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# Sexual Abuse Prevention Training for Preschoolers: Implications for Moral Development

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Child sexual abuse prevention education is taught to children of all ages. The youngest students are preschool age children. Many programs focus on the moral ramifications of a sexual assault. The limitations of children's moral development, however, may hinder their ability to understand the concepts presented. In some instances, education may unwittingly foster sentiments of guilt in these very young children.

Child sexual abuse victimizes children of all ages. The most vulnerable of these youngsters are preschoolers. As the specter of child abuse is raised to the public eye child advocates have scrambled to draft 'quick-fix' measures to solve the problem. One of the more prominent of these efforts is sexual abuse prevention training for young children. The programs are widely presented nationally (Daro, 1988), and are designed to teach children how to fend off a sexual assault. In California, the Child Abuse Prevention and Training Act (AB 2443) supports prevention training for children in all publicly funded schools. Specifically, it mandates that children have the opportunity to receive a prevention workshop five times in their school career. In many cases the training begins in the preschool years; children as young as age two and one half often participate.

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A number of studies have shown measured, yet positive knowledge gains made by elementary school age children after their exposure to a prevention curriculum (Finkelhor & Strapko, in press; Kolko, 1988). Studies of preschoolers' knowledge gain, however, have born more limited results (Gilbert, Berrick, LeProhn, & Nyman, 1989; Liddell, Young & Yamagishi, 1988; Nibert, Cooper, Fitch, & Ford, 1988; Prange & Atkinson, 1988). Preschoolers demonstrate a quite restricted knowledge of prevention concepts before their exposure to a training. Yet after the programs, available studies have shown that these youngsters have difficulties accommodating prevention information. Some of the problems they experience in managing prevention concepts may be due to the confines of their cognitive development (Berrick, 1989). Other limitations may also be due to the boundaries of children's moral development. Although program designers assert that developmental factors weighed heavily in the creation of their curricula, programs for younger children actually have a tenuous basis in developmental theory. Unfortunately, preschoolers may not understand the elemental concepts upon which many of the programs are based.

### *The Immorality of Child Sexual Abuse*

Child sexual abuse is a profoundly socially deviant act. Unlike other forms of physical abuse and neglect which range along a continuum from mild, difficult to distinguish to severely damaging behavior, sexual abuse is sharply differentiated by its clear violation of social taboos. Underlying features of sexual abuse defy moral standards on a number of levels. Sexual acts against children, by their nature, lack reciprocity as there is not a mutual understanding between partners. Children can not discern the consequences of sexual interactions with adults. Secondly, child sexual abuse is a violation of consent (Finkelhor, 1979a); the young child is incapable of consenting to an activity with which she is unfamiliar. There is a natural power imbalance in the relationship between adult and child, but it is contorted under the framework of abuse. And sexual molestation necessarily exploits the young child physically. Studies which have explored characteristics of the victimized child (Finkelhor, 1984) have also shown that these children demonstrate a heightened need for attention and affection from adult care givers -- frequently because their relationship with parents is quite distant. Thus, the child additionally suffers emotional exploitation at the hands of the perpetrator. Taken together, mutuality, consent, power, and exploitation, child sexual abuse far oversteps boundaries of moral behavior.

Although it is now widely accepted that adults are responsible for child sexual abuse, this view was not always as predominant as today. In the 1930's, Bender and Blau's studies of sexually assaulted children claimed that because a child was attractive, "the child might have been the seducer rather than the seduced" (Gager & Schurr, 1976:45). Rush's historical analysis of child sexual abuse also gives examples of social, religious and political acts that justified victimization through the child's behavior (Rush, 1980).

Providers in the field recognize adult responsibility for an assault. But the program curricula emphasize each child's responsibility for sexual abuse prevention. Under the present programmatic orientation, is it possible to teach preschoolers that sexual abuse is immoral? And can the young child truly understand that abuse is not her fault?

### *Prevention Instruction for Children*

Programs for preschoolers are very short in duration. They are presented in the preschool classroom or day care by outside providers. The programs last fifteen minutes over the course of one to three consecutive days. The conceptual content of the material introduce a number of basic ideas related to child sexual abuse prevention.

To teach youngsters what child sexual abuse is, they are usually instructed how to differentiate between different kinds of touches. Touches are variously defined as "good, bad or mixed up", "safe or unsafe" (Beland, 1986), "heart touches, question mark touches, and no touches" (Tobin, Levinson, Russell & Valdez, 1983), or "red light, yellow light, and green light" touches (Patterson, 1986). By following strict rules provided by the workshop presenters, children are encouraged to recognize when abuse is occurring so that they will be able to utilize their prevention techniques. The skills children are taught usually include concrete activities such as: saying 'no', yelling, running away, standing an arm's distance away, or using self-defense skills. They are instructed to report incidents of abuse by telling a parent, teacher or friend. Children are also introduced to the concept of private parts. The genitals are defined and rules such as the following regarding genital touching are offered to children:

Sometimes grownups try to touch children on their private body parts, or they try to make kids touch the grownup's private body parts. It is not okay for these people to touch kids' private parts unless it is for health reasons. (Beland, 1986:36)

They are told that it is wrong when adults touch private parts and that touching often involves bad secrets that should be told in spite of the

teller's demands for silence. Programs are often concluded with assurances for children that they should not feel guilty if they are sexually abused. These ideas are typically presented to the preschooler in, for example, the following instructions:

If someone touches you on the private parts of your body or forces or tricks you into touching theirs, it's not your fault. It's always the fault of the bigger or older person (Tobin, et al., 1983).

### *Moral Realism*

How do preschool-age children intellectually process and use instructions such as these? Piaget was the first to examine the question of children's moral development (Piaget, 1932/1962). Through semi-structured interviews, he posed various moral dilemmas to youngsters in the form of complementary stories. Children were requested to point out which subject in his stories was 'naughtier' and 'why'. Piaget used six sample stories, examples of which are as follows:

A little boy who is called John is in his room. He is called to dinner. He goes into the dining room. But behind the door there was a chair, and on the chair there was a tray with fifteen cups on it. John couldn't have known that there was all this behind the door. He goes in, the door knocks against the tray, bang go the fifteen cups and they all get broken!

Once there was a little boy whose name was Henry. One day when his mother was out he tried to get some jam out of the cupboard. He climbed up on to a chair and stretched out his arm. But the jam was too high up and he couldn't reach it and have any. But while he was trying to get it he knocked over a cup. The cup fell down and broke (Piaget, 1932:122).

Through his stories Piaget hoped to discover "whether the child pays more attention to motive or to material results" (Piaget, 1932:123). Children who based their explanation of disobedience on material results focused on the amount of damage resulting from the action. Explanations which were motive-oriented were based upon the good or ill intention of the child in each story.

From his observations, Piaget postulated that children's moral responses generally fell into one of the categories based upon their cognitive development. For example, a five year old, still functioning at the preoperational level of cognitive development resolved the above conflict thus:

- The first is (naughtier) because he knocked over fifteen cups.
- If you were the Daddy which would you punish most?

- The one who broke fifteen cups.
- Why?
- The first broke lots of things, the other one fewer.

Reasoning based on the amount of damage provoked by the act was given the term, "objective responsibility".

The second stage of moral development shifted to "subjective responsibility" wherein a child could distinguish between various motives underlying an event. This leap in development either followed or moved in concert with the child's cognitive transition to concrete operations. Therefore subjective responsibility was regularly found in somewhat older children:

- Have you ever broken anything?
- A cup.
- How?
- I wanted to wipe it, and I let it drop.
- What else have you broken?
- Another time, a plate.
- How?
- I took it to play with.
- Which was the naughtiest thing to do?
- The plate because I oughtn't to have taken it.
- And how about the cup?
- That was less naughty because I wanted to wipe it.

Here the child of eight years began to make the developmental transition from objective to subjective responsibility. Although she perceived the greater physical consequences of breaking the plate, she also understood that she was well-motivated when she attempted to wipe the cup.

What explains this shift in moral reasoning? Piaget places his explanation, in part, on the cognitive development of the child. He also stresses that development is linked to the child's experience in the social context. The first pattern is termed "heteronomous morality" and can be characterized as, "moral realism in which the very young child bases his moral judgment on unilateral respect for authority figures, i.e., 'objective' rules of parents and other adults" (Rich & DeVitis, 1985:48). The child is guided by externally imposed rules rather than internally generated or rationally considered options.

As she interacts more regularly with peers, the child realizes the role of reciprocity and mutuality in human relations. The child also becomes more self-reliant, rather than fully depending upon adult care givers. Hindered by the egocentrism so prominent in the preoperational stage, the preschooler is unable to separate what is actually an external from an

internal reality. When the child begins to free herself from the authority of the adult (often accomplished during the school-age period) she is able to understand the separate aspects of externally driven rules and the internal process of motivation.

### *It's Never the Child's Fault*

Piaget's emphasis on the young child's egocentrism reminds us that the preschool child will perceive most actions as emanating from herself. Thus, most events which affect the young child are perceived as originating with the child. Because of this orientation it may not be possible to convince a child that she has not caused a sexual assault. If the sexual assault is such that the child experiences physical harm or pain, she will be especially likely to feel guilty due to her orientation toward objective reasoning based on physical consequences. Moreover, the child's relationship to the offender will also affect her sentiments of guilt or shame (Anderson, Bach, & Griffith, 1981; DeFrancis, 1969; Friedrich, Urquiza, & Beilke, 1986). Seventy five to eighty percent of sexual abuse cases involve someone known to the child (Tsai & Wagner, 1978; Finkelhor, 1979b). Therefore, it is likely that the adult offender will have a strong influence on her emotional experience of the abuse. When the child has matured to understand the motivations underlying an event, she will be able to comprehend information such as adult responsibility and culpability.

If the notion of assigning responsibility for an offense is beyond the comprehension of the preschool child, should the concept be discarded? Many would argue not. Some practitioners in the field of prevention claim that while the young child may not comprehend the full idea, the training "plants a seed of knowledge" ("Preschool Child Abuse", 1988) that can be referenced in later years. The real case, however, may be just the opposite. Introducing the concept of culpability in an abbreviated lesson may be counter-productive for the preschool child.

Sexual abuse of very young children can include extremely sexually exploitative and painful touching (i.e., penetration). Yet much abuse in the early stages is characterized by fondling, petting, or exposure (MacFarlane & Waterman, 1986) -- less intrusive forms of abuse which may not necessarily be perceived as negative to the child. Under the influence of the prevention curricula the child who does not experience the behavior adversely may come to recognize that the behavior is indeed wrong. Confined by the boundaries of the child's moral development she may begin to feel guilt where there was none originally. Thus, the trainings may introduce the concept of guilt where their attempts are to lessen its impact. Given the natural limitations of moral development, the

child is then left without the developmental capacity to manage her feelings of guilt and shame.

An example taken from a recent study evaluating preschool prevention programs may help illustrate the point. During the course of an interview with a child's mother, one woman said:

I'm wary about having my son (42 months.) participate in the program. There was an incident when my older boy was four. A teenager had exposed himself to (my son) and had wanted (my son) to expose himself, too. He just didn't want to, so he walked away. A year later, we moved and he received the program in his new preschool. He came home from the program so upset. He said he felt so guilty, because he hadn't realized he'd been abused or that what had happened was bad. (Gilbert, et al., 1989)

Since we do not understand, as yet, how young children perceive lessons regarding sexual abuse, education which focuses on the moral ramifications of abuse may deserve further consideration.

### *Obedience and Punishment*

Because of preschoolers' orientation to adult obedience, and their fear of punishment, some of the programs' emphases on rules may also be somewhat misguided. Drawing upon the initial work of Piaget, a more complex model of moral development has been posited by Lawrence Kohlberg (1969). His theory offers an explanation for moral opinions. He additionally examines the reasoning which supports an opinion. His theory utilizes six stages to explain moral development through adulthood. Stages one and two (the pre-conventional level) are complementary to Piaget's two stages in childhood.

Specifically, stage one centers on the child's orientation to punishment, obedience, physical and material power (Rich & DeVitis, 1985). Rules are understood in relation to the consequences of punishment by an authority figure; at this point in development very few internal mechanisms regulating behavior have been acquired. During stage two, the child's orientation shifts, not so much to avoid punishment, but primarily to obtain rewards from others.

### *Say 'No' and Tell Someone*

Reflecting on the children's workshops, preschoolers are instructed to repel a sexual assault (say 'no', run away, use self-defense), and to report the incident ('tell' someone). But if the very young child functions in a



preconventional stage of moral development, the child's actions will be primarily influenced by her orientation to obedience to her primary caretaker. According to Kohlberg, the young child has not yet formulated an internal autonomous conscience so that she is able to judge individual acts for their merit. In Kohlberg's second stage, the child is motivated by the rewards she will obtain from pleasing the authority. Thus, the bribes, threats or strong admonitions from a close or related adult offender will have a powerful impact on the actions of a young child.

What the theory of moral development suggests is that the child's orientation to obedience may inhibit her from repelling a sexual assault or from defying the offender's cautions to secrecy. Piaget writes:

Any act that shows obedience to a rule or an adult, regardless of what he may command, is good. The good, therefore, is rigidly defined by obedience... This only points to (the child's) real defenselessness against his surroundings. The adult and the older child have complete power over him. (Piaget, 1932:92:111).

Given a command 'not to tell' by a close adult authority and a suggestion 'to tell' in a brief presentation by an unknown figure, the child will likely follow the drive to obedience of the real authority in her surroundings. At this point in the child's development, authority is made legitimate by size, strength and relationship (Damon, 1988). Disobedience to the authority is often followed by unpleasant consequences -- a persuasive rationale for the child's obedience. Of course there are other factors related to the child's obedience as well. The child's ongoing relationship with the offending adult may have a significant influence on the child's overall moral development and the child's willingness to obey.

Unlike the preschool-aged child, the school-age child has a greater capacity to process inconsistent information. The legitimacy of adult authority is less determined by sheer power and strength. The child's orientation to obedience also shifts over time (Laupa & Turiel, 1986); obedience is driven, in part, by a sense of respect and reciprocity. While the younger child tends to accept adult rules as absolutes, the older child tends to rely more on her own decisions (Cowan, Langer, Heavenrich, & Nathanson, 1969). The child's ability to distinguish between types of morality becomes heightened with age and development (Tisak & Turiel, 1984). Thus, the school-age child may find it easier to incorporate information from various sources and may follow the presenter's recommendations in spite of the offender's power.

*Moral and Conventional Transgressions*

Is the child's moral development entirely stymied? Or can a young child make individual judgments about morality based upon the nature of the immoral act? Damon (1975) associates children's reasoning about justice with their logical reasoning based in concrete operations. But other studies have shown that relations between children and authority figures are actually multidimensional and dependent upon an environmental context (Turiel, 1983; Laupa & Turiel, 1986). It has been suggested that as young as the preschool years, children make distinctions between true moral transgressions and conventional rules (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Weston & Turiel, 1980). Moral transgressions can be described by their intrinsic value or by the consequences of the action -- e.g. those pertaining to inflicting harm or pain on people (Nucci & Nucci, 1982a; 1982b). Conventional rules are based upon social standards of practice (e.g. manners, dress code). Regardless of children's age, these studies report that most subjects view moral transgressions negatively. Activities found in the conventional domain of morality are viewed with greater variation of response (Smetana & Braeges, 1987). Under circumstances of conventional justice, children's perceptions of immorality are based upon social rules or norms prohibiting the act. In fact, Smetana shows that conventional transgressions, in the eyes of the preschooler, are more permissible in the absence of a rule, and that rules are the defining boundaries for such actions (Smetana, 1981; 1984; 1985).

These studies indicate that the child's perception of morality will be a key determinate in how she responds to an immoral event. If she perceives the act as a true moral transgression, the child will be more likely to understand it as 'wrong' (and may be more easily influenced to say 'no', run away, or more importantly, to tell). If she understands the event in terms of a social construct, the child may be coaxed to abandon the rule when given persuasive arguments for its acceptability.

*Rules About Touching*

Preschool children's natural differentiation of moral transgressions and conventional morality come into conflict when prevention programs offer contradictory rules about touching. A popular curriculum for preschoolers uses the terms "safe" and "unsafe" touches to describe its touch continuum (Beland, 1986). "Unsafe touches" are first described as "touches which hurt our bodies or our feelings." The definition appeals to the child's sense of moral transgressions based upon physical consequences. This curriculum is similar to others as it relies on the child's

intuition about touching. If it "feels funny" (Tobin, et al., 1983) or if it is a touch that "you don't like" (CAPP, 1983) the child is instructed to recognize the immoral act and report it.

But "unsafe touching" is further depicted not only to attach to the child's sense of basic morality, but also, to the conventional morality of the child's social environment. The child is thus given the following rule for behavior:

Today we are going to talk about another kind of unsafe touch - a touch to which you should always say 'No!' Sometimes grownups try to touch children on their private body parts, or they try to make kids touch the grownup's private body parts. It is not okay for these people to touch kids' private parts unless it is for health reasons. There are some things grownups can do, but children should not. (Beland, 1986)

Because sexual abuse may not necessarily cause the child pain (it may actually feel somewhat pleasurable for a time), the child may not perceive it as an obvious moral transgression. Recent work with abused and neglected preschoolers (Smetana, Kelly, & Twentyman, 1984) shows that these children have the same response to moral and conventional transgressions as do non-maltreated youngsters. While the abused children recognize moral transgressions as 'wrong,' they do not exhibit a dissimilar threshold of response from the non-maltreated population. The study indicates that judgments of relativity seem to be problematic for young children, regardless of their personal or social experience.

In the preschool study cited above (Gilbert, et al., 1988), children were asked to describe feelings attached to a variety of interactive situations. Children were facile in describing affective reactions at the extremes of the touch continuum, but showed great difficulty with the middle-ground area. With regard to a picture of two animals hugging, children's pretest responses clustered around the positive end of the continuum (66%). Verbal responses corresponding to the affect were as follows:

*Hugging:*

- 'Cause his daddy's hugging him.'
- 'He likes to be happy and wants to be hugged.'
- 'He likes hugging.'

Similarly, with regard to a picture of two animals hitting, children responded with negative affect (68%):

*Hitting:*

- 'Mad. He has a mad face and a sad face cause it hurts.'
- 'Mad cause he's punching.'
- 'He doesn't like it when he's hit.'

Given two ambiguous situations (bathing and tickling), children's positive responses were prevalent on pretest (70% and 69%, respectively). While children continued to see each of the situations (except hitting) as more positive than negative on posttest, their responses had shifted toward a negative affect for all situations. While responses were divided on either end of the spectrum, almost no responses were found in the central area of the touch continuum. The implications from this portion of the research support the above studies, indicating that young children can describe the feelings attached to experiences of extreme sensation (moral transgressions). Children can and do recognize situations and feelings that are obviously 'good' or 'bad,' but confused feelings have not been internally identified for the child, or the child can not interpret the mixed feelings. In the case of child abuse, it seems that young children already know what feels good or bad and can describe it with great accuracy even before a prevention training. If the abuse is such that it falls into this type of category, the child will already have the vocabulary to describe it to someone.

In regard to many instances of abuse, however, the prevention programs are trying to communicate a rule of relative conventional morality to children. The rule is defined not by its intrinsic value, but by the prescription of adult authorities. The child is then faced with two contradictory rules of conventional morality - one defined by the curriculum presenter, and one from the perpetrator who insists that the touch is acceptable. The difficulty in teaching preschoolers about the ramifications of sexual abuse and ways to prevent it become strikingly clear as deYoung writes:

If they are able to make only a moral judgment, that is, an assessment of the rightness or wrongness, the goodness or badness, of a situation on the basis of its outcomes and consequences, then in cases of 'gentle' molestation in which there is nonintrusive sexual contact, verbalizations expressing love and care, and no unsettling threats, children will not perceive this type of touch as bad. (deYoung, 1988:64)

If the programs pivot on the concept of a 'touch continuum,' and that concept is beyond the understanding of the preschooler, then the premise of the prevention programs themselves bear careful re-examination.

### *What About Prevention?*

Child abuse is immoral, but child abuse prevention training programs are not a panacea for the problem. None of the studies to date have examined the impact of programs upon children's actual preventive

behavior. (This is not a call for such research, as such a study would be morally inappropriate.) Neither have studies shown the effect of prevention programs on perpetrators' behavior, nor on the long-term retention of children's knowledge. Finally, where there have been attempts to measure the potential negative effects of programs for children (Binder & McNiel, 1986; Conte, Rosen, Saperstein, & Shermack, 1985; Downer, 1986; Kenning, Gallmeier, Jackson, & Plemons, 1987; Kolko, Moser, Litz, & Hughes, 1987), no study has used appropriate measures that might reliably measure such a phenomenon.

So why does the public rely on this method of preventing sexual abuse with very young children? Child abuse prevention workshops can be easily replicated and administered in communities across the nation. They appeal to parents and teachers because they come pre-packaged and ask little of the adult's involvement in the presentation. Moreover, they relieve adults from the discomfort of talking about the subject with children. Most importantly, they appease adult fears about the vulnerability of these youngsters. But the complexity of the problem of child sexual abuse demands more than a simple response.

The issue of child sexual abuse is not just a question of private parts touching as the message of many programs convey. Rather it is, as discussed earlier, an issue of mutuality, power, consent and exploitation. The immorality of the act is not only defined by the physical act of touch. Therefore, prevention education should be viewed from a broader perspective; one that includes a more thorough understanding of morality, in general.

Children can not be expected to incorporate a healthy moral attitude with brief, isolated programs that teach a litany of conventional rules. Instead, teachers and day care workers have an opportunity to provide children with a solid framework for understanding morality, and more specifically, the immorality of sexual abuse. They can foster children's moral development by incorporating regular moral instruction and appropriate modeling behavior in the classroom. For whatever reason, adults are often more eager to enforce conventional rules than they are to intervene in immoral acts. Children are often reminded to say 'please' or 'thank you,' but many teachers allow children to resolve acts of aggression among themselves. As educators, these adults should be active in regularly enforcing moral standards so that children are clear about the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Consistent positive reinforcement for moral acts will allow children to internalize their behavior and will help them recognize when they are being treated unfairly. Teachers who encourage justice and equality among children and those who set boundaries on acts of aggression and violence will influence children's total sense of morality, thereby clarifying the moral issues involved in abuse.

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