

SPECIAL REPORT

Programming for Preventing Sexual Abuse and Abduction: What Does It Mean When It Works?

SHERRYLL KERNS KRAIZER
GEORGE E. FRYER
MARILYN MILLER

Many kinds of educational programs and other approaches to teaching children about the dangers of sexual abuse and abduction by strangers can have the "side effect" of creating new anxieties in the children. The program described in this article is effective without introducing negative, anxiety-producing stories, examples, and other warnings.

As the missing children campaign gathered steam in the mid-'80s and messages about strangers surrounded children, sexual abuse and abduction prevention programs became widespread. It is now the prevailing opinion that the missing children statistics were substantially inflated, which has unfortunately diminished the enthusiasm for addressing this problem with children in classrooms [Spitzer 1986; Hartmark 1986; Griego and Kilzer 1985; Gelman

Sherryll Kerns Kraizer, M.S., is Director, Health Education Systems and Coalition for Children, Palisades, NY. George E. Fryer, Jr., M.A., M.S.W., is Senior Instructor, Department of Pediatrics, University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver, CO. Marilyn Miller, M.A., is Associate Director, Health Education Systems and Coalition for Children, St. Louis, MO.

et al. 1986; USA Today 1986]. What was created which has not been addressed, however, is a pervasive and insidious anxiety on the part of vast numbers of young children in this country, as reflected by a Roper survey [1986] that reported 76% of the children were "worried that they might be kidnapped." While it is known that the vast majority of abuse takes place at the hands of people known to the child, not strangers, this does not diminish the need to provide prevention training for children to prevent both the fear and the reality of abduction.

Ask any child what she thinks a stranger is. The most common answer for children of all ages in all parts of the country is some version of, "Strangers are people who kidnap you, poison you, cut off your head and you never see your mommy and daddy ever again." Many prevention programs have reinforced this mentality and fed into the existing fear children have that they might at any moment become a "milk-carton child." This has been justified in many circles with statements such as, "I'd rather have my children be afraid and safe."

More recently, consideration has been refocused on the whole child, and concern has been expressed that messages of this kind may be damaging to children, that children may be more afraid and anxious after prevention programs are presented than before, and that these programs may not be effective in teaching the desired prevention skills [Conte et al. 1985a, 1985b; Kraizer 1986; National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse 1986]. The National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse points to this as a key issue in their Guidelines for Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs. "Sexual abuse prevention is a topic that can look deceptively simple. Some program materials foster this misconception by ignoring negative side effects, by assuming that new concepts will result in new and effective behavior."

This article reports on an evaluation of a primary prevention program that parts from traditional ways of talking about strangers with children [Kraizer 1981]. It introduces documentation that education of children geared to prevention of abduction and abuse by strangers can be effective without introducing negative, anxiety-producing stories, examples, or other warnings.

The evaluation measured the actual behavioral change attributable to a prevention program and assessed the relationship of those results to more proximate measures normally associated with evaluation of such programs [Fryer et al. 1987a]. These results are discussed here in the context of what has been learned that can inform existing and future prevention efforts in the area of stranger awareness in particular, and more generally in the related areas of prevention of sexual abuse and safety for children in self-care.

The Program

The "Children Need To Know: Personal Safety Training Program," developed in 1981, is a scripted primary prevention program designed to be used in a group classroom setting [Kraizer 1981]. It teaches prevention of sexual abuse by people known to the child, safety for children in self-care, and prevention of abuse and abduction at the hands of strangers—the focus of this evaluation. It begins by allowing children to voice their misconceptions about strangers, followed by discussion about what the word really means, acknowledges the predominance of nice strangers in the world and sets parameters for when children should be concerned with following rules about strangers. The primary messages are:

A stranger is anyone you don't know.

Most people are strangers and most of them are nice.

You can't tell by looking who is nice and who isn't.

When you are with an adult who is taking care of you, that adult is principally responsible for making decisions about strangers.

When you're by yourself or with your friends, you must follow the rules with *all* strangers.

The rules are taught positively through example, discussion, and extensive role play that allows children to actually experience implementing the rules and teaches them about the various things that might affect their thoughts. Each child has an opportunity to demonstrate mastery and to build his or her sense of competence and confidence in a wide range of possible situations.

Following are the specific rules the children learn to apply when they are without supervision:

Stay an arm's reach away from someone you don't know. Keep a "Circle of Safety" around yourself.

Don't talk to someone you don't know, including answering questions.

Don't take anything from someone you don't know, not even something that belongs to you or your family.

Don't go with someone you don't know, unless (for children six and up) the individual knows your predetermined family code word.

Through discussion, children visualize the point at which they might begin to feel uncomfortable or afraid with a stranger and plan just where and how to get help immediately and effectively.

The "What if . . . Game" is used to encourage children to think about the many applications of the rules, to actually walk through the scenarios, to provide a forum for dealing with existing fears and anxieties, and to engage teachers, parents, and even other children, in the process of continuing to build and reinforce their skills [Kraizer 1985].

The program is developmentally appropriate and skills are refined from year to year depending on the needs of the children in that particular age group. It focuses on empowerment and specifically omits all language that implies that children *should* be afraid.

The Evaluation

The evaluation took place with kindergarten and first and second graders in a mid-town Denver elementary school in 1986. Twenty-four children each were randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups. A pretest-posttest control group design, the classical experimental design, was employed. Treatment group children participated in an eight-day block of instruction consisting of 20-minute lessons each day. Control group children participated in the program in the second phase six months later.

The simulation was undertaken only after extensive discussions with officials of the school district, parents, and teachers. In designing the simulation, the school setting was chosen because it is a protected and controlled environment where children encounter strangers every day.

In the simulation, each child had an opportunity to leave the school building with a stranger (actually a member of the research team) [Fryer et al. 1987a]. As the child was encountered in the hall, the researcher/stranger requested the child's assistance by saying, "Hello, I'm presenting a puppet show here at the school today. I have some puppets and other neat things outside in my car. Will you come and help me bring them inside?" If the child agreed, he was told that the stranger would come for him later. If the child refused, the stranger responded with "Thanks anyway." After all of the children had participated in the simulation, a member of the research team went to the classrooms to let them know that the stranger had come to the office, as he should have, and had gotten the assistance he needed.

Each simulated situation was simple, plausible, tightly controlled, and did not create anxiety or upset for the participating children. Because they perceived it to be a real situation, it was an accurate measure of the children's vulnerability to abduction and subsequent abuse. A hidden camera and wireless microphone provided a record of each encounter and enabled scores to

be reviewed. A simple pass-fail rating was awarded each child. This indicated simply the child's agreement or nonagreement to accompany the stranger out of the building. Interrater reliability was 1.0 among the four evaluation team members.

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 time to express any fear or anxiety and to report the encounter. Logistically, this was time consuming and labor intensive, but this considerable allocation of resources is necessary; one should not be made complacent by the fact that none of these 44 children required the special care for which provision had been made. It was during this time that instruments to measure receptive language ability, self-esteem, and knowledge and attitudes about personal safety were administered to the children.

One-half of the children (the treatment group, $n = 23^*$) participated in the prevention program, which emphasized discovering and clarifying existing misconceptions about strangers; establishing clear, simple concrete rules and guidelines for their application; and intensive role-playing, practice, and discussion.

After the program, the simulations were repeated with another "stranger," making a different request, in another part of the school building. The knowledge-attitude and self-esteem instruments were also readministered. The performance of the group receiving no instruction (control group, $n = 21^{**}$) remained the same in the second simulation. The children who participated in the prevention program dramatically improved their performance with only five of 23 children agreeing to the stranger's request. (See table 1.)

The following school year, the control group participated in the prevention program and all the children participated in a final simulation [Fryer et al. 1987b]. After the prevention program, all of the control group children successfully refused the stranger's request to leave the school. Four of the treatment group children, who had failed in the previous year, participated in the program a second time and half of them subsequently demonstrated mastery of the program's techniques. The remaining treatment group children, who had received no intervention for six months, were resimulated to assess retention of their skills. All of these children successfully applied the rules and refused to go with the stranger.

In addition to the clear-cut reduction of vulnerability evidenced in the sim-

*1 child from the original treatment group was absent.

**3 children from the original control group were absent.

TABLE 1 Program Participation and Simulation Outcome Sequence

	<i>% Passed First Simulation</i>	<i>Received the Program</i>	<i>% Passed Second Simulation</i>	<i>Received the Program</i>	<i>% Passed Third Simulation</i>
Control Group (N = 21)	52.4%	No	52.4%	Yes	100%
Experimental Group (N = 23)	43.5%	No	78.3%	(Previous Failures Only)	86.7%

ulation, this evaluation yielded valuable insights about programming and its relationship to other factors in the child's overall profile. These are significant as we strive to improve prevention programming and to make it responsive to the individual needs of all children.

Discussion and Implications

The most important notation that must be made about the evaluation of this approach to prevention is that it worked. The vulnerability of children was reduced and was sustained over time. The knowledge-attitude instrument and the assurance the children manifested in the simulation reflected the children's feeling more able to keep themselves safe, which acts as an antidote to fear. Beyond that, there are a number of related findings that are significant for refining existing and future programming for children.

Knowing the "right" answers was not significantly predictive of success. Children's answers to the pencil-and-paper questions about personal safety did not ensure their ability to actually implement those techniques in the simulation. This is of major importance because pencil-and-paper tests have been the main criteria to date for assessing the effectiveness of prevention programs. It is clear that this measure of children's mastery of prevention concepts may be misleading as a predictor of their actual ability to protect themselves. In fact, the guidelines published by the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, mentioned earlier, suggest that, "Behavioral assessment strategies . . . represent the only means of estimating the strength of the behaviors that are being taught."

Nor is past performance a predictor of future successful resistance in the absence of prevention training. Three of the children who passed the first

simulation in the control group failed the simulation the second time. This is important to note because parents have often cited incidents in which their children escaped abuse as evidence that they are not vulnerable and do not need further prevention education. These three children call this assumption into sharp question; none of the children who received the training went from pass to fail in the simulations.

Concept Versus Action

Prevention of child abuse programs offer a remarkable range of innovative, attractive, and clever vehicles for presenting materials to children, but they reflect what adults think children need to know about this subject and how adults think it should be presented. This accounts for the proliferation of cartoons, films, videotapes, puppet shows, and so on. These all appeal particularly to adults without any evidence that they are as effective as hands-on experience for children. What programs have generally failed to reflect is a basic understanding of the difference between conceptual and behaviorally based learning. "Teaching techniques such as modeling of desired behavior, guided rehearsal in which a child is carried through the specific behavioral components of a complex skill, and reinforcement for approximations of the desired behavior are more likely to produce change in children's behavior" [Conte et al. 1985b: 15].

The opportunity to apply the skills is at the heart of a program's effectiveness. Children learn through a combination of discussion, role-play, application of skills to varied situations, and successive building and refinement of the child's ability to actually use the techniques being taught. The value of this is most clear when we recognize that the concept of self-protection does not protect. Children need an opportunity to clear out their own misconceptions, to receive new information and then to practice new skills so they make them their own—so they become part of the child's repertoire in everyday life. This process should be a part of all prevention programs for children.

Self-esteem

A link between self-esteem and the ability to learn and use prevention skills was made. Children who had high self-esteem going into the program were more successful. Those who entered the program with lower self-esteem left the program with higher self-esteem, but were not fully able to implement the skills taught. After participating in the program a second time, the number of children able to learn and use the skills to prevent abduction as measured by the simulation increased. Self-esteem appears to be a desirable precondition

to the intervention, enabling assimilation of the information presented as then measured by the performance in the simulations and the scores on the knowledge-attitude test.

This is significant because many practitioners have intuitively felt that self-esteem plays an important role in personal safety education without being able to provide a direct link. This pairing of higher self-esteem with knowledge about prevention skills as a predictor of successful use of prevention strategies in this evaluation provides an important direction for future programming and assessments. It may assist us in identifying children who would most benefit—or who may not yet benefit—from prevention training. This would enable us to meet the needs of individual children particularly vulnerable to future abuse by providing special programming.

Fear

That the children failed to manifest any fear or significant anxiety during the preprogram simulations, in a situation that clearly held enormous danger for them had the "stranger" been a perpetrator, tells us that children fear an abstraction they don't even recognize when they are confronted with it in real life.

The program itself gave the children an opportunity to express their fears, paired with specific experiential opportunities to practice appropriately and effectively the situation they feared. This freed them from the hold of the abstract fear and left them feeling more able to protect themselves.

The children again manifested no fear in the simulations following the program. This is consistent with the report of 11 children (not from this study group) who are known to have been involved in attempted abductions following their participation in the program over the past several years. In each case, the children reported thinking, when they were confronted, "This is what that class was about. I need to . . ." Each child followed the rules and escaped. Equally important, each of these children wondered at their parents' agitation when they reported what had happened. Each child felt secure, saying things such as, "I learned what to do. I did it and everything's okay. Now, let's have lunch."

These actual cases validate the observation, made following the simulations and training, that neither the training nor the situations in which the principles taught might be used are anxiety-producing for children. Fear among children does not reduce their vulnerability, but a case can certainly be made for its reducing their ability to feel capable as they learn to move about in the world.

Age of Maximum Receptivity

The successful participation of children in this study from kindergarten readiness level through second grade validates the efficacy of teaching specific skills to young children and their ability to implement those skills. It is also our experience in working with thousands of young children that they learn the techniques with less difficulty than their older siblings. The reason for this is quite simple and straightforward: they have fewer misconceptions to get in the way of the new information.

Since even very young children are vulnerable to abuse and abduction, this is an important finding. While it is true that adults bear greater responsibility for watching over and protecting very young children, there are times when these children are without our supervision. They should be taught skills that enable them to protect themselves without fear and without threatening their overall sense of well-being. This is accomplished when the rules and concepts are presented simply, with specific directions, concrete examples, and opportunities to practice.

Role of Parents

In addition to the requirements for informed consent and parental permission for children to participate, an orientation seminar was held, and the research team was available to all parents. It was clear that they were concerned about abduction and admitted readily to having frightened their children because they didn't know what else to do. They were receptive to other ways to deal with the problem, as were the classroom teachers, and appreciated being told that they had not done irreparable damage to their children.

Conclusion

Programing is essential, but it must respond to the needs of the whole child. The evaluation reported here shows that children can learn to use prevention skills without fear and without explicit information that may not be in their best long-term interests, but it represents only a step. Evaluation of the other elements of the program is continuing. As understanding about how children learn and use the materials presented to them grows, so the program can be made more appropriate, sensitive, and effective. ◆

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(Address requests for a reprint to Sherryll Kerns Kraizer, Director, Health Education Systems, Inc., Box GG, Palisades, NY 10964.)