

Preventing Sexual Abuse: A Pilot Curriculum in 22 Boston Elementary Schools

by Kim Marshall

Sexual abuse of children is occurring at an alarming rate in our society. Researchers estimate that one in four girls and one in 10 boys are sexually abused before reaching the age of 18. Abuse ranges from obscene calls, voyeurism, and pornography to fondling, intercourse, and rape. About half of sexual abuse involves actual intercourse. Most abuse begins at the ages of seven and 11; the average case of abuse lasts from one to four years.

The most common definition of sexual abuse is the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult or an older person (in some cases a teenager). This should not be confused with sex play among children of similar age; the key ingredient in sexual abuse is an age and power difference. Between 75 and 90% of abusers are people the victims know and love — step-fathers, fathers, boyfriends, counselors, coaches, teachers, babysitters, and other trusted people in children's lives. It appears that the "dangerous stranger" and "dirty old man in a trenchcoat" stereotypes are inaccurate and even misleading.

Studies of offenders indicate that they are about 95% male, mostly married, heterosexual, and outwardly normal, but driven for reasons that are not well understood to seek sexual gratification with children. Offenders are divided between pedophiles, who sometimes abuse hundreds of children, and "regressed" individuals, who abuse only a few readily-available children, usually family members, over a period of years. Offenders almost never seek psychological help and continue to abuse until they are denied access to children. A striking fact that emerges consistently from interviews with offenders is that the

one thing most likely to stop abuse from taking place is the child saying "no."

Unfortunately, this is all too rare. Children are socialized to obey adult authority and are intimidated by abusers' threats or pleas to keep "our secret." In addition, many abusers are highly skilled at "grooming" children over a period of weeks or even months before abuse actually takes place. As a result, victims very rarely say "no" or report abuse once it has begun. Almost all victims of abuse blame themselves, feel tainted by the experience, and lock the secret up inside, where it corrodes their self-esteem, their ability to work in school and excel in other areas, and their ability to have healthy love relationships later in life. So closely-guarded are these secrets of youth (and in many cases so carefully buried in the subconscious) that it is only now, with the widespread discussion of the subject and the constant assertions that abuse is *never* the fault of the youngster, that many victims are talking about what happened to them and realizing the effect it has had on their lives.

In women, the subsequent damage to those most seriously traumatized is often psychological problems, depression, alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution, and suicide. Men tend to act out their trauma in the form of violent behavior and sexual victimization of another generation of children. Of course not all victims of sexual abuse are scarred for life; many are able to overcome their negative experiences — especially if they are able to talk about them.

What does all this mean for the Boston Public Schools? First, sexual abuse in undoubtedly affecting many of our students. Second, no

child can excel in school while being affected by this kind of trauma. Third, despite the increased attention to the subject in recent years, and despite constant news stories and some good prevention efforts in the media (the Spiderman comic distributed by *The Boston Globe*, "Something About Amelia" and several other powerful television programs), these one-shot efforts are not enough to "immunize" children against sexual abuse. Fourth, children in homes where incest may take place — in other words, those most at risk — are unlikely to receive good information from their parents; they need programs outside the home. Fifth, the "dangerous stranger" stereotype won't help many children recognize and fend off many types of abuse. Sixth, boys as well as girls need to be given the facts about sexual abuse. And finally, the key ingredient in prevention is also the most difficult to teach: building up assertiveness, the ability to stand up for your rights and say "no" in a forceful and convincing way.

Should the BPS be involved in trying to prevent sexual abuse? Much has been said in recent years about public schools drawing the line on trying to solve social problems. Is sexual abuse prevention really something we should take on? This question was posed to a leadership group of BPS teachers, principals, community superintendents, central administrators, parents, and medical personnel in March 1985. The almost unanimous conclusion was that we *should* become involved, that the schools are in fact ideally situated to help stem the tide of sexual abuse. The group concluded that, although it's clear that the schools cannot take on all of society's problems, sexual abuse is one area where there is a

clear-cut need for a brief, effective curriculum.

The upshot of the March meeting was that 22 elementary schools* agreed to pilot "Talking About Touching," a curriculum published by the Committee for Children in Seattle, Washington. A Boston-based foundation called the Hyams Trust funded the pilot program with a \$12,900 grant, and in late August, a group of 40 BPS teachers and administrators went through two days of intensive training. On the September 4th all-professional day, they returned to their schools and conducted a 3-hour training session with all staff members. The training focused on presenting the need for the curriculum, familiarizing the staff of each pilot school with the materials, and preparing staff for situations where students might publicly or privately disclose sexual abuse (an increase in disclosure by students and reporting by staff is almost inevitable as the curriculum is implemented). The key elements in the training were heightening sensitivity to the signs and symptoms of abuse, preventing over-reaction, and a one-page "protocol" for getting advice and support in situations where abuse may be happening.

Before implementation in the pilot schools, parents were notified of the program and given a chance to ask questions in an open meeting. While parents are fully informed before and during the curriculum, prior permission is not requested: this is safety education, not sex education; it aims to prevent criminal offenses, and all children should be exposed to the curriculum.

The curriculum was then launched in all classrooms K-5, with the homeroom teacher conducting the daily 15-minute lessons over a two-week period. Toward the end of the curriculum, a videotape entitled "Yes You Can Say No" is shown to drive home the message about assertiveness.

The "Talking About Touching" curriculum consists of large black-and-white laminated photographs showing scenes like these: a girl peering through the window of a locked door at a stranger; a boy whose bike is broken being offered a ride; a girl sitting happily on her father's knee; a girl scowling with her arms akimbo. In each fifteen-minute lesson, the teacher holds up a picture, reads the story printed on the back, and poses a series of discussion questions (also printed on the back) designed to help students think through the proper response to the



Photo courtesy Committee for Children

One lesson picture from the Talking About Touching curriculum.

situation. Should the girl open the door? Should the boy accept the man's offer of a ride? Is the uncle's affectionate touching appropriate? Students gradually learn the central lessons of the curriculum, which are the three R's of prevention:

- Recognizing sexual abuse (telling "good touch" from "bad touch" and "confusing touch")
- Resisting if possible (saying "no" in an assertive way) and escaping
- Reporting immediately (and repeatedly) until something is done

In addition to these basic prevention messages, there are several other points children learn: You can make decisions about your own body, it's not all right for sexual abuse to occur, sexual abuse is never the child's fault, it is good to

tell someone, and children don't have to keep secrets about inappropriate touching of the private parts of their body.

The curriculum has no explicit language about body parts or sexual activities. The basic message is simply this: if someone touches you on the parts of your body covered by a bathing suit (or touches you in a way that makes you feel "icky" or confused), except for health and hygiene reasons, you should say "no" and tell someone you trust. The curriculum has a strong emphasis on positive, affectionate hugging and touching; it returns again and again to scenes of family members, teachers, and friends touching children in ways that are warm, loving, and supportive. The curriculum builds on family safety rules, and in a series of take-home activities, suggests ways for students to talk to their parents about the issues and expand their own safety rules to protect them against sexual abuse (for example, making a list of adults who are authorized to give children a ride in their car).

This year's pilot program will be completed in most schools by Christmas, and will be followed by an assessment of its effectiveness. If the results of the evaluation are positive, the School Committee will be asked to consider implementing a systemwide program for all elementary schools. We hope that the program is a significant first step by the BPS to reduce the level of sexual abuse in the city of Boston.

*The schools piloting the curriculum this fall are Farragut, Gardner, Hamilton, Tobin, Winship, Agassiz, Higginson, Conley, Crew, F. Roosevelt, P.A. Shaw, Mather, Murphy, Marshall, Blackstone, Bradley, P. Kennedy, Otis, Hennigan, Hernandez, Mann, and Trotter. If you want additional information, contact the Talking About Touching trainer in one of the pilot schools or Kim Marshall at 26 Court Street.

Kim Marshall is the Manager of Instructional Services. Material in this article is drawn largely from the training materials published by the Committee for Children, Seattle, Washington.