Child Sexual Abuse: Prevention or Promotion?

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Current child sexual abuse prevention programs assume that, by targeting potential victims, they can reduce the prevalence of child sexual abuse. This article presents findings, however, that suggest this assumption is flawed. First, recent studies indicate that the prevalence of abuse has not decreased over the history of prevention programs. Second, because of the pervasiveness of the threat of child sexual abuse, it is doubtful that prevention programs can adequately prepare children for the diversity of approaches by potential offenders. It is suggested instead that potential offenders are more appropriate targets of prevention programs. Because a large portion of abuse appears to be related to socialized relational patterns gone awry, it is suggested that a more efficacious method of prevention is a school-based program that promotes healthy relationship patterns. The article compares the existing victim-based paradigm with the proposed potential healthy relationships paradigms along four domains: underlying assumptions, orientation, method, and goals.

Key words: child sexual abuse; prevention; sex offenders

School-based programs are the primary means of addressing the prevention of child sexual abuse in the United States. These programs were originally developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s during a time of increased awareness of the problem of child sexual abuse. Originally, this awareness was largely the result of writings by feminists such as Florence Rush (1980) and Judith Herman (1981), who suggested that dynamics in society as a whole were a primary cause of the prevalence of abuse. Feminists believed that child sexual abuse was symptomatic of a patriarchal society in which men had power over girls and women. Abuse was conceptualized as an extension of socially normative behavior between men and women. One effect of this literature was to bring the problem of child sexual abuse to public awareness.

Russell's (1983) prevalence study, the first random community prevalence survey ever done, contributed to a sense of urgency concerning child sexual abuse when she reported that 38 percent of all female respondents in her sample had experienced contact sexual abuse as a child. In the 1980s, professional literature on the problem of child sexual abuse also began to expand rapidly. At the same time, high-profile cases started to be sensationalized in the media, especially abuse in day care centers, contributing further support for a sense of urgency.

Pressured to respond within this highly charged public and political arena, schools and other community organizations moved to develop programs directed at teaching skills to children so that they could avoid abuse (Finkelhor, 1990). At the same time, dynamics of offenders were poorly understood. The prevailing model for understanding offenders divided them into fixated and regressed (Groth, Hobson, & Gary, 1982). Fixated offenders, with their pedophilic tendencies toward abusing multiple children, both strangers and acquaintances, were considered to be the more dangerous offenders. In reaction, stranger danger programs were implemented.
At the same time, the developing knowledge base was recognizing that children were at even greater risk of being abused by individuals they already knew—even relatives. Answering this concern, programs expanded to include other types of potential offenders, although programs almost exclusively remained targeted at elementary school-age children. Thus, these early, but palliative, programs targeted only the reduction of victimization instead of reduction of the offending behavior itself. Although there were some early calls for prevention programs directed at potential offenders (Swift, 1979), these programs were never implemented and, over time, programs targeting potential victims became the central method by which prevention strategies were taught to children.

Today prevention programs are available, for some age level, in almost all school districts (Daro & Salmon-Cox, 1994). These programs have three objectives: (1) to teach children the concept of sexual abuse, often described as “bad touching” in private places; (2) to teach children that they can refuse such overtures and get away from the person; and (3) to encourage children to tell an adult about overtures that occur (Finkelhor & Strausko, 1992). The central goal of these techniques is to prevent abuse by relatives, known others, and strangers by reducing the “vulnerability of children to abuse and exploitation” (Kohl, 1993, p. 139).

Child abuse prevention programs are, for the most part, successful at teaching children concepts about sexual abuse and skills in self-protection (Finkelhor & Strapko, 1992; Rispens, Aleman, & Goudena, 1997). Numerous evaluations of prevention programs also note an increase in the number of disclosures of abuse (Finkelhor & Strapko). Although these are important and encouraging findings, other studies have found that these benefits are not without cost. Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (1995) found that some children, because of the information presented in the programs, reported being more worried about the possibility of abuse and had a greater fear of adults. These same children, however, were more likely to have positive feelings about the programs themselves, as well as the skills they gained. Another concern is whether the skills and information learned in the programs transfer to diverse abuse situations (Rispens et al.). Because this transfer of learning has not yet been effectively evaluated, the actual effect of these programs on the reduction of the problem of child sexual abuse remains an outstanding issue.

Other concerns about these programs have been discussed. Given the power discrepancy between abuser and victim, Melton (1992) questioned whether children are powerful enough to deflect the approach of an offender. Might that inherent power differential outweigh any sense of empowerment conveyed to children in these programs? For example, in a study that queried offenders, Elliott, Browne, and Kilcoyne (1995) found that teaching children to say no was only effective if they were not alone or when they were first approached. Once the offender was alone with the child, resistance was likely to lead to injury. Another concern is whether providing asexual information about safe touch would transfer to sexual situations. Again, evaluations do not address this problem although, as noted earlier, one positive result is that children may feel more comfortable disclosing abuse that has occurred.

The more nagging and fundamental concern, however, is whether these programs are effective in reducing the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Although program evaluations are not yet sophisticated enough to determine whether children who participate are less likely to be abused, this is an essential question and this article addresses it.

Have Prevention Programs Reduced Abuse?

The most fundamental underlying assumption of prevention programs is that they can reduce the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Although perhaps a lofty hope instead of an actual strategy, these prevention programs are considered primary prevention efforts because they target the reduction of the problem. This section considers whether there are any data to support a thesis for a reduction of abuse as a result of the inception of child sexual abuse programs.

The efficacy of prevention programs traditionally has been judged by how the children themselves are affected. Questions asked by evaluators are whether children acquire and retain the information and skills they are taught, whether they can apply the skills in role-playing situations, and whether these skills transfer to abusive situations (Finkelhor & Strapko, 1992; Kohl, 1993). Although important questions, they all focus on the participants of the prevention programs. These studies...
do not assess, however, whether participants are less victimized over time.

Another method of analyzing the efficacy of these programs is on the macro level, specifically whether these programs have had an effect on the overall level of abuse in the United States. This is a very different manner of analyzing the issue of efficacy, one that is not only intuitively appealing, but also critical. Certainly, there are concerns about moving to a macro level analysis when the point of the intervention is at the level of the child. Yet, important precedents for analyses such as these exist, such as macro level analyses on the relationship between seatbelt use and fatalities.

There are also arguments that suggest that macro level analysis for prevention is appropriate. First, the trend toward ever increasing programs in the past 15 to 20 years suggests that there should be a concomitant decrease in the number of children being abused in the same time period. Second, the large majority of school-age children are now exposed to prevention programs. Daro and Salmon-Cox (1994) noted that, in 1990, almost 85 percent of school districts randomly selected across the United States offered programs in at least one school. The trend since 1990 has been for an increasing emphasis in schools. Again, this trend would suggest that, given that most children are exposed to child sexual abuse prevention programs, the prevalence of child sexual abuse should be decreasing. Of course, one could argue that even though most children are exposed to these programs they are not exposed at the necessary strength, or dosage, that would provide some type of protection. Nevertheless, it is informative to analyze whether child sexual abuse is decreasing. Such a trend would suggest hope that these programs were working, even if a causal relationship could not be assumed.

Regrettably, a recent meta-analysis of retrospective prevalence studies of adults experiencing child sexual abuse found no indication that child sexual abuse is decreasing. This meta-analysis of random community, state, and national prevalence studies done in North America (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1999) found instead that, after controlling for methodological variations within studies, the prevalence of child sexual abuse reported in these studies had increased over the past 15 years. Of course, with a meta-analysis of this nature, the question has to be whether other reasons could account for this increase. One potential reason is that the rigor of prevalence studies (a factor that could not be captured using a single variable) has probably improved over time. Yet, this study could not rule out the possibility that child sexual abuse has increased over time, and it certainly did not indicate that abuse was decreasing. Thus, if prevention programs have had a prophylactic effect on the problem of child sexual abuse, that effect has been offset by other factors that have increased the problem.

On the other hand, evaluations of prevention programs demonstrate that disclosures of abuse increase after the programs are presented to children (Finkelhor & Straus, 1992). Concomitantly, reports of abuse (that is, abuse coming to the attention of authorities) have increased during the past 15 to 20 years. For example, the National Incidence Study done in 1981 found that authorities knew of 44,700 cases of child sexual abuse (Finkelhor & Hotaling, 1984). By 1986, 133,600 children had been identified and this number had increased to 300,200 in the latest national study conducted in 1993 (Finkelhor, 1994; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Although prevention programs may be partially responsible for such increases in reporting, other factors probably contributed, such as greater awareness of sexual abuse as a problem, greater emphasis on identifying abuse cases, increased emphasis on mandatory reporting laws, and a concomitant increase in funding (Thompson-Cooper, Fugère, & Cormier, 1993). In sum, although children exposed to prevention programs may be more likely to disclose abuse, the actual number of cases occurring also may be increasing.

**Can Prevention Programs Reduce Abuse?**

If prevention programs have not appeared to reduce abuse over time, is there a reason to believe that they can be effective in reducing abuse in the
future? Conversely, is there reason to believe that they cannot be effective? There is reason to believe that even the best prevention programs targeted at school-age children (that is, potential victims) cannot be effective.

For prevention programs to be effective at reducing abuse, they must be able to provide skills and education to children that transfer to approaches by potential offenders. Therefore, skills presented to children must be broad enough to cover the spectrum of potential abuse situations yet specific enough that children feel competent to use the skills in potential abuse situations. It is my position that abuse is so pervasive, and the multiplicity of offenders, locations, and approaches so varied, that children cannot be given adequate skills to protect themselves.

The same meta-analysis of random prevalence studies discussed earlier estimated, using a quantitative procedure, that 30 percent to 40 percent of female victims and as many as 13 percent or more of male victims are sexually abused in childhood (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1999). In a more recent analysis of these studies that added Wyatt and colleagues' (1999) replication study, these estimates were lowered to 25 percent to 34 percent (Bolen, in press). Especially for women, this study contributes to the literature suggesting that sexual abuse is of epidemic proportions. Another outstanding characteristic of random prevalence studies is that approximately 95 percent of offenders are men or boys (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Russell, 1983; Wyatt, 1985). Of great importance, virtually every type of familial and extrafamilial relationship is amply represented in offender populations. Approximately 30 percent of abuse of young girls is perpetuated by male relatives (Finkelhor, 1987), with fathers and uncles accounting for more than one-half of that abuse (Finkelhor et al., 1990; Russell, 1986; Wyatt, 1985). Yet, only slightly fewer cases of abuse are attributed to siblings, cousins, and grandparents.

For extrafamilial abuse of young girls, the most prevalent offenders are acquaintances (Russell, 1983; Siegel, Sorenson, Golding, Burnam, & Stein, 1987) and strangers (Wyatt, 1985), although abuse by authority figures (for example, teachers, doctors, and so forth), friends, dates, and friends of the family remains common (Russell, 1983). In Russell's survey, one of the most rigorous prevalence studies ever done, the prevalence of abuse of young girls was approximately 5 percent or more for each of the following male relatives: uncle, father (biological or stepfather), stranger, acquaintance, friend of the family, authority figure, and date. Two percent or more of young girls were abused by each of the following male figures: cousin, sibling, distant relative, neighbor, friend, and someone in a minor role to the victim (such as the family's gardener).

For boys, intrafamilial abuse is less common than for girls, and when it occurs it is most likely to be perpetrated by uncles and cousins (Finkelhor et al., 1990). Most extrafamilial abuse of boys is committed by strangers, followed by a known other. Thus, boys and girls remain at high risk of being abused in virtually every category of male relationship. This multiplicity of relationships complicates the ability of programs to prepare children adequately for these diverse offenders.

Another finding of concern is the multiplicity of locations where abuse occurs. In a population of identified offenders (Elliott et al., 1995), 44 percent or more of offenders approached children in each of the following locations: offender's home (61 percent), child's home (49 percent), and outdoors (44 percent). This finding is confined to a population of identified offenders. In random population surveys that report on unidentified offenders, Wyatt (1985) found that approximately one-fourth of all abuse occurred at the victim's home. Yet, both a secondary analysis of Russell's data (Bolen, 2000) and Wyatt found that victims were at high risk in each of the following situations: walking in the neighborhood or to and from school, in public locations in and outside of the neighborhood, at the perpetrator's house (usually a known other), and in a vehicle. Thus, no location can be considered safe.

Another indication of the pervasiveness of the threat of child sexual abuse, and a reason to suspect that a general transfer of learning deriving from current prevention programs is impossible, is the multitude of approaches of the offenders. In the study of identified offenders by Elliott et al. (1995), the following strategies were commonly used: using play or teaching activities (53 percent); babysitting (48 percent); bribes, outings, or provision of transportation (46 percent); affection, understanding, and love (30 percent); gaining trust of the whole family (20 percent); stories, lies, magic, or treasure hunts (14 percent); and asking the child for help (9 percent). These findings are corroborated by prevalence-level data. In a
secondary analysis by Bolen (2000) of 360 of the 461 cases of extrafamilial abuse in Russell's (1983) database, 66 methods of approach were categorized. Attempts to collapse these dynamics into coherent groups were unsuccessful. Types of approaches with 10 or more cases included approaching the child when she was alone, playing, visiting the perpetrator, or waiting in a parked car; asking the child if she wanted a ride; grabbing her while she walked; coming into her room; and taking her to the offender's house. On the other hand, these cases accounted for only 40 percent of all extrafamilial abuse cases.

Although a few children may be able to deflect an offender's approach or might be able to prevent abuse from escalating, it is likely that these attempts represent the less serious abuse incidents. Furthermore, to adequately prepare children to thwart the many different types of approaches would provoke a level of fear that itself would be too costly in terms of the benefits gained. Thus, child sexual abuse is simply too pervasive to prevent by targeting children.

Is the Population of Potential Offenders Sufficiently Large to Target?

If child sexual abuse prevention programs targeted to children are not—and cannot be—effective at reducing the prevalence of child sexual abuse, what are the alternatives? Although there may be others, this article considers the possibility of targeting potential offenders.

Although there were some early calls for prevention programs targeted at potential offenders (Swift, 1979), there were two reasons that prevention programs originally targeted children. First, the programs developed in a reactionary manner and in a highly charged political context. Because the original call was to increase the safety of children, they became the natural targets of education. Another important reason, however, was that little was known about offenders in the 1970s and early 1980s. It was considered almost impossible to target a population that could not be identified adequately. What is intriguing about the literature, however, is how little the issue of who to target was debated. That children would be targeted seemed almost a foregone conclusion. Only in 1994 did Daro and Salmon-Cox, in one of the most pointed discussions, state:

Researchers... have theories about life experiences or internal qualities that may propel perpetrators to sexually abuse a child, but these types of characteristics are not readily identifiable. ... Most estimates indicate that 80 to 90 percent of reported cases of sexual abuse involve offenders known to the child... but this does not narrow the scope of potential abusers. For this reason programs specifically target the people who could potentially become victims, namely, the child.

(p. 2)

In other words, because individuals cannot be easily identified as being potential abusers, the potential victims must instead be targeted.

Using this same logic, the problem of the prevention of child sexual abuse could be approached in a very different manner. This different perspective starts with one of the most basic statistics of the child sexual abuse knowledge base—that approximately 95 percent of offenders are men or boys (Finkelhor et al., 1990; Russell, 1983; Wyatt, 1985). Although prevention programs currently target children because all are considered at risk of child sexual abuse, can a case be made for targeting male offenders? To target the male population as a whole, however, the number at risk of becoming sexual abusers would have to be sufficiently large to warrant that approach.

This approach brings up an important question: What is a sufficient at-risk population to warrant intervention efforts targeted at all males? The child sexual abuse prevention literature provides one method for determining this question. I argue that if somewhere between 10 percent and 20 percent of all males are at risk of abusing a child either purposefully or situationally (based on the percentage of children abused), there is sufficient reason to target all males.

What Is the Likelihood of Purposefully Abusing a Child?

How many males are at risk of purposefully sexually abusing a child? It has long been of concern that far more offenders exist in the general population than come to the attention of authorities. That 30 percent to 40 percent of girls and as many as 13 percent or more of boys are sexually abused (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1999) suggests as much.

Herman (1990) probably stated this rationale best when she said, "when one-third of the female population has been sexually victimized, common sense would suggest that some comparable percentage of the male population has been doing the..."
victimizing” (p. 178). Although her statement may be somewhat exaggerated, the minimal available literature does suggest that a significant number of males have the potential to purposefully abuse a child.

In one of the earliest studies of likelihood of abuse, Freud and his colleagues (Freund, McKnight, Langevin, & Cibiri, 1972) showed slides of naked children to nondeviant men (mostly psychology students). From this study they concluded that nondeviant males had clear sexual reactions to female children as young as six to eight years of age. Furthermore, when Malamuth (cited in Finkelhor & Lewis, 1988) asked male college students, “If you could be assured of not being caught or punished, how likely would you be to engage in pedophilia, that is, sexual activity with a child” (p. 65), 15 percent agreed to some likelihood. This finding is all the more remarkable because the activity was defined as pedophilia, an illegal activity.

In a later random community study using a sophisticated technique (that is, Randomized Response Technique) to ensure the anonymity of respondents (Finkelhor & Lewis, 1988), 4 percent and 17 percent of men in two samples agreed that they had sexually abused a child at some time in their life. Given confidence limits, the range was between 1 percent and 21 percent of all men. In a college male population (Bagley, Wood, & Young, 1994), although only 1 percent of men admitted to having had sexual activities with a child under age 13 when the men were age 18 or older, 5 percent admitted to some interest in sexual activity with a child under age 13. Slightly more of these men preferred girls to boys. Five percent admitted to some interest in sexual activity with a boy between ages 13 and 15, and 9 percent admitted to some interest in sexual activity with a girl between ages 13 and 15. A final study by Briere and Runtz (1989) found that 21 percent of college men reported sexual attraction to small children, 9 percent reported fantasies of having sex with a child, 5 percent reported masturbating to fantasies of sex with a child, and 7 percent reported some likelihood of having sex with a child. These studies offer compelling evidence that a significant percentage of men may have some proclivity toward purposeful sexual abuse of a child.

What Is the Likelihood of Not Defining One’s Behavior as Abuse?

Although the number of men in the population who appear to have some sexual attraction to children is worrisome, another concern is men who do not necessarily have the pedophilic arousal patterns to children but abuse for other reasons. The literature on offenders tends to focus on perpetrators who can either be described as pedophiles or incest offenders (Becker, 1994). This conceptualization of offenders, however, derives solely from populations of identified offenders. Two issues make this an unreliable population from which to infer. First, intrafamilial abuse is vastly overrepresented in identified cases (Bolen, in press). Second, the vast majority of all sex offenders—possibly 90 percent or more (Bolen, 2000; Russell & Bolen, 2000)—are not convicted. Thus, those who are identified can in no way be considered representative of unidentified offenders.

One question that begs an answer is how unidentified offenders, who are the vast majority of all offenders, differ from identified offenders. First, because they abuse more children, pedophiles are probably more likely to be apprehended. In addition, society’s prioritization of intrafamilial abuse, especially father–daughter incest, within the child protective services system (Bolen, 2000) suggests that identified offenders also are overrepresented by intrafamilial abuse offenders. Conversely, it is likely that more situational offenders or offenders of abuse with less severity are less likely to be identified and convicted. Finally, I argue that offenders whose abuse is in a nebulous “gray zone” may be less likely to be identified and convicted. What is gray zone abuse? These are cases of abuse that, by the victim’s account, are clearly abuse. They involve unwanted contact, even rape, that the victim finds aversive and harmful. When considering these cases from the offender’s perspective, however, society may be hesitant to place a label of sex offender on the abuser. For example, in a case of
peer abuse of an adolescent that occurs at a party
and that involves alcohol, the victim might define
her experience as rape, whereas society might be
reluctant to define the male adolescent as a rapist.

To develop a theory of this type of abuse, we
must rely on studies of unidentified populations,
most of which are random prevalence studies.
Regrettably, the only known study of motivations
of unidentified offenders is my secondary analysis of
Russell’s (1983) random study of female child
sexual abuse. No similar data are available regard-
ing male abusers of male victims.

In the analysis of 360 cases of extrafamilial
abuse, there were a number of instances in which
the approach to the child was purposeful. Yet,
over one-third of all extrafamilial abuse cases,
committed mostly by juveniles or young adults,
appeared to be more situation specific (or one-
fourth of all abuse cases). Three patterns emerged
in these cases. A theme that emerged across
almost every category of perpetrator was the abuse
of the victim for sport. For example, one group of
male adolescents made sexual advances toward a
group of girls at the swimming pool; in another,
a group of soldiers harassed and fondled a victim in
a lobby. Another girl, because she was the first in
her class to wear a padded bra, became the center
of attention and abuse for a group of boys. Other
situations were even more overt, such as the snipe
hunt on which two boys forced the victim to un-
dress and left her naked to walk home. In virtually
every situation of abuse that appeared to be for
sport, a group of young men was involved and, in
most situations, the members of the group ac-
tively encouraged each other to participate.

In another type of abuse, a single young man
abused the victim and then used the abuse inci-
dent to bolster his own reputation. The theme of
this type of abuse could be classified as girls as
conquests. This abuse occurs in one of two ways.
In one, a single person abused the victim while
others watched. In another method, after the vic-
tim was abused by a solitary man, who was most
often a friend or date, he would then boast about
it to his friends. In several incidents, the victims
were humiliated and degraded by the bragging
behavior of the perpetrator.

A final and similar theme was of men’s entitle-
ment to sex, a theme that was most obvious when
dates and lovers abused victims. For certain of
these incidents the sense of entitlement was overt
and clear. For example, one perpetrator told his
victim to “either put out or get out”; another said,
“you know what you came here for.”

These abuse patterns appear to be an exten-
sion of socialization patterns between men and
women. Dates who raped and friends or acquaint-
ances who made sport of female victims speak to
socialization patterns gone awry. In these cases, it
is unlikely that these perpetrators labeled their
behaviors illegal. As Orenstein (1994) pointed
out, many male adolescents treat sexual harass-
ment and unwanted sexual touching of girls as an
expected part of their passage to manhood. When
middle school-age boys in her investigation were
told that some of their acts were illegal, they were
often surprised.

Regrettably, there is little information on un-
identified sexual offenders, especially on individu-
als who might not consider themselves to be sex
offenders. Yet, my case-by-case analysis of
Russell’s (1983) data found that a significant per-
centage of all abuse fell into—for lack of a better
name—the gray zone. The girls, who often experi-
enced severe unwanted sexual contact, were
clearly victims of child sexual abuse. On the other
hand, these mostly young men who perpetrated
the abuse were probably unlikely to consider their
actions illegal. Because the cases were often peer
abuse situations that occurred in friendship or
romantic relationships, it is also likely that society
would be more ambivalent about defining these
young men as sex offenders. Therefore, these cases
probably only seldom come to the attention of
authorities. When they do, they are also probably
more likely to be dismissed. The pervasiveness of
this type of abuse, however, suggests that a signifi-
cant percentage of the male population are at risk
of perpetrating this type of abuse.

The forms of sexual abuse of children dis-
cussed in this article are particularly worrisome
because they suggest that the potential of “nor-
mal” men to abuse is higher than expected. Of
equal concern, however, are those men and boys
who might not consider their behavior abusive.
Indeed, approximately one-fourth of all abuse
cases in Russell’s (1983) community prevalence
study, were primarily peer abuse situations that
were unlikely to be labeled sexual abuse by the
offender. These findings suggest that a sufficiently
large number of young men appear to be at risk of
sexually abusing a child to justify targeting all men
and boys for the primary prevention of child
sexual abuse.
Prevention or Promotion?
Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse

To develop a framework for prevention strategies, this article uses Finkelhor’s (1990) sociological framework for considering prevention efforts. This framework focuses prevention efforts in four areas—targeting high-risk populations, deterrence, sexual socialization, and altering the male sex role.

Finkelhor (1990) first suggested that populations known to be at high risk of becoming sexual abusers be targeted. Specifically, he mentioned two populations—stepfathers and boys who were sexually abused. Because we still know so little about offenders, however, Finkelhor believed targeting high-risk populations could only be one point of the overall approach to prevention.

Deterrence, the second focus for prevention efforts, is that category of intervention efforts in which sex offenders have to contemplate the increased risk of punishment for their behaviors. Because child molesters historically could be fairly assured that they would not get caught (Finkelhor, 1990; Russell & Bolen, 2000), there was little to deter them from acting out their sexual deviance. Thus, any efforts that increase child molesters’ concerns about being apprehended are likely to lower offending behaviors. There are limitations to deterrence tactics, however. First, they only target those individuals who are clear that their behaviors are illegal. Furthermore, they are probably more effective with adult offenders than juvenile offenders, who constitute approximately 40 percent of all offenders (Davis & Leitenberg, 1987; Fehrenbach, Smith, Monastersky, & Deisher, 1986). Because of their youth, juvenile offenders may be less aware of the sexual offending laws and may not realize that these laws apply to them. Finkelhor (1990) discussed another limitation of this strategy:

We live in a culture that in spite of its overt prohibitions against molestation is underneath ambivalent in these prohibitions. There is a certain license given to adults to consider having sex with children under some circumstances. The license is communicated in the fantasies about deflowering of virgins, in the now readily available pornography that approvingly describes sex with children, and in the sexualisation of children in the media and advertising. (p. 392)

Thus, he suggested that efforts to publicize deterrents to child sexual abuse must be done concomitantly with a campaign to discredit these ambivalent messages” (p. 393).

Finkelhor’s (1990) third focus for prevention efforts was to socialize children regarding sex. Finkelhor suggested that children must be raised with enough comfort about sexual issues that, as adults, they feel comfortable meeting their sexual and emotional needs without exploiting children. Although an important strategy, it does not target peer abuse, which constitutes a significant percentage of all abuse. For example, in my secondary analysis of Russell’s (1983) random community prevalence study, peers within five years of age of the victim (as computed by me) committed approximately 30 percent of all abuse.

The final strategy of Finkelhor (1990) was to focus efforts at altering the male sex role. Finkelhor states, “In a society that encourages predatory male sexuality, that sexualises all intimacy, and that fosters male irresponsibility towards children, it will be hard to prevent sexual abuse (p. 389).” His remarks suggest that the male sex role, as defined culturally, is a key contributor to why some men sexually abuse children. Marshall and Barbee (1990), in their integrated theory of the etiology of sexual offending, also believed that sociocultural messages, especially those that reflect traditional notions of a patriarchal societal structure (p. 264), may be used to bolster men’s sense of masculinity. These messages, in combination with other factors such as a poor upbringing or low self-esteem, may substantially increase the propensity to sexually offend. Herman (1990) further contended, “the use of coercive means to achieve sexual conquest may represent a crude exaggeration of prevailing norms, but not a departure from them” (pp. 177-178). These statements represent the beliefs of many experts that there is a critical link between traditional socialization of men and sexual violence.

The socialization patterns related to sexually offending have been studied much more closely in the rape literature than the child sexual abuse literature. Researchers have consistently found that these factors—interpersonal violence, male dominance, and negative attitudes toward women—are related to an increased propensity to commit rape (Marshall & Barbee, 1990).

These same factors also may be related to an increased propensity to commit child sexual
abuse. In the study of college men cited earlier, Briere and Runtz (1989) found that the likelihood of sexually abusing a child was related to an acceptance of sexual dominance over women and even the hypothetical likelihood of raping a woman. Thus, it seems likely that one important factor related to a greater propensity to abuse is the traditional socialization of boys. If so, however, child sexual abuse may be so interwoven into the fabric of society that it may be difficult to extinguish.

Taking a more optimistic view, however, it would appear that if effective programs can be developed that target the redefinition of the male role, then for the first time in modern history we may be able to consider the possibility of significantly reducing the prevalence of child sexual abuse. To develop programs that target the reduction of the offending behavior, however, requires a very different paradigm than the current prevention paradigm.

**Promotion of Healthy Relationships**

**Assumptions.** The current paradigm for the prevention of child sexual abuse has a dire assumption—because we cannot effectively target potential offenders, we must target potential victims. At its most basic, then, the existing paradigm for child sexual abuse prevention is somewhat hopeless. It assumes that the best we can do is to thwart the attacks of offenders. Children are thus taught strategies of self-defense, possibly couched in the rhetoric of empowerment, so that they have some tools for evading a potential offender. This strategy is similar to teaching self-defense strategies to all people in the United States as the primary prevention strategy for lowering overall levels of violence.

The primary assumption of the proposed paradigm, however, is that the problem behavior—the abuse itself—can be dramatically reduced. This more optimistic assumption provides hope for the actual reduction of the prevalence of child sexual abuse.

**Orientation.** For the existing victim-based paradigm, the orientation is one of prevention. For the proposed abuser-based paradigm, the orientation is one of promotion. Much like the Healthy Start program in Hawaii (Mansfield, 1997), this paradigm shift assumes that promoting healthy behaviors is an even better method for reducing problems. In this particular case, the problem behavior is the offending behavior itself. This orientation, then, assumes that boys can be presented alternative and more prosocial definitions of masculinity that allow them to express their masculinity in healthier ways than by choosing aggressive sexuality.

**Method.** The current method of prevention targets primarily young children, teaching them messages of empowerment and methods to thwart potential offenders. These specialized programs, presented to children on an occasional basis, do not consider differential abuse patterns over time and are typically not offered to preadolescents or adolescents.

The proposed paradigm, by addressing abuse through the promotion of healthy behaviors, requires a very different method of approach. First, it is unreasonable to assume that occasional programs can be effective. Social learning theory suggests that those messages that are most likely to be internalized are those heard consistently over time. With the pervasive and negative gender stereotypes in the media and in society in general, it is naive to assume that an occasional presentation of alternative behaviors would have any effect. Instead, this type of program must be infused in the curriculum of schools. Thus, all classes could have some content that models and rewards prosocial behavior. Furthermore, health or similar classes could have consistent time devoted to this material. In addition, it is important that this curriculum be offered in every grade, becoming a part of the overall curriculum.

Although these messages of prosocial behavior should be interwoven throughout the curriculum, there are probably special windows of opportunity. The first window of opportunity might be the preschool and early school years. One of the developmental tasks of these early years is to come to some understanding of gender identity (Schuster & Ashburn, 1991). Children may be especially sensitive to input at this age. Another period during which children may be especially amenable to considering their gender role is during preadolescence and early adolescence, a period when they are discovering their own sexuality and are beginning to contemplate how to express it.

The focus of this program also must change over time. One of the pertinent findings from my secondary analysis (Boles, 2000) of Russell's (1983) community prevalence survey was that...
patterns of risk for abuse changed over the life span of the child. Concomitantly, it is likely that situations in which men or boys are at high risk of abusing also change over the life span. In Russell’s study, approximately one-half of all abuse committed by juvenile offenders (that is, under age 21) was perpetrated against a friend or date. Another 30 percent of all abuse was perpetrated against an acquaintance. Although offenders under age 14 committed most friend abuse, offenders between ages 14 and 21 committed most date abuse.

These findings suggest that, for younger ages, the program needs to focus on the promotion of healthy behaviors for boys and girls in friendship relations. For middle school and high school populations, however, the focus must include romantic relationships. For all ages, boys must be taught better methods of expressing their masculinity than appropriating acquaintances for their sport or conquest.

Messages about healthy sexuality and masculinity also may be especially beneficial for deterring instances of abuse in which men or boys feel entitled to sexual access or are acting out extremes of socialized behaviors. Conversely, adolescents must learn that sexual activity with younger children—indeed, any child at a younger developmental stage—is never appropriate and is instead harmful. These messages combat those societal messages that encourage men or male adolescents to have sex with younger inexperienced girls. If, as Orenstein (1994) suggested, it is true that many young men do not understand the bounds of appropriate sexual contact, then it is certainly a subject that can be taught easily and effectively in the school environment.

Although most abuse is heterosexual, and these programs must be especially sensitive to this type of abuse, some abuse is not. Some male abusers choose younger male children, and a very few women also abuse. It is important that these populations not be overlooked. Therefore, broader messages that teach the bounds of appropriate contact in same-sex friendships or romantic relationships as well as messages concerning the bounds of appropriate contact for younger children are also necessary.

Finally, even though this program directly focuses on healthy relationship patterns that are taught through a guided curriculum, the promotion of healthy relationships also can be interwoven throughout the curriculum and philosophy of schools. One method of promoting healthy relationships is by having and strictly enforcing a policy of zero tolerance for any type of sexual harassment. Peer counselors with special training, both boys and girls, can also promote and model healthy relationship patterns. Teachers can and should also be appropriate models for healthy patterns. In-service programs can be offered for teachers. For older children and adolescents, role playing by trained adolescents (sometimes presented as part of a theatrical group) of date rape and sexual harassment scenarios is a powerful medium that elicits passionate discussions. Programs that use and educate parents can be used also. In short, there are multitudes of methods beyond a focused curriculum by which schools, at very little cost, can implement programs that promote healthy relationship patterns.

Goals. As discussed in this article, outcomes for existing child sexual abuse prevention programs have been measured primarily by the retention of information by participants. The short-term goal for these prevention programs, then, is that some children are able to thwart the attacks of offenders by using the information they were taught. Although the long-term goal for these programs is that there are fewer victims of child sexual abuse, I have argued that this outcome has not materialized, nor can it.

The short-term goal for the proposed paradigm is twofold. First, boys and young men exposed to this curriculum internalize a healthier and more prosocial model of expressing their masculinity. Second, these same children and adolescents perpetrate less abuse. The long-term goal for the proposed paradigm is that these young men also perpetrate less abuse as they come into their manhood. Thus, this paradigm envisions as a realistic goal the actual reduction of the prevalence of offending behavior over time. In this manner, the risk of abuse to children would decline.

Final Thoughts

One final topic must be considered. What do we do with current prevention programs? Should they be retained? These programs do have utility in specific areas. They not only appear to be effective in teaching concepts about sexual abuse and skills in self-protection (Finkelhor & Straus, 1992; Rispens et al., 1997), but also appear to increase
disclosures by children (Finkelhor & Strapko). These important advantages would be lost if these programs were dismantled. Instead, it is suggested that a better approach is to supplement the existing programs with the proposed paradigm, which has the reduction of offending behavior as its primary emphasis.

The only effective method of reducing the prevalence of child sexual abuse is to target potential offending behaviors. In short, to be effective, a very different paradigm is needed. Borrowing from Finkelhor’s (1990) sociological framework for the prevention of child sexual abuse, I suggest that this paradigm target one of the most critical causal roles in child sexual abuse—the societal definition of the male role—by promoting healthy relationship patterns. Framing the program in this manner moves the focus, and rubric, of the program away from methods of extinguishing negative behaviors, a deficit model and one that might be experienced by boys as demoralizing, to that of promoting healthy behaviors, a strengths perspective. Furthermore, the focus changes from prevention to promotion.

Programs for the promotion of healthy relationship patterns might be successful for the same reason that current prevention programs do not appear to be successful at reducing the prevalence of abuse. They target the reduction of offending behavior rather than the reduction of victimization. In addition, they target what many experts consider to be one of the primary causal factors for the epidemic of child sexual abuse and the preponderance of male offenders—the social definition of the male sex role. Targeting one of the important causes of child sexual abuse, although providing healthy alternatives for behavior, has the potential to finally reduce the intolerable tragedy of child sexual abuse.

References


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