

Foundational Principles for Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

Ending Child Sexual Abuse requires understanding:

Child sexual abuse exists because perpetrators exist. Therefore, the fundamental issue that must be addressed if we are to truly prevent and end child sexual abuse is how to stop creating sex offenders. Only when we - on the societal, community, family and individual level - focus on all the things that need to “go wrong” before a sex offense can occur, will we be able to stop this victimization before it ever happens.

Perpetrators actively seek to create and exploit vulnerabilities in children. While statistics demonstrate that certain children may be at increased vulnerability to perpetrators, any child is potentially vulnerable. Some perpetrators are strangers or acquaintances. However, the majority of perpetrators are known to the child and/or the child’s family. In these situations, access to the victim is often gained through a betrayal of the relationship and trust. The child (and protective adults) may be confused and conflicted about caring and/or loving feelings toward the perpetrator.

Most sex offenders are built, not born as such -- and most have prior histories of victimization and trauma. Exploring the origins of sex offending behavior in no way excuses or minimizes the abuser’s actions or the pain that victims endure. It does not negate responsibility. And it must be clearly understood that most victims do not become perpetrators. However, understanding these dynamics, on both the collective and individual level, is an essential component of prevention.

Children often “tell” – adults need to know how to listen, believe and respond. Adults need to be aware that children disclose abuse in a variety of ways – through behavior, fears, indirect comments, and sometimes direct description. Adults need to know what to say and do when a child does disclose. This includes how to respond supportively and safely to the child as well as how to report the abuse.

Sexual abuse is what happened to the child, not the child’s (or family’s) identity.

Individual and Systems Level Responses must be victim-centered, which means being respectful and responsive to the unique lived-experience of each child and her/his non-offending parents/guardians. Victims often report feeling re-traumatized by the very systems and individuals who are charged with providing support and access to justice. Understanding issues including trauma and resilience, the importance of culture, and the rights of victims and non-offending parents/guardians to autonomy and self-determination is required. So is clear recognition that a victims’ actions or inactions do not – ever-- cause sexual abuse to occur. The sole responsibility for the abuse rests with the offender.



Introducing educational programs for children requires planning, resources, and evaluation.

Critical thought, careful planning, and adequate resources /capacity are absolute requirements before child sexual abuse educational programming is introduced in school, community, faith or other settings. Training of the adults in the environment/community is a pre-requisite. Choosing an evidence-based, culturally-relevant, developmentally appropriate approach for the particular setting is essential. Other key considerations include the qualifications and expertise of those presenting the programming, commitment to delivering a continuous message, and a plan for program evaluation. Collaboration with community experts, including sexual assault victim service providers and child advocacy centers (if present in the area) are also necessary. No programming is better than inappropriate or inadequate programming, regardless of how committed or well-intentioned those providing the training are.



Clarity regarding the difference between Prevention and Risk Reduction is critical.

Providing educational programs for children in schools and other child-serving agencies is important and necessary. There are several evidence-based programs which have demonstrated promising results in helping some children to recognize adult behaviors that make them uncomfortable and/or help children who are being abused to identify a safe adult to tell. Such programs contribute to reducing individual vulnerability/risk and may help to identify perpetrators before further abuse occurs. These programs, when properly implemented, can provide an important protective element for children, however they are not primarily preventative in nature.

Adults are responsible for preventing child sexual abuse -- not children. This is an uncomfortable, confusing and often personally difficult topic, even for those who want to help. It can bring up past trauma for those adults who experienced past childhood sexual abuse. It is understandably troubling for those who love and care for the abused child. It is often distressing for those who have a relationship with the perpetrator. Adults – not children -- are responsible for supporting child victims, holding offenders accountable and creating a culture where child sexual abuse is unthinkable, but never unspeakable.

PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IS AN ADULT RESPONSIBILITY THAT MUST BE SHARED BY ALL ADULTS IN MICHIGAN.