Child Sexual Abuse Programs: Recommendation for Refinement and Study

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ABSTRACT: Child assault prevention programs have increasingly been instituted in school systems throughout the country. This paper reviews and summarizes research findings on child abuse, child abuse prevention programs, and evaluations of child abuse prevention programs. In addition, the author presents issues for program developers to consider as they re-examine and refine existing child abuse prevention programs.

The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (1979), defines child sexual abuse as “contacts or interactions between a child and an adult when the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or another person” (P.2). During the late 1970’s there was a large increase in the number of reported child sexual abuse cases. As a result, many studies have been conducted in an effort to understand the scope of the problem. Peters, Wyatt, and Finkelhor (1986) describe several of these studies and report that estimates of prevalence rates range from 6% to 62% for females and from 3% to 31% for males. As they pointed out, even the lowest figures indicate that child sexual abuse is not a rare occurrence, while the higher rates indicate a “problem of epidemic proportions” (P.19).

Several studies document initial and long term effects of child sexual abuse on the victims (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986a; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986b; Lusk & Waterman, 1986). Initial effects might include excessive fears, anxiety, guilt, depression, interpersonal problems, and inappropriate sexual behavior. Adults who were victimized as children may experience impaired functioning in marital, familial,
and interpersonal relationships, self-destructive behavior, poor self-esteem, chronic depression, and sexual maladjustment.

Finkelhor (1984) asserts that for child sexual abuse to occur, the perpetrator must have the motivation to abuse and must overcome internal inhibitions, external impediments, and the child's resistance. This last factor would indicate that teaching children the necessary skills for recognizing and resisting abuse may assist them to avoid abuse. Hence, numerous child sexual abuse prevention programs have been established with the goal of primary prevention in mind.

Prevention Programs

It was not until the late 1970's that programs focusing on prevention were established. Prior to that time, efforts were aimed at identifying and treating sexual abuse victims rather than trying to prevent the abuse (Finkelhor, 1986). Initial prevention efforts were directed toward abuse perpetrated by strangers even though statistics indicated that 80-85% of all assaults are by offenders known to the child and 25% of these perpetrators live in the child's home (Saslawsky & Waterman, 1986). Because assaults by strangers account for only 15-20% of all abuse, current child sexual abuse prevention programs do include information on known offender abuse (Kolko, 1988: Wurtele, 1987).

These programs have been widely implemented in school systems. Daro, Duerr, and LeProhn (1986) estimate that child sexual abuse prevention programs have been presented in at least 25% of public schools nationwide. Plummer (1986) estimates that over one million children have been exposed to various child sexual abuse prevention programs since 1980. Although there has been an increase both in the number of child sexual abuse programs offered and the number of children covered by these programs, questions remain as to their efficacy.

Program Evaluation

Such questions have developed primarily due to the fact that evaluative studies have lagged behind the actual implementation of existing and recently established child sexual abuse programs (Wurtele, 1987: Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 1988). Reppucci and Haugaard (1989) state that "there is no evidence, not even one published case example, that