

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

RETHINKING PREVENTION

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PREVENTION PROGRAMS for children are very often created by well-meaning professionals as an isolated response to a specific problem without adequately considering or understanding the overall needs of children. They are created from concepts and beliefs that make sense to adults but which are consistently misunderstood by children. Often they are adaptations and interpretations of solid existing programs which look similar in their new form but which dramatically alter the desired effect.

Most prevention programs have evolved from a standard set of beliefs about children: Who they are, how they think, how they learn and what they need to know in order to be protected. As these programs, and derivations of derivations of these programs, have been implemented, there is a growing possibility that they may not be in the best interests of children, that children may be more fearful, mistrustful and insecure after these prevention programs are presented than before. There is a possibility that we are, in the name of prevention, taking away our children's right to feel safe and grow up viewing the world as a fundamentally nurturing place where people sometimes get hurt.

Most prevention programs claim they do not want to frighten children, but then go on to point out that knowledge about abuse is necessary to prevention. In essence, children are being told: "Boys and girls, this is what sexual abuse is, this is what they do to you, and the person most likely to do it is someone you love and trust." While the message is said gently and covertly to avoid confrontation, still it is the message being given.

Danger stranger says watch out for strangers, scream and run. Missing children are ever present on milk cartons, grocery bags, posters, and television. Children, however, are left with no understanding about what happened to all those missing children and, more importantly, worry that it might happen to them. The missing children campaign is not invalid, but we have failed to take care of the needs of all children while trying to assist missing children.

Perhaps the basis upon which the majority of these programs are built is not correct. We need to rethink and challenge the assumptions, beliefs, and activities in this field.

Most prevention programs are built around the concepts of good and bad: good and bad touch, good and bad strangers, good and bad feelings. This approach fails to recognize several fundamental points. First, sexual abuse has its beginnings in what most of us would call "good" touch which progresses to "confusing" touch and finally to "bad" touch. Prevention occurs long before "bad" touch begins and information about "bad" touch is not a necessary part of prevention programs. Secondly, children are unable to reconcile "bad" touch occurring with "good" people, that is, people they love. This is the primary reason the research has consistently found that children do not learn that the people they love might hurt them. Researchers have responded to this finding by recommending that we reinforce this concept more firmly without recognizing that it is an unhealthy and irreconcilable idea for children. Finally, teaching about "bad" touch gives children information they simply do

not need and may increase the possibility, if not the probability, of misinterpretation and false reporting.

There is a vast gap between what teachers think they are saying and what children are hearing. For example, one kindergarten child had been through a prevention program that taught him about his private zones. That night, when his father swatted him on the bottom on his way up to bed, he turned to him and said, "Daddy, I'm sorry, but my teacher said that that's my private zone and you can't touch me there anymore." An affectionate swat on the bottom was not what the teacher had in mind, but it was what the child heard and interpreted her to mean.

What we say to children and how we say it does make a difference. Children are not adults. They do not think like adults and they do not need the same information as adults. Rather, they need adults to protect them and to teach them to protect themselves while preserving their right to be children with all the innocence, naivete and freedom we associate with that time of life.

Personal safety must be addressed in the context of the whole child. Programs must take into account the overall well-being of children and their developmental needs and abilities. Programs must be developmentally appropriate. While everyone agrees with this, the most cursory review of existing programs and materials makes it clear that they do not adequately provide for the differences among children of varying ages. At a minimum, programs should be adapted in two-year increments.

We must recognize how children learn. There is a massive difference for children between concept and action. A puppet show, movie, story book or game can teach concepts. But a concept never prevented child abuse. Children must learn these skills in their muscles. This means role-playing, walking through the techniques, practicing, discovering what works and what does not. This is what children will ultimately call on in a situation where prevention strategies are needed.

Children must continue to learn these skills and the needed adaptations as they get older. To implement a prevention program in one grade only is irresponsible. At the most callous level this fails to recognize the need for prevention from the earliest possible age. It also fails to recognize the obvious and well-accepted need for reinforcement and re-shaping of children's skills as they mature.

We need to give up the notion that being "responsible" for oneself is too great a burden for children. Responsible is defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as ". . . involving personal accountability or ability to act without guidance . . . capable of making moral or rational decisions on one's own . . . able to be trusted or depended upon; reliable." It does not mean to be at fault. The truth is children simply must be responsible for themselves when they are by themselves.

Additionally, being responsible does not create the guilt associated with sexual abuse. Children are egocentric and quite naturally see themselves as the center of the world and the cause in what happens to them, including abuse. This is a primary treatment issue: whether or not children are taught about being responsible for themselves.

We need to look at the degree to which our point of view and our language are consistent with our own upbringing and beliefs about strangers and abuse. Phrases such as "Beware of strangers," "Be a cautious kid," "Warn children about abuse," "It's a dangerous world," "Watch out for strangers," "A little fear couldn't hurt," come from adult stereotypes and consistently invade prevention efforts. This way of thinking and speaking fails to reflect what we now know about teaching children to feel safer in the world while acting in a way that makes them safer. While we are teaching children, we also need to start thinking in a manner that acknowledges the ability of children to think and act on their own behalf.

We need to recognize that prevention efforts can support or damage children in the most fundamental way, that they concern the message children get about the kind of world they are

growing up in and their role in it. We need to stop being cavalier about who teaches prevention. Training matters for those working at prevention as much as it does for people who teach, counsel and protect our children. The subtext of fear and paranoia spreading through our population of children comes directly from those who speak to children about prevention without adequate understanding or training in the basics of positive, effective prevention.

Children have a right to be safe. They have an equal right to grow up without being anxious or afraid that someone might abuse them. Our goal should be to support a generation of children who are competent, confident, capable of thinking for themselves, of speaking up for themselves, of making decisions and judgments and of knowing when they need help and where to get it.

Children should have a sense of their own capabilities. They should have assertiveness training, appropriate communication skills, positive self-image, and common sense rules for personal safety. Teaching of these basic life skills should be ongoing, consistent, and carefully balanced. This training should be presented in such a way that it does not interfere with normal healthy and positive development.

We need an appreciation and understanding of the needs of children. They are why we do this work. They deserve our best. We need to choose existing programs or create new ones that are truly excellent and that do the job that needs to be done fully and appropriately. To prevent abuse and abduction without sacrificing the very children we mean to protect, we need to diligently examine our beliefs, our attitudes, and our positions in order to create a new context from which to implement programs that work.