied on proximate measures presumed to be predictive of actual skills. This paper presents documentation that brings those assumptions into question, describes actual observation and measurement of behavioral change in children before and after prevention education, and correlates that behavioral response with more traditional measures of effectiveness. Unique to the evaluation was the staging of an actual situation in which each of the children had an opportunity to leave the school building with a stranger. Each simulation was videotaped and conducted in such a way that the children remained unaware of the fact that they had been tested. In addition, tests of language development, self-esteem and knowledge of prevention and safety concepts were administered before and after participating in the Children Need to Know Personal Safety Training Program [1]. Several findings have significant value for future examinations and programming. The effectiveness of a primary prevention program based on age-appropriate, experiential and interactive instruction was empirically documented. Traditional instrumentation which elicits written or verbal responses to cognitive questions about safety may be misleading in assessing children's vulnerability. Higher self-esteem before instruction and higher knowledge/attitude scores after instruction were found to be predictive of a reduction in vulnerability. While this is a significant series of findings, some children did not achieve the objectives of the prevention program. These results suggest further possibilities for evaluation and some direction for improving prevention education.

Résumé—Jusqu'à ce jour quand on voulait quantifier l'efficacité d'un programme préventif de maltraitance, on se fondait surtout sur une appréciation approximative et immédiate qui était censée avoir une valeur prédictive quant aux compétences réelles acquises grâce au programme. Le présent article apporte des données qui font douter de la validité de telles estimations: ces données résultent de l'observation d'un réel changement de comportement des enfants soumis à un programme éducatif de prévention avant et après l'application du dit programme: le changement de comportement est mis en relation avec des estimations plus traditionnelles de l'efficacité. Ce qu'il y avait d'unique dans cette évaluation, c'était la mise en place d'une situation réelle dans laquelle chacun des enfants testés avait l'occasion de quitter le bâtiment de leur école accompagné par un étranger. Cette simulation était enregistrée sur bande vidéo et conduite de telle sorte que les enfants impliqués ne se doutaient pas qu'ils étaient en train d'être soumis à un test. En plus avant et après la participation des enfants au programme de prévention intitulé "Les enfants doivent connaître les règles de la sécurité personnelle," des tests du développement du langage, de l'appréciation de soi-même et de la connaissance de concepts de prévention et de sécurité étaient administrés aux enfants. Plusieurs des observations faites pourront servir à de futures évaluations et programmations. On a ainsi obtenu par une méthode empirique une évaluation de l'efficacité d'un programme de prévention primaire fondé sur une instruction appropriée à l'âge, experiential et interactive. L'instrumentation traditionnelle qui conduit à obtenir des réponses orales ou écrites à des ques-

tions formelles sur la sécurité personnelle pourraient bien induire en erreur en ce qui concerne l'évaluation de la vulnérabilité des enfants. Une idée de soi-même élevée avant l'instruction spécifique et des scores élevés quant aux connaissances des attitudes après l'administration du programme d'instruction se sont révélés être de bons index prédisant une réduction de la vulnérabilité. Cela est vrai en général mais quelques enfants n'ont pas du tout atteint l'objectif du programme de prévention et les résultats observés suggèrent aussi d'autres possibilités d'évaluer et d'améliorer les programmes éducatifs visant à prévenir la maltraitance.

INTRODUCTION

THERE IS A RICH HISTORY of innovative and well-conceived attempts to demonstrate the value of programs for preventing the abuse of children. But assessing the effectiveness of preventive interventions is a difficult undertaking. Formidable obstacles to objective evaluation, upon which compelling arguments of the benefits derived from programming could be predicated include unreported abuse, matters associated with confidentiality, the ethics of attempting to sample child behavior in actual abuse situations, and a variety of others. Most evaluators have therefore elected to focus on proximate measures which are "presumably linked to desired ultimate outcomes. . . . Unfortunately, there is often little research evidence that the purported relationships hold" [2]. The relevance of traditional measurement of a child's understanding of concepts, with the assumption of a relationship to behavior resistant to victimization has recently been challenged [3, 4]. This paper presents documentation of the effectiveness of the prevention program, Children Need to Know Personal Safety Training Program [1], obtained by observing and measuring the behavioral change of children in simulated situations and correlating that behavioral response with more traditional measures of program effectiveness.

METHODS

Students enrolled in kindergarten, the first and second grades of a midtown Denver elementary school took part in the study. Twenty-four each were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups tested. Of these, 21 control group and 23 experimental group children were present for school on both testing days and were included in the study. A pretest-posttest control group design, otherwise known as the classical experimental design, was employed. It controls for all factors which jeopardize internal validity [5] and is the most widely used of the true experimental designs [6]. The respective groups were not related/matched; children were not paired on predetermined criteria [7], although their memberships were very similar in attributes. But for the purpose of comparisons made for before and after test results, children were matched against themselves at two different points in time [7].

Experimental group children participated in an 8-day block of child abuse prevention instruction consisting of 20-minute presentations each day. Control group subjects received no instruction, but were scheduled to take part in the program in the near future. The 8-session classroom program emphasized discovering and clarifying existing misconceptions children have about their personal safety. For example, participating children were not told that strangers are bad or dangerous, but merely "people you don't know" and an everyday part of life.

The program further attempted to establish simple, concrete rules and specific criteria for the application of those rules. The children were asked to follow the rules only when they were not with caretaking adults. In fact, children were encouraged to meet and interact with people they had not met before when in the presence of caretaking adults. The rules were as follows:

1. Stay an arm's reach away.
2. Don't talk or answer questions.
3. Don't take anything.
4. Don't go anywhere.

In a situation such as one simulated in the school setting, therefore, children, when by themselves, would be expected to follow the rules and not interact if approached by a stranger.

The program provided extensive opportunities for individual children to exercise those rules and concepts through role-playing. We hypothesized that children who can parrot concepts may not be able to actually use those skills in real life situations. Role-playing gives children an experiential base for future consideration, thoughtfulness and confident decision making when they find themselves in a situation associated with risk for child abuse.

Immediately before the classes, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), a non-verbal, multiple choice examination, "useful in measuring extensiveness of receptive vocabulary and (an instrument that) may serve as a screening device for children with a limited expressive vocabulary or for children who are verbally inhibited in a testing situation," was administered [8]. It measured not actual risk to abuse, but rather the ability of the children to master cognitively the concepts that were presented.

The students were subjected to two additional tests both prior to and following the instruction: the Harter Perceived Competence Scale for children [9] and the Children Need to Know Knowledge Attitude Test [1]. The Harter Perceived Competence Scale for Children is a self-report instrument strong in psychometric properties, designed to measure the competence of children across one general worth and three specific skill domains [9]. It is a commonly applied instrument measuring self-esteem, a construct sometimes theorized as being related to abuse and otherwise clinically important [9]. The Children Need to Know Knowledge-Attitude Test [1], a 20-item examination, was administered to measure the children's cognitive awareness and understanding of issues associated with risk and prevention.

Unique to the evaluation was the staging with each child of an actual situation the day before and the day after the classroom program, by which the child's response reflected the degree of vulnerability to abuse. This simulation, enacted only after extensive discussion and collaboration with parents and officials of the school and school district, was comprised of the child's encounter with a member of the research team in an isolated setting in the school. The research assistant, posing as a stranger, requested the child's assistance in the performance of a task which entailed their leaving the school building together. Acquiescence would clearly create the potential for an act of abuse.

Two scenarios were constructed. In each, the would-be stranger requested the child's assistance. In the pretest, he asked the child to accompany him to his car to help bring treats in for his son's birthday party. In the other simulation, the posttest, the child was similarly asked to come to the stranger's car to bring in puppets to be used in a puppet show: "Hello, I'm presenting a puppet show here at the school today. I have puppets and other neat things outside in my car. Will you come out and help me bring them inside?" If the child agreed, he/she was told that the stranger would come for him/her later for help. After all children had been through the simulation and had returned to their classrooms, they were told that the stranger had gotten help from the school's main office and would therefore not need their assistance.

Each simulation was carried out in a way that could not be expected by the children, who were unaware that they were, in fact, being tested. They were not informed after the fact that they had had a simulated encounter. In both instances, teachers had fabricated

an excuse to have the child leave the classroom and move to the designated area for the confrontation with the stranger. Collaborating office staff, classroom teachers, and school nurses took steps to insure that no one else was present in the hallway in which the simulation occurred and that the child could have departed the building with the stranger unseen by school personnel and/or other students. Thus, the major criterion to judgment of risk to the child's becoming victimized was his/her compliance/noncompliance with the stranger's request and other specific behavior in response.

A hidden camera and wireless microphone produced an audiovisual record of the encounter which was later reviewed and scored by research team members. A straightforward pass-fail rating was awarded the child based on performance during the simulation. It connoted simply whether or not the student agreed to the stranger's request. Interrater reliability among the four evaluation team members was 1.0 (total reliability). There was no disagreement concerning any child's expression of willingness to leave the school building with the simulator. The entire simulation process had been previously piloted with a class of kindergarten children.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Even before discussing findings attained, the authors emphasize what we believe to be the extreme importance of attentiveness to the emotional well-being of children participating in the study. Extreme care was taken in the creation of these simulations to protect the children's emotional well-being and to assure that the simulations were perceived as being well within the norms of everyday occurrences. Formal meetings were held with administrators of the Denver Public Schools to insure that they were fully cognizant of the protocols to be employed and to entertain any questions or concerns.

Parents were sent a letter detailing explicitly the format, process and content of the program. A positive permission form was used to assure that parents had judged participation appropriate for their child. Finally, a parent seminar was held where the concept and planned protocol were fully explained and all questions answered prior to initiation of the evaluation.

In designing the simulation, the school setting was selected because it is a protected and controlled environment. The "strangers" were conservative in appearance. The specific statements of both simulations were plausible and nonthreatening.

All personnel who took part in testing and staging the simulations were trained in social work and/or child development and had experience working with children of this age. A social worker observed on a television monitor each child's simulation and was prepared to terminate the simulation and attend to the child at the first indication of anxiety.

After the simulation, each child spent the next 30 minutes in a one-to-one meeting with a member of the research team. This allowed ample opportunity to express any fear or anxiety as well as to report the encounter.

Logistically, this made the process difficult, time-consuming, and labor intensive. But in our judgment this considerable allocation of resources is necessary and we should not be made complacent by the fact that none of the 44 children required the assistance for which provision had been made.

Only 1 of the 44 children expressed even minor anxiety about the simulation. This took the form of the child's straightforward request that a member of the research team investigate the activities of the stranger in the hallway. A researcher spoke with the child later that day and then stringently observed the child during the next two weeks. In this way we ascertained that there was no lingering effect or disturbing memory of the event. We