

Stewards of Children: A primary prevention program for child sexual abuse

Vivien Resofsky

This article profiles a new approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse that has been developed in the United States over the last decade: the *Stewards of Children* program. The article explores the rationale for considering this new program and its potential usefulness in Australia. It then goes on to outline the key elements of the program, and feedback from some of those who have participated in the *Stewards of Children* training program.

Child sexual abuse is a hidden but significant social problem in Australia with serious detrimental impacts on individuals, relationships and society. In recent decades, there has been a range of responses to the problem of child sexual abuse with a view to drawing community attention to its occurrence, impact and prevention.

Practice wisdom and perspectives on child sexual abuse

This article stems from two types of knowledge. The first is knowledge gained through my formal study of social work. The second is practice wisdom, developed through my experience working in the field. Practice wisdom is “tacit knowledge that is inductively derived from cumulative observations and which leads to pattern recognition and responses by experienced practitioners” (Scott, 2005, slide 6). My perspective on child abuse prevention programs has been developed through research and program documentation, and my experience in working with maltreated children and the elderly.

Background

It is estimated that one in four girls and one in six boys experience child sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1994), and live with its impact on their emotional, physical and psychological wellbeing. Research points to a range of significant negative outcomes for children who experience sexual abuse, including adverse effects on academic performance, friendships, family relationships and physical health (Dubowitz, Black, Harrington, & Verschore, 1993).

Child abuse has occurred throughout history; however, the catalyst for modern approaches to child abuse was when Kempe and colleagues theorised the *Battered Child Syndrome* in the 1960s to characterise a clinical condition in young children who had received serious physical abuse, usually from a parent (Goddard, 1996). Discussion of child sexual abuse entered the professional and public domains in the mid-1980s (Bromfield, 2007) and is now the subject of widespread professional attention. Individuals, however, still contend with shame, which makes disclosing experiences of child sexual abuse difficult. For others, its emotional and controversial nature can make child sexual abuse difficult to identify.

Australian approaches to CSA prevention programs

Since the appearance of child sexual abuse on the public agenda, child welfare policy-makers and practitioners have endeavoured to develop ways of protecting children from sexual abuse. It is possible, however, to point to persuasive research that suggests limitations in some of these existing approaches. For example, Tomison and Poole (2000) identified personal safety programs as the most prevalent child

sexual abuse prevention programs in Australia. However, personal safety programs target a single group: they focus on children rather than addressing adult responsibility for children's safety. A further limitation of approaches to child sexual abuse prevention in Australia is that there has been no large-scale community education programs aimed at the primary prevention of child sexual abuse.

Personal safety or protective behaviours programs

Personal safety and protective behaviours programs are generally school-based prevention programs that aim to equip children with self-protection strategies through educating them in how their body responds to feeling unsafe, and their right to say no. They are designed to educate children to identify, and therefore protect themselves from, situations in which they are potentially at risk of harm. The theory is that, with knowledge, children are able to identify potential risks or to disclose abusive experiences. The protective behaviours program was originally an initiative that aimed to prevent child sexual abuse, but over time the program has been extended to incorporate other risks such as domestic violence and other forms of social violence such as harassment and bullying. However, the focus of personal safety programs remains largely on child sexual abuse.

Personal safety or protective behaviours programs are a major child sexual abuse prevention initiative identified by the Australian audit. The strategy accounts for 10% of current programs, and more than two-thirds of the programs are based on the Protective Behaviours program (Tomison & Poole, 2000).

A review of the effectiveness of child abuse prevention programs by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse reported that personal safety programs can be effective in teaching children basic concepts and skills (e.g. good touch/bad touch) and are associated with an increase in disclosures. However, there is no evidence that personal safety programs are actually able to provide children with the knowledge and skills to avoid being abused (Bromfield & Holzer, 2006).

Furthermore, research has shown that some concepts were difficult for children to learn (e.g., it is not just strangers who abuse); and that programs using non-specific language to describe body parts can lead to confusion in young children about what the program is trying to tell them (Brennan, 2006; Briggs, 1991). Programs need to be tailored to the developmental needs of the child (Bromfield & Holzer, 2006). In relation to 'resistance strategies', some commentators have queried whether it is appropriate to expect children to protect themselves, and whether giving this type of message to children could lead them to feel guilt and shame if they were unable to protect themselves from abuse (Bromfield, 2007).

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Community education approaches

Community education aims to broaden community knowledge, to influence attitudes, and to change behaviours that contribute to child abuse. Such programs address the community as a whole, and include large-scale media campaigns, local information packages and resources, and training programs. Tomison and Poole (2000) found that while the general community is broadly aware of child maltreatment, there is a need to provide information on specific aspects of child abuse and neglect.

In Australia, there have been no large-scale community education programs that specifically target community awareness and the role of adults in preventing child sexual abuse. Professor Dorothy Scott (Director, Australian Centre for Child Protection) writes: "There have been very few health-promotion-style interventions in relation to child abuse and neglect in Australia, and those that have been tried have been short-lived (e.g. 'Don't Shake the Baby' campaigns) and not well evaluated" (Scott, 2006, p. 13).

This view is consistent with the findings of Tomison and McGurk (1996) who argued that Australian community education programs needed to follow the trend set by the United States in re-targeting programs to provide the public with detailed knowledge of specific aspects of child abuse and neglect.

Summary

This overview of existing Australian approaches to child sexual abuse prevention suggests that there is room in Australia for broad-based community-education that is specifically designed to prevent child

sexual abuse. This paper suggests that Australian child protection policy-makers, researchers and practitioners consider a new perspective that focuses on broad public education and information, and concentrates the responsibility for child sexual abuse prevention on adults.

A new international approach

In 1997, a small group of professionals in South Carolina, USA, established an organisation in response to escalating child sexual abuse statistics. The primary focus of this organisation, *Darkness to Light*, is the prevention of child sexual abuse (www.darkness2light.org/). It is a national non-profit community organisation, and its aims are:

- to shift the responsibility for preventing child sexual abuse from children to adults;
- to reduce child sexual abuse throughout the US through education and public awareness aimed at adults; and
- to provide adults with information to prevent, recognise and react responsibly to child sexual abuse.

The organisation's goals are encapsulated in the child abuse prevention program it has developed in collaboration with experts such as internationally recognised researcher, Professor David Finkelhor, called *Stewards of Children*.

Principles underpinning the Stewards of Children program

Adult responsibility

The core philosophy of the *Stewards of Children* program is that adults must be wholly responsible for preventing child sexual abuse at every level of society. That is to say, adults should work politically to end child sexual abuse within society, and that adults should protect individual children within their families, friendship networks and communities.

Community interaction

Stewards of Children is committed to the belief that child sexual abuse has been treated as a taboo subject and that ongoing community information sharing (community interaction) is essential to uproot the social taboos that allow child sexual abuse to continue.

The organisation suggests that in order to be committed to such action, adults must resolve to overcome the discomfort, uncertainty or difficulty they may face when confronted by child sexual abuse.

Action and resolve

In addition to community education about child sexual abuse, *Stewards of Children* asserts that adult responsibility needs to extend to implementing policies and practices that prevent child sexual abuse, and respond to it promptly if a child discloses. The organisation suggests that in order to be committed to such action, adults must resolve to overcome the discomfort, uncertainty or difficulty they may face when confronted by child sexual abuse.

The program is a sexual abuse prevention program that educates adults to recognise, prevent and respond responsibly to child sexual abuse. The program is comprehensive, and gives adults an overview of the complex nature of child sexual abuse. It utilises a seven-step approach and is appropriate for all adults, whether they work with child-focused organisations or are just concerned individuals. It aims to acknowledge the concerns and potential fears that adults might experience around issues of child sexual abuse, while educating them in the realities of its causes.

The participants

Darkness to Light is targeted at all adults within the community. The *Stewards of Children* program is a training program designed for organisations and corporations that serve children and youth.

The program

The two-and-a-half hour training program uses an interactive workbook that is used in conjunction with a DVD. The DVD features personal stories of child sexual abuse told by survivors, and training in recognising, preventing and responding to child sexual abuse. The program comprises seven steps, described below:

Step 1: Learn the facts. Understand the risks

- Learn the facts surrounding child sexual abuse, such as what it is, the incidence, facts about abusers, and the effects on individuals and society.
- Understand that child sexual abuse frequently occurs.
- Make decisions for children based on the facts of child sexual abuse rather than a level of trust in others.

Step 2: Minimise opportunity

- Adults (parents and professionals) must act on the known risks to create child-safe environments.
- Understand the importance of a well-conceived organisational policy that minimises the opportunity for offenders to isolate children.

Step 3: Talk about it

- Understand why children often keep abuse a secret and how these barriers can be broken down.
- Encourage a climate of open communication.
- Explore when parents should talk to children and what they should say.

Step 4: Stay alert

- Understand the possible signs of sexual abuse.
- Be alert to recognise these signs.

Step 5: Make a plan

- Knowing how to respond responsibly to incidents of child sexual abuse, such as how to react to a disclosure, reporting procedures, legal requirements and community resources, can contribute to a positive outcome.
- Formulating plans in advance can be of significant benefit to a child should abuse occur.

Step 6: Act on suspicions

- Being a silent bystander to sexual abuse can allow it to continue.

Step 7: Get Involved

- Support organisations that prevent and treat child sexual abuse.
- Use your voice to make the community a safer place for children.

How effective is *Stewards of Children*? Preliminary evaluation findings

In the two years since the program has been running in the US, growth has been rapid. It was originally introduced in nine organisations based in South Carolina, USA, and the training is now available in thirty-four US states as well as Canada, Iceland, Spain, Peru and the Cayman Islands.

In evaluation data provided by the nine organisations that participated in the original pilot, the program was considered to have a significant influence on participants' knowledge and understanding of child sexual abuse (www.darkness2light.org/). Specifically it was said to impact on:

- Understandings of the way choice, power and consciousness impact on child sexual abuse;
- Participants' perception of their potential to change social attitudes about child sexual abuse; and
- Knowledge about critical issues for organisations and individuals concerned about the protection of children.

The participants' evaluation of their training was followed up two months after their training session and indicated a knowledge retention rate of over 90%. Further feedback also indicated an increase in behaviours aimed at the prevention of sexual abuse. Specifically, participants reported they were more likely to:

- Discuss issues of child sexual abuse with a child or another adult;
- Pay attention to potential signs of sexual abuse; and
- Drop in unexpectedly to ensure the safety of a child in the care of another adult (www.darkness2light.org/).

Conclusion

My experience as a social worker lead me to believe that child sexual abuse could be reduced if adults knew more about *how* to protect children. I then searched for a multifaceted program that could teach adults about the complexities of child sexual abuse specifically and I became aware of a gap in existing Australian programs (it is worth noting that there are Australian programs and organisations raising awareness about child abuse and neglect more broadly such as the Australian Childhood Foundation).

I then researched overseas and identified the *Stewards of Children* program as having the comprehensive characteristics I perceive as important for an effective child sexual abuse prevention program. Not only do adults learn about the complex nature of child sexual abuse, they also learn practical steps they can take to protect children. The program confronts the social misunderstandings and fears that surround child sexual abuse and empowers adults to take responsibility for the safety of children.

Because of its origins in the United States, the implementation of the *Stewards of Children* program in an Australian setting would, in all likelihood, require some linguistic and cultural changes. Such cosmetic changes, however, do not detract from the usefulness and relevance of the program.

Child sexual abuse is a hidden but significant social problem in Australia. The effects are significant and wide ranging for individuals, families and communities. Australian child protection professionals have developed child abuse prevention programs that stem from various perspectives. The *Stewards of Children* program, run by the *Darkness to Light* organisation, aims to be a comprehensive education program that places the responsibility for the prevention of child sexual abuse on adults.

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Author biography

Vivien Resofsky has worked as a social worker for the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service, the Victorian Department of Human Services (Protective Worker) and Jewish Care Inc. (formerly JCS, Aged Care Service). Vivien is an accredited facilitator of the *Stewards of Children* program. She is currently using the program to train a range of different people working with children, and encourages existing organisations to adopt the training. It is her aim to launch the program nationally, and incorporate the *Stewards of Children* program in a new prevention of child sexual abuse initiative. Email: v.resofsky@iprimus.com.au

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Dr Mel Irenyi (Research Officer at the National Child Protection Clearinghouse) for her assistance in preparing this article for publication.