

“Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in Youth-Serving Organizations”

Norman D. Bates, Esq.

Christine Army, MA

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is an insidious crime that can destroy the lives of innocent children and leave their families devastated.

Child sexual abuse has been defined as:

“Child sexual abuse involves any sexual activity with a child where consent is not or cannot be given. This includes sexual contact that is accomplished by force or threat of force, regardless of the age of the participants, and all sexual contact between an adult and a child, regardless of whether there is deception or the child understands the sexual nature of the activity. Sexual contact between an older and a younger child can also be abusive if there is a significant disparity in age, development, or size, rendering the younger child incapable of giving informed consent. The sexually abusive acts may include sexual penetration, sexual touching, or non-contact sexual acts such as exposure or voyeurism.”

The Scope of Child Sexual Abuse

Estimating how many children are being or have ever been sexually abused is problematic. Some of the challenges that are faced include:

- 1. Inconsistent State Definitions of Child Sexual Abuse:** There is no single definition of child sexual abuse used currently. States vary in what age is considered a “child” as well as who can legally be held responsible for child sexual abuse.
- 2. Under and Non-reporting:** Many cases of child sexual abuse are not reported right away, and some are never reported. Therefore, the actual number of children who are or have ever been sexually abused is unknown.
- 3. Report Receiving Agencies:** Depending on who a state defines child sexual abuse, usually reports will be reported to either local law enforcement or Child Protective Services (CPS). However, many instances of sexual abuse never reach these agencies and are dealt with internally by the organizations and/or individuals involved.
- 4. Data Collecting Agencies:** There are a few agencies that collect data on child sexual abuse. The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), the data collecting system of The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN), gathers information from participating Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies. However, they do not collect data from local law enforcement. This means that current data collecting systems only capture a portion of the total incidence of CSA.

5. How the Data is Reported: Understanding the scope of child sexual abuse means considering both prevalence and incidence rates.

The number of child sexual abuse cases will be reported in one of two ways: incidence or prevalence. “Incidence rates are based on how many children were abused in a single year. Prevalence rates are based on a lifetime or a full childhood, such as what percentage of all children were ever abused.”

Characteristics of Offenders

The reality of child sexual abuse is that most offenders are known to their victims. Offenders are often trusted by the victims and their families. It is estimated that approximately 90% of juvenile child sexual abuse victims know their perpetrator in some way. As many as 40% of children are abused by older, more powerful children.

Grooming: Grooming is the process of how offenders make initial contact with the intended victims and the methods they use to develop a relationship with children in an attempt to normalize their behavior. It is a premeditated behavior intended to manipulate potential victims into complying with the sexual abuse.

Maintaining the Abusive Relationship: Many offenders will continue to sexually abuse the same victim, sometimes for years after the initial contact.

Environments for Abuse: Environments can play a significant role in whether offenders are able to commit abuse. Historically, childcare and youth-serving organizations created conditions where individuals, in positions of authority, were able to misuse and abuse their positions.

Characteristics of Victims

About 1 in 7 girls and 1 in 25 boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18.

While there is no profile of a “typical victim” of child sexual abuse, certain characteristics may make some children more vulnerable to abuse or to an offender. Children are most vulnerable to child sexual abuse between ages 7-13. Children with disabilities are at an increased risk of child sexual abuse as well. Children with communication impairments are 3 times more likely to become victims of sexual assault than children without.

Disclosure: Disclosure refers to the victim telling someone about the sexual abuse. The process of disclosing abuse can be difficult and complex. Consequently, it is often delayed or never disclosed. The average age of disclosure of child sexual abuse is around 25 years and only one-third of those sexually abused disclosed it before the age of 18.

Limited Prosecution: There are various reasons why cases of child sexual abuse go unprosecuted including: retraction of the accusation, lack of sufficient evidence, non-disclosure, age of victim, and political agendas.

Guidelines

Establishing clear policies provides a framework for the creation of an anti-abuse culture. However, merely establishing policies and educating staff is just the first step. An anti-abuse culture should prioritize the well-being of the children being served and establish a safe environment by implementing the following measures.

A. Pre-Employment Screening: The first step in developing a program to reduce the risk that a youth-serving organization will hire a sex offender is to establish a comprehensive pre-employment screening program for all employees, volunteers, and contract employees who may have contact with the children being served by the organization.

There is no guarantee that careful and considerate pre-employment screening will weed out all those unsuitable for a particular position. Unfortunately, there are a number of sex offenders who have no previous sexual offense history. However, a reasonable effort to check the background and verify the information provided by the applicant will help reduce the likelihood that a child sex offender is hired to work with children.

B. Employee Conduct: The next step in creating an anti-abuse culture is to ensure safe and healthy behavior boundaries between organization employees and the children being served. This is achieved through establishing employee handbooks that cover all aspects of adult and youth interactions including training, one-on-one meetings, transportation and youth outings, peer-to-peer interactions, and restrictions on contact between employees and youth outside of the physical facility and through media and digital devices.

C. Responding to Child Sexual Abuse: Organizations should create an environment and culture that encourages reporting suspected abuse. Policies should clearly outline the steps to be taken when someone witnesses or suspects abuse, whom is required to report, how to properly report an incident, what the process is once the report is made, and reassurance that reporting will be confidential and taken seriously.

D. Physical Design of Facilities: This section addresses the prevention of child sexual abuse through the design of facilities and a variety of physical security measures that a YSO can use to help supervise the interactions between adults and children. Designing spaces that are open and visible through the facility ensures that individuals with a propensity to commit child sexual abuse do not feel comfortable pursuing their abhorrent behavior.

Concluding Remarks

The long-term prevention of child sexual abuse requires a proactive approach. As stressed by this publication, all YSOs should actively participate in the development and implementation of policies and procedures to combat the threat of child sexual abuse.

Parent's CSA Checklist

This checklist for parents addresses child sexual abuse awareness, precautions to keep your child safe, responding to child sexual abuse, and choosing a youth organization.

YSO Sample Policies

This section provides recommended policies for YSOs to consider as part of their comprehensive child sexual abuse prevention culture. It also provides sample policies currently being implemented by youth-serving organizations.

Note: This article is an excerpt from “Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in Youth Serving Organizations”. A copy of the full publication is available online at www.liabilityconsultants.com