

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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By David Prescott and Alisa Klein

“Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Opportunities: Parenting, Programs, and the Reduction of Risk.”

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THE QUESTIONS

Can parents and other caretakers of children play a significant role in shifting the responsibility of preventing child sexual abuse off of the shoulders of children themselves by incorporating practices such as communication, involvement, and monitoring into their parenting to decrease children’s risk for sexual abuse?

THE RESEARCH

Underlying this research is the assertion that most parental prevention programs focus on teaching parents how to discuss sexual abuse risks and prevention strategies with their children. As such, the authors examined the following three questions:

1. Can sexual abuse of children between the ages of 4 – 8 be reduced if parents communicate to them the dangers of sexual abuse and strategies to prevent it?
2. Do children have the developmental and emotional capacity to identify the nuances of sexual abuse prevention concepts and sexually abusive behavior towards them?
3. Can sexual abuse education have negative unintended social and emotional consequences for children?

The authors note that despite over thirty years of programs that teach parents child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention skills to share with their children, parents continue to be hesitant to do so, and that there is no empirical evidence to prove the effectiveness of parental discussion with children as a way to prevent CSA.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The authors suggest that it may be crucial to broaden CSA prevention beyond its current focus on discussion with children about prevention strategies to one that improves parents' overall protective capabilities and decreases parental risk factors. They suggest strengthening positive parenting practices and building supportive home environments to reduce the effects of various risk factors, including parental absence, drug and alcohol use, mental illness, marital conflict, compromised supervision, and weak parent-child attachment. The authors conclude that the over-reliance on child education needs to shift to the development of parenting programs that enhance parenting practices protective against CSA and mitigate the risk factors for the sexual abuse of children. They also recommend that CSA protective behaviors not be taught to parents in isolation, but that they be integrated into existing evidence-based parenting programs. These programs should teach not just CSA prevention topics such as offender behaviors, CSA warning signs, and healthy boundaries, but parenting skills such as developing a warm relationship, engaging well with children, monitoring, setting appropriate limits, providing a sense of security, and communicating effectively and lovingly.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

It is understandable that our first attempts at preventing child sexual abuse involved talking with the children themselves and emphasizing the parents' role in doing so. After all, sexual abuse thrives on secrecy and without open discussions, how could prevention take place meaningfully? These findings highlight what many, if not most, practitioners have long felt in their hearts: that the context of these discussions is vital. These findings emphasize the importance of communication with children about sexual abuse and the context in which it occurs, as well as critical areas of focus for professionals as they assess and attempt to help the families that come to their attention. Professionals of all backgrounds can use these findings as markers of possible risk and adjust their style for interacting with each family accordingly in order to build on each family's unique strengths, risks, and aspirations on behalf of their children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

These findings illustrate how specific techniques and methods of communicating with children are only one aspect of preventing sexual abuse. Safety, predictability, and warm, nurturing relationships are also vital. These components can too easily go missing from assessment and treatment of families experiencing stresses, perhaps because few studies have established the links between these risk factors and areas of family functioning

ABSTRACT

To date, child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention has relied largely on child-focused education, teaching children how to identify, avoid, and disclose sexual abuse. The purpose of this article is to explore how prevention opportunities can include parents in new and innovative ways. We propose that parents can play a significant role as protectors of their children via two pathways: (i) directly, through the strong external barriers afforded by parent supervision, monitoring, and involvement; and (ii) indirectly, by promoting their children's self-efficacy, competence, well-being, and self-esteem, which the balance of evidence suggests will help them become less likely targets for abuse and more able to respond appropriately and disclose abuse if it occurs. In this article, we first describe why teaching young children about CSA protective behaviors might not be sufficient for prevention. We then narratively review the existing research on parents and prevention and the parenting and family circumstances that may increase a child's risk of experiencing sexual abuse. Finally, we make a number of recommendations for future approaches to prevention that may better inform and involve parents and other adult protectors in preventing CSA.

CITATION

Rudolph, J., Zimmer-Gembeck, M.J., Shanley, D.C., & Hawkins, R. (2018). Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Opportunities: Parenting, Programs, and the Reduction of Risk. *Child Maltreatment*, 23(1) 96–106.