

**An Investigation of the Ability of
Elementary School-Aged Children to Learn
Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Concepts**

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Statement of the Research Problem

The last decade has seen a proliferation of sexual abuse prevention programs directed to children, in response to growing recognition of large numbers of children who have been sexually abused. Although only one of a range of prevention options to address sexual abuse (Tutty, 1991), child-directed programs have become the preferential mode of teaching abuse prevention concepts. The programs present similar concepts (Conte, Rosen, Saperstein & Shermack, 1985), typically challenging such widely held beliefs that children are at more risk of abuse from strangers than from familiar adults, and that boys are not at risk of abuse. Children are given permission to say no to adults in some circumstances. They are offered directions as to how to proceed if abused, in the hope that such information would empower a child to either escape the abusive incident, or to disclose the incident to a trusted adult. By working within school systems, these programs are viewed by large number of children and can be described as providing primary prevention. Many programs include teacher training components as well as the opportunity for parents to view the prevention materials, thereby providing prevention to a wide segment of the community. Despite recent questioning as to whether children are the appropriate prevention audience, child-directed programs are offered in many communities across the North American continent.

Research Background

Approximately 30 research studies evaluating the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs for elementary and preschool aged children have been published since 1981 (for reviews see Tutty, 1990, 1994; Wurtele, 1987). Several recurring methodological problems in this research have resulted in an inability to wholeheartedly endorse the use of the programs on the part of some (Wurtele, 1978), and in strong criticism of the programs on the part of others (Reppucci & Haugaard, 1989; Berrick & Barth, 1992). The research has been hampered by relatively little use of appropriate control or comparison groups, a paucity of psychometrically sound instruments, and small sample sizes. A discussion of each of these problems will both clarify the difficulty in extrapolating clear findings from review of the research and will present the rationale for the development and design of the current research.

The nine well-designed studies that included control groups (Blumberg, Chadwick, Fogarty, Speth, & Chadwick, 1991; Conte et al., 1985; Downer, 1984; Fryer, Kraiser & Miyoushi, 1987a; Harvey, Forehand, Brown, & Homes, 1988; Hazzard, Webb, Kleemeier,

Angert & Pohl, 1991; Kolko, Moser, Litz & Hughes, 1987; Saslawsky & Wurtele, 1986; Volpe, 1984; Wolfe, MacPherson, Blount & Wolfe, 1986). Primarily found statistically significant gains in knowledge and/or skills, although these improvements were typically an increase in only one or two prevention concepts, a point that will be discussed in more detail later.

Another question about child sexual prevention programs has been whether children would remember the concepts over time. Seven studies collected follow-up information periods longer than 2 months, finding that children retained their knowledge of abuse prevention concepts over 3 months (Saslawsky & Wurtele, 1986; Wurtele, Saslawsky, Miller, Marrs, & Britcher, 1986), 5 months (Wurtele, Kast & Melzer, 1992), 6 months (Fryer et al, 1987b; Kolko et al., 1987; Ray & Deitzel, 1985) and 1 year (Hazzard et al., 1991).

The two most commonly utilized outcome variables for testing the efficacy of child abuse prevention programs are knowledge of abuse prevention concepts and behavioral change. While information about both behaviour and knowledge would ideally be collected to demonstrate that prevention programs are working as planned, there are problems with using behavioural change as an outcome variable. Such an outcome is usually measured by stimulating a potentially abusive situation, with a stranger approaching a child and requesting that he accompany the adult under the guise of helping in some manner (Fryer, Kraiser & Miyoshi, 1987a; 1987b; Poche, Brouwer, Swearingen, 1981). Although one of the major concerns about using this method of validating programs has been the ethics of such a simulation (Conte, 1987), another problem is that it can only be used to assess responses to strangers. Since the majority of perpetrators of sexual abuse are known to the victim, this method has limited utility. Thus, although knowledge gain is limited to the extent that one cannot be certain that it will be translated into changed behaviour, it remains the initial criteria to evaluate whether a program is effective.

A further obstacle for those who wish to evaluate prevention program is that, to date, there are few psychometrically sound measures available to assess children's knowledge levels. Exceptions include the Personal Safety Questionnaire often used in conjunction with the "What if Situations Test" (Saslawsky & Wurtele, 1986), both of which are commonly used to test programs for preschool and young elementary school-aged children, a test that was not available at the time the current research was developed.

Finally, one of the greatest concerns about child-directed prevention programs has been whether there would be negative consequences such as fear or nightmares. Research has consistently found that only a very small number of children show negative reactions after participating in a child abuse prevention program (Nibert, Cooper & Ford, 1989; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1987). However, each new program should be examined in respect to this question.

While child-directed sexual abuse prevention programs have become widespread over the past decade, there remains skepticism as to whether children actually learn the material taught. The current research was designed to address several of the methodological problems in the available research on the efficacy of child abuse prevention programs for elementary school aged children such as lack of control groups, small samples, short, poorly developed measures, and a lack of follow-up testing.

Questions/Hypotheses

The major questions posed for the study were: how much do the children know before participating in a prevention program, do children learn the prevention concepts after participating in the program, and do they remember the concepts over time (five months). Age was found to be a critical variable in the results of past research, so three age groups were delineated: Grades 1, 3, and 6. A smaller sample of kindergarten children were also tested, but the results with this age-group are considered exploratory.

No research has yet investigated the influence of parental variables on a child learning and remembering prevention concepts. The current study looked at how parents' participation or non-participation in the prevention program might affect the scores of the children and the long-term retention of the material. Whether parents attended prevention previews and therefore were able to reinforce prevention concepts at home was hypothesized as important in the long-term integration of such information. Finally, the accuracy of a parent's perception of their child's understanding of prevention concepts was thought to be an important variable in whether parents would reinforce the learning of these concepts by discussion or by providing supplementary materials.

Methodology

The research was quasi-experimental utilizing an extended Solomon Four Group design with 100 children in each group; two in experimental conditions, two in control conditions. Half of the children participated in an abuse prevention program "Touching," and the other half were in a waiting list control group. Half of each group were pretested, and the other half not, in order to determine whether the pretesting sensitized the students. All children were tested again five months afterwards to investigate the long-term retention of prevention concepts. The total number of participants from the four age groups were: kindergarten (N=48), Grade 1 (N=116), Grade 3 (N=120), and Grade 6 (N=116).

The children in the current study participated in a new school-based prevention program, "Touching," consisting of a 45-minute live production of a play, that also included the opportunity for parents to attend a preview, training for teachers in the dynamics of abuse and how to respond to disclosures, and supplementary classroom materials for children. In total, 501 children from the three different age groups were tested, with 400 children included in the final data set.

The children were assessed with the Children's Knowledge of Abuse Questionnaire (C.K.A.Q.), an instrument developed by the author (Tutty, in press) consisting of 40 items addressing the broad range of prevention concepts discussed in the literature. The psychometric properties of the measure were established with one-month test-retest reliability (N=100) at $r = .76$ and internal consistency using the KR-20 formula of $4 = .90$. In addition, another 113

children were given the Personal Safety Questionnaire (Saslowsky & Wurtele, 1985), a measure developed for kindergarten-aged children which was considered too short and simple for use with the age ranges in the present study. The correlation of $r = .92$ between the two instruments suggests evidence of the convergent validity of the C.K.A.Q.

Results

The initial 2X2 factorial ANOVA (Pretest/No Pretest X Treatment/Control Group) showed that pretesting did not appear to have sensitized the children so that they performed better at posttest simply as a result of prior exposure to the C.K.A.Q. Children who participated in the prevention program scored significantly higher on the C.K.A.Q. than children who did not see "Touching." A further 2X2X4 ANOVA (Pretest/No pretest X Treatment/Control Group X Grade Level) showed significant differences between all age groups ($p < .000$), with kindergarten scoring at about 57%, Grade 1 in the 65% range, Grade 3 in the 80% range, and Grade 6 in the 90% range after having seen the play. A repeated measures analysis was used to analyze the long-term retention of prevention concepts. After five months, the children who participated in the program did not forget the concepts, and actually scored somewhat better than on the posttest analysis. However, one of the control groups also made unexpectedly significant increases in their scores over five months.

Teachers (N=32) reported few negative reactions on the part of their students in the classrooms. They commented that students were initiating appropriate discussion about the play and its concepts, and that they had observed children being more assertive with peers who were trying to bully them.

Parent reports (N=284) indicated few negative responses on the part of the children who participated in the prevention program. Overwhelmingly, the majority of parents reported changes in their children which they saw as positive, including talking about the play and appearing more confident. Parents scored an average of 71% on the short knowledge questionnaire. They tended to underestimate the incidence and seriousness of sexual abuse. Parents of young children were likely to overestimate their child's knowledge of core prevention concepts. In terms of parental perception of their child's responses, the more knowledgeable parents more accurately predicted their child's response to key questions when age was taken into consideration. Further involvement of parents in school-based prevention programs is recommended.

Because it was not possible to randomly assign children to research conditions, one cannot clearly "make a causal connection between the participation in the program and improvement in scores" (Posavac & Carey, 1980, p. 231). Despite this limitation, the research results suggest the effectiveness of the prevention program in teaching abuse prevention concepts to children, however, highlight the fact that some concepts are difficult for younger children to learn. The results show small, but statistically significant, increases which is consistent with other well-designed research on child abuse prevention programs. This raises the question of

why it appears to be difficult for some children, especially younger ones, to learn the concepts. It may be that the concepts are dealing with attitudes rather than with knowledge, and that attitudes are more difficult to change. An item analysis that looked at the interaction of age and correct endorsement of items suggests that developmental differences between the younger and older children in areas of morality or relationship to authority figures interfere with learning certain concepts. The necessity for repetition of the core material both in discussion of the materials and in the provision of supplementary materials directed to different age groups is promoted. Finally, the importance of inviting parents to participate in prevention programs with their children is underscored.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Child sexual abuse prevention programs have the potential to decrease the incidence of children falling victim to abuse and to encourage earlier disclosures. Social workers are often central in developing the programs, and, since disclosures of abuse are a common occurrence after children participate in programs (although not the primary focus), social workers will be involved in the aftermath of programs. Although just one of a range of options to prevent sexual abuse, school-based programs offer the opportunity to address a great number of children. One of the implications of this study to social work practitioners is that although children demonstrate the ability to learn the material taught in prevention programs, the youngest children still have difficulty learning some of the core concepts, especially those related to believing that a familiar adult might be a perpetrator. Social workers must not become complacent about the need to continue to educate other professionals and the public about the risk factors and the signs of sexual abuse.

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