Questions about Child-Focused CSA Prevention

1. Is providing information to young children about CSA for avoiding it? We do not know. It is still unclear whether providing information to children is effective (Kaufman et al., 2002; Topping & Baron, 2009; Zietz et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is no agreement as to what constitutes effectiveness (Zahn- Benage & Hafeli-Steinmann, 2015); and evaluations can involve measuring: knowledge through questionnaires or interviews, skills through hypothetical scenarios, behavioral responses to simulated situations or disclosure rates. Regardless of which of these are measured, the effectiveness of CSA programs can only ever be ascertained through "proxy" (Wurdie, 1971) "assumed" - or proximal (Tynny, 1992) means "prevented to be predictive of skills in the actual situation" (MacMillan et al., 1994, p. 870). Several studies have shown that children exposed to school-based CSAPs were not able to prevent sexual victimization attempts (Finchelstein et al., 1991; Ko & Cosden, 2003; Pekovic et al., 1992).

2. Do young children understand and are they able to enact prevention strategies? It may be an unrealistic expectation. Some claim that it is unrealistic to expect children to protect themselves against sexual abuse (Berman & Gillett, 1991; Dunn, 1994; Kaufman et al., 2002; Melven, 1992; Reppucci et al., 2005). Deliberations for young children about CSA and protective behaviors are based on the assumptions that children are able to: (a) identify the names of an abuser or exploitative contact, teach, relationship, or situation; (b) counter the social, psychological, and physical manipulations or threats of an abuser; (c) challenge the authority of an adult; (d) foresee affection, attention and/or material incentives that may be provided by the abuser, and (e) be willing to report to someone they potentially care about: "with some knowledge that there will be consequences for the abuser, and potentially, the family and the victim themselves."

Some studies have demonstrated that children find it difficult to learn important prevention concepts, such as: familiar adults or someone in their family might touch their private parts; that secrets do not always have to be kept; that adults do not always have to be obeyed; saying no to an authority figure; recognizing the feelings associated with being safe and unsafe, and understanding about the protection of others. (Leclerc et al., 1999; Yang et al., 1995; Turry, 1996)

3. Are there unintended outcomes of CSA education for young children? There is some risk for negative consequences. The possible negative effects of telling a child that he or she may be the target of abuse, especially to the lapses of family members and loved ones, should be considered. Research shows that some children may experience fear, anxiety and confusion about touches after a prevention program (Topping & Baron, 2009; Walsh et al., 2015; Zietz et al., 2018). These studies in one review reported increased fearfulness of strangers (13-25%), increased dependency behaviors (13%) and having adverse reactions of a coping (Pazera, 1988; Russell, 1989), physical abuse (Furman et al., 1993; Ko et al., 2007), neglect, childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and self-evaluation (Leclerc et al., 1994). Similarly, teachers reported that students were more anxious (16%) and found the lessons dealing with private parts and being touched by a relative upsetting (8%). Significantly, 10% of caregivers felt that the information abuser” may be used to prevent children from being victimized. However, in major large telephone survey reported being worried about being abused after participating in a CSA program (5%), 9% worried about being abused by a family member, and 26% were scared by adults (Finchelstein & Drisko-Leachman, 1999). There may be also social and personal consequences, with Nijhoff and colleagues (2012) hypothesizing that the decrease in social trust observed in Western democracies over the last 40 years, may be partly due to the distrust that parents foster in their children when they caution them about the danger other adult others may pose.

Taken together, the answers to these three questions reinforce the need for a diversified approach to CSA prevention, including a greater emphasis on community capacity building, especially the involvement of parents and other adults in new and innovative ways.

Parental Involvement in CSA Risk

Parents have demonstrated their capacity to protect their children from sexual abuse by the extent to which they have dismissed their children with CSA (Deblingen et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2012). In general, a parent is deemed effective at protection if he or she has spoken about specific abusive behaviors, such as inappropriate touching, perpetrator identities (that is, the abuse was not a surprise), the abuse situation (Deblingen et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2012; Wurdie, 1992). However, emphasizing this approach to prevent parental-based prevention rests on the same assumptions as education programs for young children. Also, there is no empirical research that has assessed the effectiveness of parental discussion as a way to thwart threat potential victimizations and prevent CSA, or determine whether parents telling their children about the specifics of abuse and the identity of possible perpetrators can mitigate harms such as a lack of trust, and fearfulness of touch in normal encounters. Moreover, despite attempts by CSA prevention campaigns to encourage parents to inform their children about CSA risks and prevention strategies, research over the last 30 years shows that parents continue to hesitate to do so.

Only two studies have explored parental protective behaviors other than communicating with children directly about CSA risks (Hunt, Lees & Miles, 2015; Collins, 1996). Parents reported using a variety of protective practices (e.g., relationship building, supervision, monitoring, open communication and involvement) to create the external barriers that may keep their children safe from CSA, of which direct discussions of abuse prevention in the home was a small part.

Opportunities for a Diversified Approach to Prevention

Finchelstein (1986) identified four pre-conditions that must be present for CSA to occur: 1 a perpetrator motivated to sexually abuse a child, 2. the perpetrator’s ability to overcome personal internal inhibitions towards such a behavior, 3. the perpetrator must be able to overcome the external barriers to committing CSA (such as parental supervision, strong parent/child relationship) and 4. the perpetrator must be able to overcome the child’s resistance. This integrative conceptualization of the necessary preconditions for CSA reports, that parental targets are identified and identifies several opportunities for prevention programs, regardless of whether they are aimed at children or parents, attempt to address only preconditions – teaching children to thwart abuse. The two prevention opportunities that we focus on here draw from Finchelstein’s preconditions 3 and 4.

Regarding preconditions 3 (external barriers), parents and caregivers, are in the best position to maintain strong external barriers that can prevent a perpetrator gaining access to children. Research with sexual offenders demonstrates that they benefit from, and exploit to their advantage, a lack of caregiver supervision. According to Cohen and Falbo (1979) the absence of a capable guardian is a prerequisite for successful crime commission, and this is especially the case with CSA, in which an offender needs a certain amount of privacy with a child (Leclerc et al., 2015). Analyses of CSA offender modes typically demonstrate that the ideal conditions for child sexual abuse to occur are lack of adult supervision and a conducive environment, at all stages of the crime commission process; that is, during the accessing, grooming and abusing of the victim (Leclerc et al., 2011; Leclerc et al., 2015; Smallbone & Worrley, 2005). In fact, according to Leclerc and colleagues (2013), it is possible that a person may exploit such a situation when it presents itself, without any premeditated intention.

Prevention 4 (victim resistance) can also be targeted through parental or other caregiver input. According to Finchelstein (1986), precondition 4 “means much more than a child who says ‘no’ to a potential abuser,” with “one large class of behaviors being anything that makes a child feel emotionally insecure, needs or unprepared” (p. 60). The idea of some children being more susceptible than others is supported by research conducted with offenders who acknowledge that they target children who are vulnerable, due to their connection with the community, and who can manipulate (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Elliott et al., 1995; Finchelstein et al., 1994. Finchelstein et al., 1996). Finchelstein goes on to explain that a lack of support, emotional deprivation, and poor relationships with caregivers “make a child’s ability to resist” (1984, p. 61). Parents can, therefore, play a significant role as protectors of their children via two pathways: i) directly, through the strong external barriers afforded by parental supervision, monitoring and involvement and ii) indirectly, by promoting their child’s self-efficacy, competence, self-esteem and self-worth, which can be maintained, add value to an understanding of the balance of evidence, suggest they may be less likely targets for abuse (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Elliott et al., 1995; Leclerc et al., 1994; Leclerc et al., 2015) and more able to respond appropriately to abuse and disclose when it occurs (Finchelstein, 1984).