

Magenu:
**Evidence Informed Education on the
Prevention of Child Sexual abuse**

By: Dr. Shani Zoldan-Verschleiser, AuD. LCSW

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Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence and Implications

Child sexual abuse can be a difficult and uncomfortable topic to discuss. It is, however, a problem that affects us all for a number of reasons both hashkafically as well as for social and emotional reasons. Child sexual abuse is a very large health problem that many children face. The prevalence of child sexual abuse varies slightly from study to study, however, according to David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, one in five girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse¹. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census there are approximately 74.5 million children in the United States between the ages 0-17. The statistics averaged out to 1 in 10 children means that an estimated 7,450,000 children are sexually abused before their 18th birthday. This number is extremely high and can have many detrimental consequences for the individuals as well as society as a whole. It can be hard to believe that this happens in our enclosed Jewish communities, but practitioners in the field will attest to the fact that the numbers match up to the statistics reported.

Most children will not disclose abuse for many reasons and it is therefore, reasonable to assume that the numbers are even larger than those reported. In addition, the numbers span class, race and neighborhood. In other words, all children are at risk despite where they come from or where they end up. In the past, the concept of “Stranger Danger” was primarily taught to young children as being the main threat in their lives. We now know that 60% of sexual abuse

¹ Child Sexual Abuse Statistic. (2013). Darkness to light web site. Retrieved from <http://www.d21.org/site/c.4dICIJOKGcISE/b.6251055/k.23F6/References.htm>

is perpetrated by someone the child knows very well, such as a family member or close family friend.²

The numbers also propose that more girls are victims than boys. We cannot be certain of this fact. Firstly, the stereotype that boys should not be abused may cause many boys to not report their victimizations. In addition, specifically in our communities, many offenders may choose their victims based on opportunities and since we generally have all boys and all girls activities, the numbers are likely to differ. Again, we have no specific numbers for our communities so it would be hard to say for sure, but this is based off what is being found in research as well as what therapists are reporting seeing in our communities.

Child sexual abuse can have many negative effects on children including regressive behaviors, sleep disturbances, eating problems, behavioral problems, isolation, anxiety, self-destructive behaviors, somatization and many others. Many of these symptoms can fall under the diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder.³

Prevention efforts

When trying to come up with initiatives to prevent child sexual abuse, two strategies are generally discussed; managing offenders and school based intervention programs. Initiatives for offender management are; sex offender registry, background checks, prison time etc. The problem with these strategies in regards to prevention is that it primarily focuses on those

² Child Sexual Abuse Statistic. (2013). Darkness to light web site. Retrieved from <http://www.d21.org/site/c.4dICIJOKGcISE/b.6251055/k.23F6/References.htm>

³ Morrissette, P. J. (1999). Post-traumatic stress disorder in child sexual abuse: Diagnostic and treatment considerations. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 28(3), 205-219.

offenders that would be in the system already or individuals that are pedophiles that would prey on children in easy to access environments such as in a school. This actually does not take into account that many sexual abusers are not strangers or pedophiles and many are juveniles. This is not to say that law enforcement should not be involved especially with high risk offenders, however these strategies will not stop the offenders that we have not identified. Juvenile offenders for example have a very low risk of reoffending if given proper counseling.⁴

It is important to understand that not all pedophiles are child molesters and not all child molesters are pedophiles. Pedophilia is actually a diagnosable disorder where the individual has either a primary or exclusive attraction to prepubescent children. A child molester is someone who touches a child sexually. A pedophile becomes a child molester only when they act on that attraction – but they are pedophiles regardless of whether they act on it or not.⁵

So, the main distinction is that someone does not become a child molester until they have victimized a child, but an individual can be diagnosed as a pedophile even if they have not victimized a child.

Pedophilia is recognized as a mental disorder, which is not illegal, but acting on it is a crime. At this time, there is no recognized cure for pedophilia, although there are therapy treatments that can help pedophiles learn to change their behavior and exercise self-control.⁵ Many practitioners and researchers have advocated in favor of counseling for sex offenders both to increase skills for behavioral self-regulation and to help resolve problems that may underlie

⁴ Finkelhor, D. (2009). The prevention of childhood sexual abuse. *Future of Children*, 19(2), 169-194.

⁵ *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis For Law Enforcement Officers Investigating Cases of Child Sexual Exploitation* December 1992 Third Edition Kenneth V. Lanning © National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

the offending. The availability of treatment options has grown, but many offenders still do not receive high-quality treatments. Barriers to such treatment include its expense, the lack of trained therapists, and the public perception that therapy coddles rather than controls offenders. We need to provide more access to resources for pedophiles. I am suggesting we further look into ways that allow for individuals to seek help in a confidential way (which in itself could be compromised). That is as much a part of prevention as the next piece we will discuss.

School based prevention programs

School education programs have been targeted at children, but also incorporate parents, teachers and employees that can intervene on a child's behalf. The main goals of a program is to teach skills to help children identify dangerous situations, to identify boundary violations, unwanted touch, and other ways in which offenders may groom children. It also aims to teach children how to refuse approaches or invitations and how to ask for help. A main point in a quality program is to teach a child to report abuse in order to stop ongoing abuse from occurring. In addition, the school based programs try to lessen the negative consequences of abuse among children who may have been abused by helping alleviate feelings of guilt which children often feel⁵.

Criticism for school based programs

The criticism that school based programs have drawn are; the concepts are too complicated to be learned especially for younger children, programs have negative consequences for children, such as creating anxieties or causing children to distrust or not cooperate with

⁵ Carroll, L. A., & Miltenberger, R. G. (1992). A review and critique of research evaluating child sexual abuse prevention programs. *Education & Treatment of Children, 15*(4), 335

trusted adults, and that they encourage false reports. The main reason critics have been against school based programs has been that children cannot reasonably be expected to stop an adult predator and that it is perhaps psychologically harmful to place the responsibility for preventing abuse on the child's shoulders.

In regards to the ability of children to learn the information, research shows children can and do learn the concepts and younger children have actually been shown to learn the concept more effectively than older children. Does this mean that they will be able to avoid getting abused? Not necessarily, but it does mean that they can and do learn the lessons if taught in an age appropriate manner.⁶ As far as negative consequences occurring from a program, research does not support this as a fact and in my own experience of training 1,000s of children there have been approximately 3 children that were reported to be feeling anxious due to the lessons as reported by a parent or teacher. Overall, the children enjoy the lessons and actually they have been shown to promote parent and child discussions on the topic of safety and trust overall. This is by far a positive consequence.

The question of false reporting does come up and can be a big fear for some considering implementing a prevention program. There are times when it does occur, but it is extremely rare. Sexual abuse is something a child needs great strength to disclose. As we stated earlier, sexual abuse is very underreported and this is due to many reasons such as; fear of the perpetrator, guilt, shame, love for the perpetrator, isolation etc. In addition, it can be very stigmatizing, especially

⁶ Finkelhor, D. (2009). The prevention of childhood sexual abuse. *Future of Children*, 19(2), 169-194.

in our tight knit communities. A child needs a great deal of courage to report sexual abuse and believing the child is paramount to their mental well-being⁷.

Can a child say no to an offender? Some say that children can never get away from a molester because of their motivation and authority. This is usually based on offenders that are highly motivated to abuse and use sophisticated strategies to engage victims. While this is true for these situations, there are many other times that children can use their knowledge to get away; such as with a peer or an abuser that is anxious and unsure of themselves, or in a public place such as a park or train. In addition, the lessons are not only to say no, but incorporate a huge piece to promote disclosures when something has occurred and to alleviate feelings of guilt that a child may feel. The programs should also allow for others to be educated and intervene on a child's behalf. This fact alone points to the need for a school based program.⁸

Other educational programs that have been shown to be effective in schools such as bullying, interpersonal skills building and drug use programs, have the same elements as a sexual abuse prevention program. They deal with people, involve judgments about the intentions of other people, and attempt to train children to resist pressures from others, in many cases, more authoritative people. The scientific literature is conclusive that this type of approach works as a general prevention strategy.⁹

Another benefit of school based programs is that they increase disclosures. This can often times be viewed as a reason why prevention is not working. The question arises, why are so

⁷ Davies, G. (2008). When children don't tell. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 22(9), 1318-1319.

⁸ Finkelhor, D. (2009). The prevention of childhood sexual abuse. *Future of Children*, 19(2), 169-194.

⁹ Wurtele, S. K. (2009). Child sexual abuse prevention: Preventing sexual abuse of children in the twenty-first century: Preparing for challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse: Research, Treatment, & Program Innovations for Victims, Survivors, & Offenders*,

many children and adults disclosing abuse if prevention is working? Research suggests that the more people speak about abuse the more prevention is successful. Having individuals come forward and enjoy an atmosphere of trust and shelter when they feel threatened or victimized is crucial. Keeping abuse secret confounds the injury to the child and increases the likelihood they will be re-victimized. The point of awareness is to empower kids to break that cycle, and I believe that is already happening.

Most practitioners agree that prevention is not solely on a child's shoulders and adults are responsible for protecting their child, but we have to arm our children with methods to protect themselves. If we do not teach children to avoid certain situations or to disclose abuse if it occurs, how will they know? As adults we teach our children to wear helmets when they ride a bike, not to touch fire, to wear a seatbelt and other safety rules we deem important. We do not avoid these topics as something an adult should be responsible for and therefore not necessary to teach. It is the adult's responsibility not to drive a car without his/her child being buckled, but it is also the adult's job to teach the child to always buckle up for safety. When it comes to prevention it is crucial for adults to learn what to look out for and how to be involved in their child's life to avoid abuse situations, however, it is also important for the adult to give the child the tools to protect themselves or to come to them should something occur.

In interviews with CSA survivors, certain pieces of knowledge can be gained and applied to prevention strategies. It is not generalizable, but it does teach us important and useful information. Two women, Erin Merryn and Lauren Book, were sexually abused as children by someone very close to their families, and have now become advocates for prevention in the school system. Erin Merryn travels around the country passing a bill called Erin's law that would require all schools to have a sexual abuse prevention program. Erin talks about the fact

that no one taught her what safe and unsafe touches were and how to disclose abuse. Erin reports that if this curriculum was taught to her in school she may have been able to seek help. Lauren Book developed Safer, Smarter Kids, a sexual abuse prevention program implemented in public schools in Florida that targets the children for the lessons because she believes the same as Erin. Lauren reports that if someone in school would have educated her on disclosure and abuse she could have told. Lauren says if the lessons were taught to her in school, she may have found a teacher to speak to or if the teachers were trained they may have noticed something and intervened. These two amazing woman teach us that prevention in schools can make a difference.

Our School System

It is in my opinion that the responsibility of prevention cannot be solely on the child and that parents and teachers have the main portion of the responsibility. This is the exact reason why I believe the school system is the best way to implement prevention. I'll explain. Let's start with the parents.

Parents/Caregivers

Many hold that parents are the primary mode for prevention and in many cases this is true. Parents know their children better than anyone else and can speak to their own children, so why do we have to? Well, studies show that while parents speak to their children about safe and unsafe touch, they fail to speak about some of the most crucial pieces of abuse such as the fact that abuse most often occurs by someone the child knows and trusts. Many parents give basics, but lack the knowledge to give over the nuances that often are the keys to prevention. We also have the parents that are just not comfortable with the topic and therefore, avoid it or assume their children know what they need to know. These parents need to be taught tips and tools on

how to approach the topic and even the actual words to say to their children. Parents are the ones that need to be taught grooming strategies implemented by predators so that they can stop the abuse from ever occurring. Parents have to learn to trust but verify. They need tools on what to look out for.

Another point that is difficult to accept, but just as important is when the parent/caregiver are the abuser. In a situation where the parent is the one perpetrating the abuse, how can we expect the education to come from the home? This is not something we can ignore because if we do we will lose the opportunity to educate and save too many children.

The next piece for parents is when a child was abused and discloses. The support and acceptance of the non-offending parent or other legal guardian the child discloses the abuse to, has been shown to contribute to the outcome of sexually abused children in regards to their symptoms and healing.

The reaction of the person to whom the disclosure is made has consistently been shown to have an impact on the psychological sequela of childhood sexual abuse. The nature of responses to disclosures predicted the severity of symptoms experienced 25 years after the cessation of the abuse. When reviewing the score's on measures of general trauma symptoms, PTSD, and dissociation; the results were worse when a negative response was given upon disclosure. Parental supports were found to ameliorate the negative effects of child sexual abuse.¹⁰

Parents have to be educated on this topic from signs of abuse and avoiding predatory situations to what a proper response to a disclosure is and how that can alter a child's mental

¹⁰ Roesler, T. A. (2000). Adult's reaction to child's disclosure of abuse will influence degree of permanent damage. (Cover story). *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter*

health for the future. There is no question that this is an important piece in a prevention program and one that can be delivered through the school system in a very efficient manner.

Staff

The staff of a school or youth serving organization is so crucial to prevention. Firstly, before any lessons are taught to the children, the staff must be equipped to handle a disclosure. Many times prevention programs promote disclosure, which is one of the goals. When this occurs the response by the teacher is just as crucial as a parent's response for that child's well-being.

The second most likely person that a child will disclose abuse to is a teacher. That is an enormous responsibility and one that cannot be taken lightly. If you are in the business of teaching children you need to be aware of the possibility that a student may need help and you may be the only person that can help them. Having the staff and administration trained allows for discussions on keeping predators out of the school, creating a safe environment for children and staff alike, learning signs that a child may be being abused, how to recognize a disclosure and how to handle the disclosure. It allows for exploration of this subject in a calm and supportive atmosphere. This can help staff who suspect abuse take the proper steps in responding which can mean life or death to that child.¹¹

We already learned that most abuse is occurring by someone that is very close to the child, often times in their homes, having a school environment where the staff is trained and comfortable with this topic allows for abused children to have a venue where they can disclose

¹¹ Pohl, J. D., & Hazzard, A. (1990). Reactions of children, parents, and teachers to child sexual abuse prevention programs. *Education*.

that may feel safer for them. In addition, today's climate has changed so much that Rebbeim and teachers need to learn practical tools to help maintain their own safety in their work with children. Being prepared and educated means being empowered.

Conclusion

School based prevention programs allow for the parents/caregivers to learn the information needed to protect their children. The fact that children learn the safety lessons in school promotes discussions between the child and the parent which is a crucial piece in prevention. School based intervention programs also allows for the staff and administration to be involved in the protection of all the children and promotes comfort for the children to disclose if needed.

Magenu's program

Magenu's goal is to lower the numbers of sexual abuse cases within our Jewish communities. We strive to take all the research and scientific reviews on sexual abuse prevention and apply it in a modest fashion. We teach age appropriate curriculum which means preschool, early elementary and middle school have different programing and methods of application. We use behavioral methods, role playing, discussions, and worksheets which have been proven to be most effective.

Unlike other programs which teach children all the information in one lesson, our curriculum is 5-6 lessons, a method that is proven to be the only way to actually work. Research has demonstrated that programs are more effective if they are longer in duration (four sessions or more), if they repeat important concepts, if they provide children with multiple opportunities to

actively practice the taught notions and skills, and if they are based on concrete concepts (what is forbidden) rather than abstract notions (rights or feelings).¹² Magenu takes this very seriously as we have seen the difference in information retention by the children following the lessons. Each lesson builds on the previous one strengthening the concepts taught and the children's understanding. In addition, it allows the child to formulate questions and opinions and discuss their thoughts while giving them a sense of comfort with this potentially uncomfortable topic.

Magenu distributes parent newsletter after completion of every lesson so that parents/caregivers can take the information and review it further with their child at home. This further enhances their retention and is a great method for starting conversations between the parents/caregivers and their children.

Magenu sends home games and activity sheets to be completed at home, thereby furthering discussions with the parent or caregiver allowing the child to ask questions and review the information and practice the concepts taught.

As the strength of the program is based on repetition and review, teachers should teach the curriculum throughout the year, interweaving the safety lessons into daily school life. With this in mind, Magenu created a teacher workbook, which includes full scripts, classroom activities, and follow up lesson plans for optimal lesson learning¹³.

¹² Collin-Vézina, D., Daigneault, I., & Hébert, M. (2013). Lessons learned from child sexual abuse research: Prevalence, outcomes, and preventive strategies. *Child And Adolescent Psychiatry And Mental Health, 7*

¹³ Pohl, J. D., & Hazzard, A. (1990). Reactions of children, parents, and teachers to child sexual abuse prevention programs. *Education*

Unlike other programs Parent night is practical tips-and-tool based, rather than fear oriented. Fear does not seem to work and is often counterproductive. Some anxiety is necessary to convey the importance of the topic but too much only proves to immobilize. Our goal is empowerment through education, which we believe can be accomplished when taught properly.

Our staff workshop consists of two components. The first encompasses indicators of abuse, mandated reporting, and handling disclosures. The second and just as important piece is ways that the staff can keep themselves safe from compromising situations. In today's climate, with children more exposed to the outside world, ensuring staff is protected is as crucial as ensuring the protection of the student body.

Overall, Magenu is confident that school-based intervention programs can lower the rates of child sexual abuse cases and can encourage disclosures when abuse is occurring. Education is empowerment and we are dedicated to educating all aspects of our community on how to keep our children safe.

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