

SEX ABUSE PREVENTION PROGRAMS: OFFENDERS' ATTITUDES ABOUT THEIR EFFICACY

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Abstract—Little scientific basis exists for the content of school-based programs which are intended to help children protect themselves from sexual abuse. Children are taught about protecting themselves from a stereotypical old male stranger, yet perpetrators are most frequently young, known to the victim, and use a variety of methods to gain access to children. Programs generally include concepts of body ownership, acceptable touching, good vs. bad secrets, saying no, telling, and trusting one's intuition. Seventy-two prison inmates incarcerated for child sexual abuse were surveyed to evaluate their attitudes about the effectiveness of topics intended to prevent abuse. Offenders described the ideal victim and the modus operandi they used to involve children. Inmates indicated which topics in prevention programs they believed were efficacious and which topics would have little value in preventing abuse. Responses of incestuous and nonincestuous abusers were compared. Inmates indicated that parents could help prevent child abuse and that they must be involved if programs are to be effective. Information from abusers is useful and can be incorporated into programs if the potential for prevention of abuse is to be improved.

INTRODUCTION

STUDIES HAVE INDICATED that the prevalence of sexual abuse in North America ranges from 6% to 62% for females and from 3% to 31% for males [1]. "The higher reported rates would point to a problem of epidemic proportions" [1]. In one survey of 930 adult women, 28% indicated that they were sexually abused or victimized prior to age 14 years, and 38% indicated sexual abuse or victimization by 18 years of age [2].

Victims of sexual abuse suffer immediate and long-term adverse consequences from their abuse including phobias, depression, and suicide [3-5]. One response of society to the problem of child sexual abuse is the development of school-based programs which have been designed to teach children how to protect themselves from potential perpetrators [6]. These prevention programs exist in almost every part of the United States, beginning in early preschools and continuing throughout high school [7]. Prevention has been emphasized because treatment of child abuse victims is expensive and not always effective. In addition, victims of sexual abuse may become future perpetrators [8].

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Programs designed to protect children from sexual abuse share the use of the following five basic concepts [7]:

1. Body ownership. Children have the right to control access to their bodies.
2. Touch continuum. Certain ways of being touched are acceptable while others are not.
3. Intuition. Children should trust their own feelings about what is right or acceptable.
4. Saying no.
5. Telling. Children should tell an adult if someone has touched them in a "wrong" way.

Prevention programs have little scientific basis for their curricula. Rather

what children are being taught in prevention programs constitutes adults' best guesses about the concepts and skills children will find useful in preventing their own sexual victimization. . . . No one knows yet if these activities are actually useful to children in preventing their own abuse [7].

A previous study of data from victims of sexual abuse revealed topics which should be addressed in the design and evaluation of prevention programs [9, 10]. Coercion was frequently utilized to gain sexual access to the boy victims in the study. Threats that ranged from mild admonitions to not tell about the incident to those of bodily harm involved 44% of the cases. Another 16% involved bribes of beer, cigarettes, money, or candy [9]. These findings were found to be similar for girl victims [10].

Studies involving victims of sexual abuse have shortcomings. The ages of victims and the emotional stress that they have undergone may preclude their ability to recall the details of their exploitation. Moreover, it is unlikely that younger children are able to fully comprehend the consequences or extent of their manipulation.

An approach to the design of programs for the prevention of child sexual abuse, that has not been described in the literature, is to use sexual abusers as a resource of information. Abusers know about which procedures are utilized to gain a child's trust and silence and which children they target for sexual abuse. This information should be used in prevention programs.

Inmates incarcerated at the Chillicothe Correctional Institute (CCI), in Chillicothe, Ohio, agreed to be surveyed about methods they actually employed and about how they would prevent sexual abuse. All subjects were enrolled in the Polaris Program at CCI or had already completed this program. Polaris provides "intensive milieu counseling to inmates who are serving sentences for sex offenses or who have a history of sex offenses and who accept responsibility for their sexual acting out behavior" [11].

METHOD

A form was designed to survey perpetrators of child sexual abuse to gather information on methods they employed to solicit children and how they would prevent child sexual abuse. Information gathered included age and sex of the perpetrators' victims, number of victims, perpetrators' knowledge of victims, risk factors, perpetrator approaches, methods of gaining cooperation, and how perpetrators prevented children from reporting. They were also asked their attitudes about the questionnaire. Demographic questions had to be limited to perpetrators' age range and classification of their crimes so as to not disclose the identity of any of the subjects and to fulfill the requirements of the human subjects committees. According to Polaris officials, the subject age range was 23 to 63 years, with a mean of 41 years. Of the participants, 13% were black and the remainder were white.

Before the survey instrument was distributed, the intent of the investigators was described to the subjects. Participants completed two consent forms: one for Children's Hospital and another for the correctional institute. Questionnaires were read to the subjects, after which they were given the opportunity to ask questions about the purpose of the study or about the three forms, and offered the opportunity to leave without participating. They were informed, as per institutional protocol, that they would not be penalized for declining to be involved with the study nor could they be rewarded for assisting in the study. Of approximately 90 inmates who were oriented to the study, approximately 18 chose to exit, leaving 72 to participate in the study. The numbers 90 and 18 are approximate, as the investigators were not allowed to determine who would participate.

Consent forms and completed questionnaires were placed in a box by subjects when they finished. Subjects were separated into two groups: those who had completed the Polaris Program (completers) and those who were currently enrolled (currently enrolled).

Chi-square analyses were used to compare the following percentages: (1) Data from the completers were compared to those of the currently enrolled; (2) the percentage of boy victims from this study was compared to the percentages discussed by Showers and colleagues [10]; (3) answers to the questions about efficacy of prevention programs were compared to the 50% positive answers which would be expected in a random sampling; (4) the answers of the subjects who indicated that they were involved in incestuous relationships were compared to those who were not. In cases in which a subject reported being involved in both incestuous and non-incestuous relationships, the responses were included in both the incestuous and non-incestuous pools of data.

RESULTS

Statements made by subjects and their responses to questions about the questionnaire were favorable. Although those who were currently enrolled indicated that they felt the questionnaire was a good idea, they were significantly less favorable to answering questions about their offenses than those subjects who had completed the program, $\chi^2 = 10.47$, $n = 40$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$.

The range for numbers of males involved by each perpetrator was between 1 and 200, with a median of 3.5, whereas the range for numbers of female victims was between 1 and 75, with a median of 2. Inmates indicated that the children they abused ranged from 3 months to 17 years of age.

There was a spectrum of answers to the question, Did you prefer one "type" of child (for example, a certain gender, hair color, race, height, personality, etc.)? (See Figure 1.) The subjects tended to prefer their own children and/or passive, quiet, troubled, lonely children from broken homes. Of 33 answers, 15 included these descriptions. Other answers were classified as follows: (1) physical descriptors, such as "dark hair, brown eyes," "around puberty," or "quiet, non-aggressive, slender blondes"; (2) availability, such as "any kid I could manipulate," "comatose and unresponsive," or "no male figures in their life"; and (3) statements that only qualify the victim as offspring of the perpetrator, such as "my kids," "my daughter replaced my wife," or "having characteristics of her mother."

The subjects were asked to indicate where they found their victims (see Figure 2). Other places that were not listed on the form included the perpetrator's home (8 responses), on streets (4 responses), babysitting (3 responses), perpetrator's friend's home (3 responses), public facilities (3 responses), and arcades, to and from school, scout meetings and drug parties (1 response each).

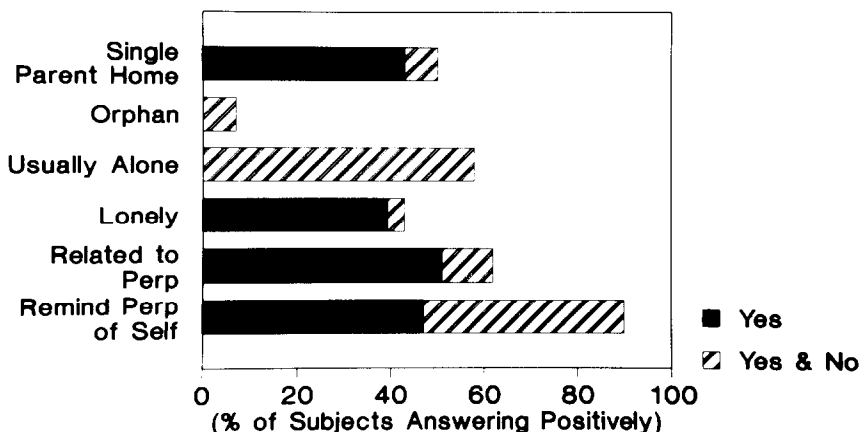


Figure 1. Characteristics of victims.

Yes refers to all subjects who only responded positively.

Yes and No refers to all subjects who responded positively and negatively for their different victims.

Perpetrators who were involved with incest were compared to their non-incestuous counterparts with respect to the methods employed to gain children's trust. The two groups used similar tactics but to differing degrees (see Figure 3). Non-incestuous subjects reported use of the following tactics in a significantly greater frequency than their incestuous counterparts: (1) using victim's friend with whom the perpetrator had been previously involved ($\chi^2 = 16.02$, $n = 32$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$); (2) acquiring victims who had already been victimized by perpetrator's offending friends ($\chi^2 = 16.11$, $n = 32$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$); (3) giving victims toys ($\chi^2 = 4.58$, $n = 33$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

Figure 4 indicates the frequency of different types of threats which were used by the 22% and 25% of perpetrators who claimed to have utilized threats to obtain the victims' cooperation and silence. Other threats listed by the subjects to gain cooperation included threatening a loss of friends, parental anger, lack of contact with perpetrator, lack of love from perpetrator, jailing of perpetrator, and divorce of victim's parents. Other threats listed to gain victim si-

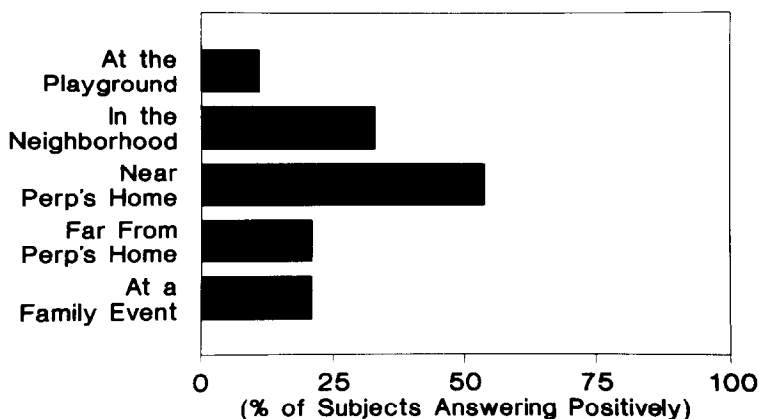


Figure 2. Places where perpetrators found their victims.

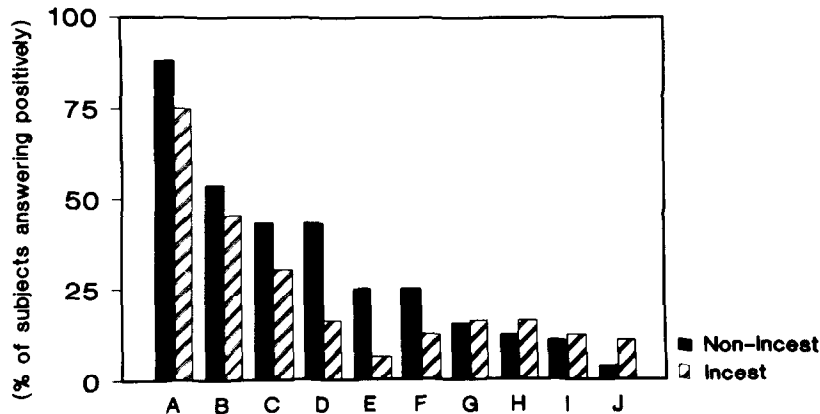


Figure 3. Methods of gaining victims' trust.

The subjects were asked to answer yes or no as to whether or not they employed any of the following to gain their victims' trust.

A = Did you gain his/her trust by being a friend?

B = Did you gain his/her trust by playing children's games with him/her?

C = Did you gain his/her trust by giving him/her money?

D = Were you able to gain his/her trust because he/she had already been involve with another perpetrator?

E = Did you gain his/her trust by having one of his/her friends with whom you had previously been involved with tell him/her it would be OK?

F = Did you gain his/her trust by giving him/her toys?

G = Did you gain his/her trust by giving him/her candy?

H = Did you gain his/her trust by giving him/her cigarettes?

I = Did you gain his/her trust by giving him/her beer?

J = Did you gain his/her trust by giving him/her drugs?

lence included exposing the victim who would then be institutionalized, displacing blame onto the victim, loss of friends, inability to repeat sexual act, jailing of perpetrator, and a loss of promised rewards.

Inmates' perceptions of the efficacy of different sex abuse prevention methods being used to teach children varied (see Figure 5). Inmates agreed that children should be taught to tell if they have been abused 91.67% ($\chi^2 = 50.00$, $N = 72$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$); to say no to assailants 90.28% ($\chi^2 = 46.72$, $N = 72$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$); about proper handling of their genitalia 88.89%

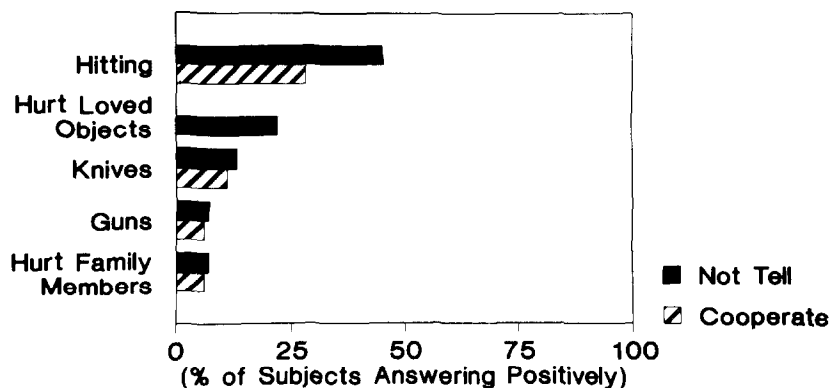


Figure 4. Frequency of threats used to gain victim cooperation of silence.

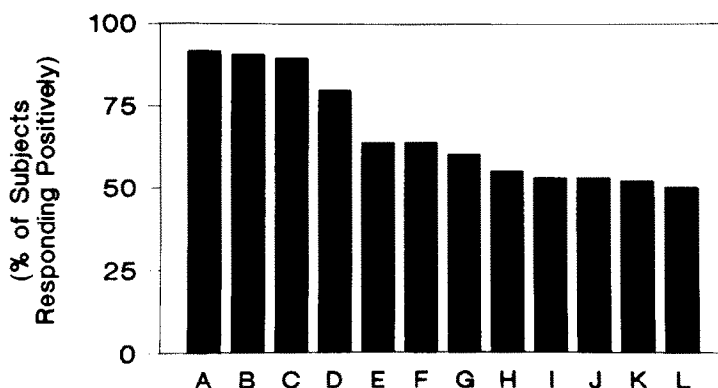


Figure 5. Recommendations for prevention of child sexual abuse.

The subjects were asked which of the following did they believe should be taught to children so that they can prevent their own sexual abuse.

- A = Tell if They Have Been Abused
- B = Say no
- C = Learn About Proper Touching of Their Privates by Others
- D = Never Get Into a Stranger's Car
- E = Run Away if Approached
- F = Resist
- G = Keep Away from Strangers
- H = Cry
- I = Have Better Parents
- J = Do not Talk to Strangers
- K = Never Tell One's Name
- L = Shout if an Adult Approaches

($\chi^2 = 43.56$, $N = 72$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$); and never to get into cars with strangers 79.17% ($\chi^2 = 24.50$, $N = 72$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Fewer believed that children should be taught to shout if an adult approached them 50% ($\chi^2 = 0$, n.s.); never to tell their names 51.39% ($\chi^2 = .06$, n.s.); not to talk to strangers 52.78% ($\chi^2 = .22$, n.s.); and to cry if propositioned 52.78% ($\chi^2 = .22$, n.s.). Specific topics recommended to be included in prevention programs are listed in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

Becker and colleagues state:

There are various means of reducing and ultimately eliminating sexual offenses. The first step is to identify the cause of sexually aggressive behavior; the second step is to prevent that behavior from occurring; the third is to treat those who have committed sexual crimes in order to prevent further victimization [12].

This study was concerned with improving the efficacy of programs that attempt to satisfy the second need.

Perpetrators are a useful resource for determining what should be taught to children in school-based sexual abuse prevention programs. However, as indicated by Abel and colleagues [13], there are problems in studying convicted sexual offenders. The data obtained may differ from the tendencies of those offenders who are not convicted. Perpetrators who have escaped detection or conviction were not included in the subject pool of this study. Their

Table 1. Subject Recommendations of What Should be Taught for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse

For Whom Instruction is Based	Examples
Children	"Avoid too friendly friends of parents" "Don't let a stranger get close enough to touch you" "Don't be afraid of strangers but be careful about relationships with them" "Threaten the perpetrator you won't be their friend" "Stay close to home, close to a grown up you know" "Say you're on your period or sick" "Hit, kick, bite where it hurts the most" "Don't tell last name, be friendly but aloof" "Don't walk around the house in under clothes, dress before leaving the bed room" "Never be alone" "Mothers can abuse you by denying you privacy"
Parents	"Provide potential victims with emotional fulfillment, kids don't tell because they don't trust their parents" "Provide good supervision while in institutional settings" "Be more involved in kids lives" "A loved and cared for child stands a better chance of not becoming a victim" "Ask kids periodically if they have been abused or had a pass made at them"

techniques might be important to study in order to design effective prevention programs. There is also a potential that incarcerated subjects will misrepresent their offenses due to fears of being denied parole despite guarantees of anonymity. It is unlikely that non-incarcerated offenders can be utilized for similar studies, as they would risk arraignment and possible conviction if they admitted to their activities. Furthermore, the perpetrators would have to address their own feelings of guilt if they were to volunteer for such a study.

It can only be assumed that the participants in this study cooperated fully with respect to questions about the methods they employed and recommendations for prevention programs. However, they may have been reluctant to answer questions such as the total numbers of children they were involved with because of fear of further prosecution. This may account for higher numbers of victims being reported in one study of non-incarcerated paraphiliacs [13].

The questionnaire completely maintained subject anonymity, and any subjects skeptical of their protection were offered the opportunity to remove themselves from the study. Various subjects in this study were highly motivated to cooperate. During informal conversations with the survey administrators, several perpetrators indicated that they had been victims when they were children. Their victimization and its continuing effect on their lives was an incentive to help end the sexual victimization of children. The subjects' favorable responses about the questionnaire and their supportive statements sustain the observation of Abel and colleagues that "it is possible to enlist the cooperation of the perpetrators of sex crimes to learn about who they are and what they do" [13].

Perpetrators who had completed the Polaris Program and those who were currently enrolled had similar attitudes toward the survey. The only discrepancy was that significantly more of those currently enrolled wished that people would stop asking them questions about their offenses than those who had completed the Polaris Program. It was expected that nontreatment (currently enrolled) offenders would have less enthusiasm about helping prevent child sexual abuse than those who had completed the Polaris Program. This did not prove true (see Figure 1).

Of the subjects, 37.5% indicated sexual involvement with males. Reported male victimiza-

tion was significantly less than the percentage of female victimizations. Other studies have suggested that a larger number of males are victimized than reported [14]. The greater under-reporting of males may be due to cultural norms that maintain that males are not victimized [11]. As a result, boys may be less likely to tell of their abuse and, if they tell, their parents may be less likely to believe them or report to the officials. As the perpetrators were all males, their victims may withhold information because of a reluctance to report about a homosexual act.

Males might actually be more accessible than girls for sexual victimization because they more typically play out-of-doors. Their parents may be more naive about their sons as far as protecting them and/or suspecting their victimization. A "play habits" argument for increased victimization potential is supported by one subject's observations. He indicated that he found his female victims at friends' houses but he found his male victims "on the streets."

Where the perpetrators claim to have found their victims contradicts many popular concepts. It is not the stranger at the playground who should be feared as much as trusted individuals, including parents, babysitters, friends of the family, and workers at public and health facilities.

Non-incestuous perpetrators utilized giving candy and coaxing by others to gain access to the children more commonly than did the incestuous subjects. It is likely that the incestuous subjects were able to use their position as the child's father to gain cooperation without tangible gifts. This is evidenced by the subjects' responses about threats they used, which included "threats via position as their father" and "I would blackmail her with things she didn't want her mother to know." Incorporating this information about subtle forms of bribery into the prevention curricula is necessary; however, the approach to warning children about inappropriate behaviors by parents without undermining trust in innocent or appropriate parental behavior will prove challenging.

Differences in styles of abuse and in personalities of abusers may account for the prevention methods recommended. Potentially physically abusive perpetrators may be less likely to advocate resisting that those who are more passive.

A majority of the subjects agreed with the basic prevention concepts that if children are to avoid being abused, they should learn about proper touching of their privates by others, say no to potential assailants, tell if they have been abused, and never get into strangers' cars. These suggestions by perpetrators indicate that aspects of current prevention programs may be efficacious.

The conclusions drawn from this study cannot be considered all inclusive, as all types of perpetrators were not involved in completing the questionnaire. Data from adolescent and female perpetrators were not included in this study; their approaches may differ.

Other topics that are not included in prevention programs must be considered for incorporation. The typical victims described were passive, troubled, lonely children from broken homes. Parents should be made aware that a loved and cared-for child is less likely to become a victim; however, simply informing parents of their responsibility may not result in behavior change. These findings indicate that prevention programs might be more efficacious if parents or future parents are educated about sexual abuse prevention. Parents of high-risk children should become aware of the need to be especially diligent.

Cohn, Finkelhor, and Holmes support the need to include parental education in prevention programs. Fathers who are involved in incest are less likely to have been involved in child rearing [15]. Encouraging fathers to play a larger role in the upbringing of their children may keep the father from becoming a perpetrator.

Conte indicates that the sexual abuse may "result from a lengthy process in which the actual sexual behavior takes place only after a considerable period of time. . . .During this

'grooming process' the adult learns what the child likes, dislikes, is concerned about, and fears" [7]. Parental participation in their children's lives and concern for their self-esteem may reduce the probability of a successful grooming process.

It is possible that our subjects wished to deflect some of the blame for their actions to the parents of the victim. This unwillingness to accept responsibility is a therapeutic topic in the Polaris project. Avoidance of responsibility is seen in subjects' responses which indicated that the fault was the child's for having "propositioned the perpetrator." Of the subjects, 22.2% reported that they used threats to gain their victims' cooperation and 25% reported using threats to prevent the children from telling of the abuse. These figures differ from those reported by Showers and colleagues. Threats were used by 44% of their subjects [9].

This data indicates that a person who is seeking a child victim other than his own child would most likely go to a public place, such as a zoo or mall, and watch for a child who seems alone or desirous of attention. The person also may go to events in which children participate to see those who fail to succeed or children whose parents are absent. The perpetrator's approach is generally not threatening and often carefully planned.

Prevention programs should be repeated periodically to mitigate against decay of retained information. Topics should be consistent with the development of the child and specific age-related risks. Wurtele suggests that "educational programs attempt to provide children with information in an understandable, age-appropriate manner. . . (programs) should be geared to the child's age and cognitive level. . . (but few are) developmentally based" [6]. Programs need a developmental base to guarantee the child's comprehension of what is being taught and because different solicitation approaches may be used, depending on the child's developmental level.

CONCLUSION

Although this study indicates that data from incarcerated male perpetrators can make a valuable contribution to the design of prevention programs, further data is needed which must include information from adolescent and female perpetrators. Non-incarcerated perpetrators also should be studied. Studies should compare incest and non-incest perpetrator variables.

The types of victims listed and where they are found also requires further study. Questions such as the following need to be answered: Are types of victims in specific locales more likely to be involved in certain types of sexual abuse (extent of sexual contact and incest vs. non-incest)? Does the type of sexual abuse relate to the age of victim? Do those perpetrators who involve younger victims prefer more passive victims?

Future studies might also attempt to correlate victims' ages with bribes used to gain the victims' participation. It is likely that the younger children do not appreciate the money, beer, drugs, or cigarettes, and older children are not likely to be enticed by the prospects of candy.

Interviewing perpetrators may have provided more complete data by ensuring that the subjects understood the questions and would give ample considerations. This would avert "no" or inappropriate answers from subjects who have reading difficulties. Obtaining permission for interviews, however, may be more difficult, as the inmates' anonymity is jeopardized. The reliability of the subjects' answers may also be reduced.

Yes/no answer questions limit the range of responses. Accordingly, the original questionnaire has been revised with scaled responses to allow for greater flexibility. In addition, where subjects preferred to find their victims or which bribes or threats they utilized are to be rank ordered by the subjects.

Child sexual abusers have knowledge about methods used by assailants. This study indicates

that information from inmates can be used as a resource to develop the curriculum in child sexual abuse prevention programs.

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Résumé—Les programmes éducatifs mis sur pied dans les écoles pour aider les enfants à se protéger contre les sévices sexuels ont un fondement scientifique très limité. On apprend aux enfants à se protéger eux-mêmes en leur inculquant la notion que l'agresseur potentiel est généralement un inconnu d'un certain âge, de sexe masculin, dont on leur fait une représentation quelque peu stéréotypée. En fait les auteurs de sévices sexuels sont souvent jeunes, connus de la victime et utilisent des méthodes variées pour approcher les enfants. Les programmes éducatifs de prévention mettent en général l'accent sur les concepts suivants: le corps est une propriété privée et personnelle; certains attouchements ne sont pas acceptables; il existe des bons et des mauvais secrets; les raisons de dire non; les raisons de rapporter ce qui s'est passé; il est bien de se fier à sa propre intuition. Les auteurs se sont adressés à 72 prisonniers qui avaient été incarcérés pour sévices sexuels à l'égard d'enfants. Ils leur ont posé des questions permettant d'évaluer la valeur effective des conseils éducatifs donnés aux enfants des écoles pour les aider à échapper aux sévices sexuels. Ces "experts" ont décrit la victime idéale et la manière utilisée par eux pour l'approcher. Les prisonniers ont indiqué les sujets qu'ils considéraient comme efficaces dans les programmes de prévention scolaires et ceux qu'ils jugeaient avoir peu de valeur. On a comparé les réponses des hommes condamnés pour inceste et celles de ceux condamnés pour sévices non-incestueux. Il a aussi été noté ce que les prisonniers ont dit: si l'on veut que les programmes éducatifs

aient une chance quelconque de succès, ceux-ci devraient requérir la participation des parents. Les auteurs de l'article pensent que les informations récoltées auprès des délinquants sexuels sont utiles; on devrait en tenir compte pour améliorer les programmes préventifs.

Resumen—No existe una base científica para el contenido de los programas escolares designados para ayudar a los niños a protegerse del abuso sexual. Se les enseña a los niños a protegerse de un estereotípico hombre extraño y de edad, mientras que los perpetradores son lo más frecuentemente jóvenes, conocidos, y utilizan toda una serie de tácticas para ganar acceso a los niños. Los programas generalmente incluyen los conceptos de la propiedad del cuerpo, el tocar que es aceptable, secretos buenos y malos, el dar no como respuesta, y el confiar en la propia intuición. Setenta y dos presos encarcelados por abuso sexual del niño fueron cuestionados para evaluar sus actitudes acerca de la efectividad de los tópicos usados para la prevención del abuso. Los presos describieron la víctima ideal y el método que utilizaron para envolver a los niños. Los presos indicaron que tópicos ellos encontraron eficaces y que tópicos tenían poco valor para prevenir el abuso. Las respuestas de los abusadores incestuosos y no incestuosos fueron comparadas. Los presos indicaron que los padres pueden ayudar a prever el abuso y deben ser envueltos en los programas para que estos sean efectivos. La información de los abusadores es útil y puede ser incorporada en los programas si se quiere mejorarlos.