
In the Footsteps of Mary and Joseph: The Role of Adult and Child Education in the Prevention of Abuse

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“Safety and security don’t just happen, they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear.”
— Nelson Mandela²

All major religious traditions prioritize the importance of addressing the needs and concerns of marginalized individuals and communities.³ Creating safe spaces for children to grow and question is not just a good idea, it also aligns as a mandate in a wide spectrum of religious texts. As one example, when Joseph, Mary, and the Wise Men learned the baby Jesus was in danger, the Bible tells us that each of these adults took concrete steps to prevent abuse (Matt 2:1–21). Years later, when the boy Jesus was missing, we are told his parents diligently searched for him until they knew he was safe (Luke 2:41–52).

Unfortunately, many faith communities have not followed the example of Mary and Joseph in acting to prevent abuse or neglect. When it comes to personal safety or other prevention education, members of the faith community may become squeamish when lessons about bodies, especially with correct body terminology, are taking place in a house of worship. Moreover, prevention education reminds us that abuse can and does happen in faith communities and this reality makes us uncomfortable.

If faith communities are to become Safe Spaces for children, four things must happen. First, adults must take ownership of their role in the prevention of abuse and neglect. Second, adults must be educated so that they implement and enforce prevention policies and training and are otherwise vigilant in protecting the children God has placed in their care. Third, children should receive personal safety education as a tool which may prevent some abuse or empower a child to disclose maltreatment. Fourth, faith communities must evaluate and continually improve their prevention programming.

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2. <https://www.inspirationalstories.com/quotes/nelson-mandela-safety-and-security-dont-just-happen-they/> accessed February 23, 2018.

3. Stephen Hammer and Malia Robinson, *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children* (UNICEF 2015).

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Adult ownership

Investing in prevention means taking adult ownership of the problem. Personal safety should never rest solely on the shoulders of a child. Children can be given skills to help them communicate about safety, such as being taught about body safety rules, identify trusted adults to connect to if someone is ignoring or breaking safety rules, and problem solve different “What If” scenarios around safety, but a child should not own the responsibility for prevention. It is one strategy to teach a child to tell if someone is violating their boundaries, but there should also be education offered to the person that they might tell so that person feels empowered to act on behalf of a child even when the offender is a person in a position of power. There should also be education explaining why most children do not disclose abuse so that there isn’t an unrealistic expectation that a child will always tell if there is a problem. There should be policies, screening, monitoring, and training in place to help prevent someone with bad intentions from ever being in a position of power with children.⁴ Giving children tools to empower them in safety can be a very positive

4. A helpful resource that walks congregations through this process is: Basyle Tchividjian and Shira M. Berkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide for Churches and Ministries* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2017).

step forward, but it cannot be the only step.

Those who harm look for opportunities to be in positions of power. Children and youth are at a disadvantage as they traditionally are not in positions of power in faith communities. It is the responsibility of individuals to not cause harm to children and for communities, including faith communities, to own prevention of child maltreatment and make child safety a priority.⁵ Prevention programs that empower children are one piece of a much larger puzzle to get ahead of the problem of child sexual abuse. The responsibility to prevent should be spread out across individuals, organizations, and social structures, such as a faith community. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, “Changing the behavior of adults and communities, rather than the behavior of children, is the ideal way to prevent child sexual abuse.”⁶

Educate adults

Adult ownership includes providing sexual abuse prevention education to adults. Increasing the knowledge for adults through offered education programs can help parents and other adults recognize danger signals.⁷ Grooming is one such danger signal. The grooming process begins with identifying potential victims, gaining their trust, and breaking down their defenses, which can lead to isolating and controlling behavior.⁸ Grooming behavior, using power in a relationship dynamic to break down boundaries, does happen in faith communities. Sex offenders may not only groom children but will often groom families and other community members as the means of beginning an association with a child that they are attempting to harm.⁹

Offenders can recognize ideal settings to exploit children and, in many cases, the traits of faith communities can put children at risk.¹⁰ The trusting nature and family feel of faith communities can create a setting where abuse is not considered as a problem. In fact, those traits elevate the need for education. One of the many ways that grooming is used is the offender attempts to “define the reality” for both the targets and the extended community so that the abuser can control the perspectives of others.¹¹ As one example, if the community is conditioned to be used to all of

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the children wrestling with the same one adult between services, the group perspective can quickly conclude that the behavior is nothing to worry about because it is what has always been done. If, instead, the adult is approached and reminded that through policy and through training, it has been decided that wrestling behavior is not a community norm, the reality remains defined by the community and not the individual acting out. If the adult means well, they can accept the correction as they move within the community norms. If the adult is attempting to lower inhibitions and test boundaries, they are reminded that this community holds each other accountable.

In prevention education and discussion scenarios for both adults and young people, it is important to put the focus on the behavior of the person and not on the relationship. It can be tempting to explain behavior away when the person is known and trusted, but it is important that the boundaries and expectations remain consistent for all. In prevention work, the focus should not be on how well-known a person is, but rather how the person is acting. It is critical to be mindful of the fact that most people who make the choice to harm children are known and trusted by the child and often liked by the community. The child’s willingness to say “no” will vary depending on how they know or do not know the person,¹² so children should also be reminded that if they freeze or don’t say no, it is still not their fault and they can still ask for help. Adults, too, should be reminded that people that we know, like, and trust can be the same people who cause harm. As James Lapine puts it so succinctly in the musical, *Into the Woods*, “Nice is different than good.”

The problem of sexual abuse is complex and must be looked at comprehensively. As stated by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Sexual violence does not occur from one single cause, but instead through an environment, physical and/or social, bred with increased risk factors and decreased protective factors.”¹³

5. Martyniuk, H., Dworkin, E. *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: Programs for Children* (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2011), 3.

6. Ibid.

7. Richard Wortley and Stephen Smallbone, “Applying situational principles to sexual offenses against children,” in *Situational Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse* Vol. 19, eds. Richard Wortley and Stephen Smallbone. (Monsey, N.Y.: Criminal Justice Press, 2006), 7–35.

8. <http://victimsofcrime.org/media/reporting-on-child-sexual-abuse/grooming-dynamic-of-csa>

9. Anne-Marie Mcalinden, “Setting ‘Em Up: Personal, Familial and Institutional Grooming in the Sexual Abuse of Children,” *Social and Legal Studies* 15(3)(2006): 339–362.

10. Anna Salter, *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists, and Other Sex Offenders*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 29.

11. Maureen Farrell Garcia, “Groomed for Abuse,” *Christianity Today* (January 2015).

12. Kenneth V. Lanning and Park Dietz, “Acquaintance Molestation and Youth Serving Organizations,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29 (2014), 2815–2838.

13. *Sexual Violence Prevention: Risk and Protective Factors*, (Centers for Disease Control: December 2017) available at: <https://>

There is not one solution, but instead multiple opportunities for faith communities to engage in prevention. Comprehensive public health approaches are required in prevention efforts with interventions that target:

- Offenders and potential offenders
- Children, adolescents, and teens
- Situations in which child sexual abuse is known to occur or has occurred
- Community approaches¹⁴

Education for youth is one opportunity of many for faith leaders to champion as they work to create safe spaces for all. Consider how different audiences are served when a community of faith takes initiative in hosting or coordinating prevention education messages at all levels of leadership. Offenders are shown that this is not a place where secrecy thrives. Youth are given safety tools in the context of a Creator who loves them, parents and caregivers are being supported by the community as they model important conversations, and with education the community is better equipped to provide healing to those who have been harmed.

Educate youth

In a summary of the research on personal safety education, David Finkelhor concludes the “weight of currently available evidence shows that it is worth providing children with high-quality prevention education programs.”¹⁵

There is power in speaking what has been often unspoken. One reason personal safety education may be effective is that offenders often use positions of power with children to facilitate and hide their abusive behavior and are able to make use of environments that value secrecy.¹⁶ When a faith community decides that children will be empowered with non-fear based, good quality information about body safety, it sends a message to all that children are valued here.

The United States Department of Education has recommended education for students as part of an overall program to prevent the abuse of children.¹⁷ Prevention education offered in the school typically provides developmentally appropriate information about personal safety in a general way and sexual abuse prevention in more of a specific way, including messages about seeking help

www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/riskprotectivefactors.html.

14. Stephen Smallbone, William L. Marshall, and Richard Wortley, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Evidence, Policy and Practice* (Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing, 2008).

15. David Finkelhor, “Prevention of Sexual Abuse Through Educational Programs Directed Toward Children,” *Pediatrics*, 120(3) (2007), 640-645.

16. Joe Sullivan and Anthony Beech (2002) “Professional Perpetrators: Sex Offenders Who Use Their Employment to Target and Sexually Abuse the Children with Whom They Work,” *Child Abuse Review* 11 (2002), 153-167.

17. Carol Shakeshaft, *Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature*, (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), 49.

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and emphasizing that children are not to blame for abuse.¹⁸ Faith communities are in a position to help provide proactive messages around prevention while also answering questions that may address spiritual injuries. It can be very powerful for a young person to hear from their faith leader that abuse is not their fault and that they are loved unconditionally. If the abuse is happening in the family, hearing from a respected faith leader that children have a right to be safe and have a right to get help can be a very powerful messaging to counteract the message they receive from their abuser.

It is important to consult a child abuse prevention expert when deciding which curriculum or course offering would be a good fit for your congregation or youth ministries. Well-intentioned adults can perpetuate ineffective programming by focusing on unreliable myths or outdated research. For example, “stranger danger” is not taught as an effective prevention tool as most people who harm children are known to them. Moreover, children may have an image in their mind of what a stranger looks like that is different from that of an adult. Children will often attach the danger message to the person coming out of the van in a trench coat but won’t attach the same concern to someone they meet at a family reunion. Again, the focus should be on behavior and not how we know a person. The messaging can be as simple as “If anyone asks you to go somewhere with them, I want you to check in with me first. It doesn’t matter who the person is or how we know them. Let’s practice with some what ifs...” Outcomes in various curriculums can vary. Programs with multiple outcome gains feature three main components: modeling, group discussion and role play.¹⁹

Faith communities are at an advantage in prevention planning as classes for parents can have a stronger buy-in than parent classes offered at school. Especially if offered after a worship experience, families are likely to be in the same place at the same time and each group can have prevention offerings. Lessons children learn from prevention programs usually last for several months and may last as long as one year.²⁰ When parents are equipped with prevention

18. Alan Carr, “Prevention of child sexual abuse,” in Alan Carr, ed. *Prevention: What works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Prevention Programmes for Children, Adolescents and their Families* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002).

19. Keith J. Topping and Ian G. Barron, “School-based Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs: A Review of Effectiveness,” *Review of Educational Research* 79, (2009), 431-463.

20. Ibid.

information and scenarios to review with children, the important step of building on skills learned and increasing knowledge gains can be built throughout childhood.²¹ Information about having a Family Safety Night or “What If” scenarios can be accessed through the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center.²²

Program evaluation

Evaluating if the programs you are offering to families are effective is a very important step as your faith leaders make decisions about what is working and what to build upon. It is best practice to have programs and policies that evolve and improve.²³ Prevention programs require regular review and evaluation to be sure they are updated with research and knowledge that reflects the time.²⁴ Evaluation can also help ease fears for parents and open the door to more community partners. In one study, researchers reviewed data from twenty-four different school-based prevention programs. Children who had been taught prevention at school were more likely than those who did not receive the education to tell an adult if they had or were currently experiencing child sexual abuse.²⁵ That same research showed that children did not have adverse effects and there was little evidence to show that children experienced unnecessary worry from having prevention education offered to them.²⁶ Having data about the effectiveness of what is being offered can help as you adapt and adjust offerings to best serve your community.

Conclusion

Faith communities are in a powerful position to take on the responsibility of providing good quality prevention education as a way of living out the community’s beliefs in a real and concrete way.

It is truly an awesome responsibility to be involved in shaping the lives of children, families, and caring adults as faith communities create spaces where all are heard, respected, and protected. Offering prevention education for all members, including children and youth, is one big step forward in making the safety of all a priority.

It is truly an awesome responsibility to be involved in shaping the lives of children, families, and caring adults as faith communities create spaces where all are heard, respected, and protected. Offering prevention education for all members, including children and youth, is one big step forward in making the safety of all a priority. As adults take on ownership of prevention, consult with experts, engage children and youth, and evaluate what is working, the community becomes stronger in their ability to protect the least of these. The first steps may start from a place of discomfort, as most growth does. Reach out to your local sexual abuse prevention resources and Child Advocacy Centers so that decisions originate from the question, “What is best for the children we serve?” It is the very same question that Mary and Joseph asked and acted upon.

21. H. Martyniuk, Emily R. Dworkin, *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: Programs for Children* (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2011).

22. www.jwrc.org

23. Naeshia McDowell, *Georgia’s Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Prevention Technical Assistance Resource Guide: Guidance for Schools and Youth-serving Organizations to Build Their Capacity for Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Prevention* (Georgia Statewide Human Trafficking Task Force, 2017). Accessed December 22, 2017: <http://georgiacenterforchildadvocacy.org/learn-more/resources/child-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation-prevention-resource-guide.html>.

24. Ibid.

25. K. Walsh, K. Zwi, S. Woolfenden, A. Shlonsky. “School-based Education Programmes for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse.” *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2015*, Issue 4. Art. No.: CD004380. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD004380.pub3.

26. Ibid.