



## **Child Safety: Curricula for Children**

by Susan Dougherty

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Of the 542,000 children in out-of-home care at any one time 2001, 48% lived in non-relative family foster homes and another 24% in relative foster homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2003b). It is the responsibility of the foster care system to ensure the safety of these children, the majority of whom were maltreated in their birth families. Yet we know that some of these children do experience abuse while in placement. The best data available at the current time indicates that in about .5% of maltreatment cases the perpetrator is a foster parent and another .2% of abuse is perpetrated by residential care staff (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2004).

The risk to children in care is broader than this, however. Studies have indicated that, while in care, children are abused by their birth parents, other birth relatives, and by other children in the home (Benedict, Zuravin, Brandt, and Abbey 1994; Benedict, Zuravin, Somerfield, and Brandt 1996; Spencer and Knudsen, 1992; Hobbs, Hobbs, and Wynne 1999). Physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect were all represented (Rosenthal, Motz, Edmonson and Groze 1991; Zuravin, Benedict and Somerfield 1993; Benedict et al., 1994; Poertner, Bussey, and Fluke 1999; Tittle, Poertner, & Garnier 2001).

The Department of Health and Human Services (2000) has determined that one of the outcomes to be measured in determining how well States are meeting the needs of children in the child welfare system is to the reduction of the incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care. There are many approaches that can and should be taken to do this, one of which is to provide instruction to children that will enable them to

- recognize abusive situations;
- resist abuse if possible; and
- report abuse if it occurs.

Existing child abuse prevention curricula are most often school-based, address sexual abuse but not physical abuse or neglect, and focus on abuse perpetrated by strangers. In a 1996 report on the effectiveness of such programs, the U.S. General Accounting Office stated:

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there was not as yet any direct evidence that these programs were effective in preventing the occurrence of child sexual abuse. The reviews focused on whether children could acquire knowledge about sexual abuse and learn skills that might prove useful in an abusive situation, as well as whether programs prompted victimized children to disclose ongoing or past abuse. There was general consensus that children could learn concepts about abuse, although it was clear that some concepts were more difficult to grasp than others. For example, children had a difficult time grasping the concept that abuse could be perpetrated by a family member. There was less consensus about whether knowledge was retained over the long term, whether children could learn skills for resisting abuse, and whether children would disclose new instances of abuse after participating in the program. Finally, the reviews generally agreed that programs were more effective in teaching concepts to older children, and that concepts and skills could be grasped better when taught with active participation (e.g., modeling or role-playing techniques) than with more passive methods (e.g., films or lectures). (p. 3).

Davis and Gidycz (2000), in a meta-analysis of such programs, make the following observations:

- programs that include the active involvement of children (role playing, skills rehearsal) were more successful than those that did not;
- programs that consisted of incremental learning over than three sessions were more effective than those of 1-3 sessions;
- the youngest children (preschool and early elementary) showed more learning immediately post-training than older children.

Tutty (2000) makes the following additional points:

- prevention programs often teach children to engage in behavior that is at odds with familial and cultural norms, such as saying "no" to a grown-up and not keeping; and secrets;
- the cognitive development of young children is not sufficient to allow them to understand some concepts involved in prevention programs, such as the idea of "stranger."

Tutty also makes the recommendations that program developers

- present material repetitively and in multiple modalities;
- direct prevention lessons toward younger children, and add topics such as dating violence and peer abuse for older children;
- involve parents in the teaching of prevention concepts;

- incorporate sexual abuse prevention into programs that address wider issues such as assertiveness, self-esteem, bullying prevention and conflict resolution.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2003a) published a synthesis of lessons learned from school-based maltreatment programs, including those with primary prevention strategies addressed to children. They concluded that "children who attended prevention presentations showed an increased awareness of safety issues and demonstrated greater knowledge of child abuse and neglect. In some cases, this led to disclosures about their own experiences of maltreatment."

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (n.d.) has published guidelines for programs aimed at prevention which includes a curriculum scorecard and a program evaluation checklist to aid schools and communities in the evaluation of prevention programs.

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