
The Prevention of Sexual Abuse: An Evaluation of "Talking About Touching"

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Abstract

The program, "Talking About Touching," was designed to increase children's knowledge about sexual abuse, options to resist abusive situations, and to provide information about where to go for assistance if they have been abused. An evaluation of this program was conducted in five elementary schools and consisted of three components: (1) measurement of student knowledge in a pre-post design; (2) a survey of classroom teachers who delivered the program; and, (3) a survey of parents. The results indicate that: (1) although children in the study started out with a high level of knowledge related to sexual abuse, they made further statistically significant gains in knowledge; (2) teachers feel that the program is needed and that it has few negative side effects; and, (3) parents are generally supportive of the program and also report few negative side effects. Limitations of prevention program evaluations and areas for further research are discussed.

Résumé

Le programme, "Talking About Touching," a été conçu dans le but de développer une meilleure connaissance chez les enfants de l'abus sexuel, d'élaborer des options pour mieux résister aux situations abusives et de procurer un éventail de possibilités pour obtenir une assistance s'ils ont déjà été abusés. Une évaluation de ce programme a été conduite dans cinq écoles élémentaires et était composée de trois éléments: (1) mesure de la connaissance des étudiants à l'aide d'un pré-post test; (2) un questionnaire complété par les enseignants qui ont présenté le programme; et (3) un questionnaire complété par les parents. Les résultats ont indiqué: (1) qu'ils ont augmenté de façon statistiquement significative leur connaissance sur l'abus sexuel même si les enfants dans l'étude démontraient déjà un haut niveau de connaissance sur l'abus sexuel; (2) que les enseignants considéraient le programme nécessaire et que celui-ci avait très peu d'effets négatifs; et (3) que les parents étaient de façon générale en faveur du programme et ont rapporté aussi très peu d'effets négatifs. Les limitations de l'évaluation de programme préventif et d'autres avenues de recherche dans ce domaine sont discutées.

Since the late 1970's there has been a steady increase in the number of children identified as being victims of sexual abuse (e.g., Borkin and Frank, 1986; Finkelhor, 1984). However, while the number of reported cases is on the rise, there is no clear evidence that the actual number of children being sexually abused has increased. Currently, it is generally believed that the number of reported cases has increased due to a rise in public awareness of the problem (Luther and Price, 1980). However, some evidence suggests that incest is on the rise (Russell, 1986).

In their review of available data on the incidence of sexual abuse in Canada, Badgley, Allard, McCormick, Proudfoot, Fortin, Ogilvie, Rae-Grant, Gelinas, and Sutherland (1984) conclude that: (a) approximately one in two females and one in three males in Canada has been a victim of unwanted sexual acts; (b) approximately four out of five of these un-

wanted sexual acts occurred when the individual was a child or youth; (c) three in five sexually abused children have been threatened verbally or physically; (d) one in four assailants is a family member or a person in a position of trust, half are friends or persons known by the victim, and *only* one in six is a stranger; and, (e) a majority of victims do not seek assistance. Finkelhor (1984, 1986) has reported that the mean age of a child abuse victim is 9.2 years old. Finkelhor and Baron (1986) report that the research on sexual abuse has clearly demonstrated that pre-adolescent children are the most vulnerable to sexual abuse. Furthermore, it has been conservatively estimated that every elementary school in Canada has at least two or three students who are currently being sexually abused and that five times that number are "... suffering trauma as a result of past sexual abuse..." (Bagely, 1984, p. 18).

Protecting Children From Abuse

Two broad goals have been suggested for sexual abuse prevention programs. The first goal is keeping the abuse from ever happening (primary prevention), while the second goal is encouraging disclosure of past and ongoing sexual abuse (secondary prevention) (e.g., Finkelhor, 1986; Haugaard and Reppucci, 1988). To meet the goal of primary prevention, programs should contain information about "good" and "bad" touches, strategies for protecting oneself and sensitizing children to the fact that abusers can be someone they know, as well as strangers (e.g., Haugaard and Reppucci, 1988; Vernon and Hay, 1988). Secondary prevention should stress the issues of telling a trusted adult if something has, or is happening to them, and to keep telling until someone does something to help (e.g., Finkelhor, 1986; Haugaard and Reppucci, 1988).

In a survey of adults with children between the ages of 6 and 14, in the Boston area, Finkelhor (1984) reports that only 29% of the 521 parents surveyed discuss sexual abuse with their children. However, while parents appear to be reluctant to discuss the topic of sexual abuse with their children, there is evidence that the majority of parents want to have the topic presented to their children (Finkelhor, 1984). This fact, plus the additional facts that the onset of sexual abuse usually occurs in children of elementary school age, that one in four assailants is a family member or trusted friend of the victim, and that parents need information concerning sexual abuse makes the school setting an ideal place to provide prevention programming (e.g., Finkelhor, 1984, 1986; Gerler, Jr., 1988; Haugaard and Reppucci, 1988; Maher, 1987; Wurtele and Miller-Perrin, 1987).

The "Talking About Touching" program was developed by the Child Advocacy's Committee for Children (Seattle Institute for Child Advocacy, 1985). The "Talking About Touching" curricula, "K-6 Talking About Touching" and "7-9 Personal Safety and Decision Making" inform chil-

dren about abuse, develop assertiveness skills and enhance safety rules regarding personal safety. The focus is primarily on sexual abuse prevention. The curriculum is made up of photographs and vignettes which initiate discussion about personal safety. There are four sections which make up the program: personal safety and decision making, touching, assertiveness, and community support systems. Within the curriculum there are a maximum of fifteen lessons for each grade level, as well as additional activities to supplement the lessons. The presentation format allows teachers to offer the program in scheduled periods throughout the year or in blocks of time set aside specifically for such education. The fact that the program provides lessons for each grade level, K-9, is one of its strongest features.

In the school division studied, the version used was the one developed in the United States, and not the Canadian version. One change was made to the original "Talking About Touching" program which involved using the materials that were designed for a lower grade level than was recommended by the developers of the program. That is, the pre-kindergarten level materials were used at kindergarten and grade 1 levels, and the K-4 materials were utilized at grades 2 through 6. This change was implemented because it was thought that, in terms of content, using the lower level materials would make the program more acceptable to school trustees and parents.

The process used by the school division to implement the program was almost identical to that recommended by Haugaard and Reppucci (1988). School division administrators first appointed a committee made up of school officials and community members to review the various programs. Second, the division selected a small group of pilot schools (volunteers were requested) to test the program selected by the committee. Third, in-services were provided to teachers on the general topic of sexual abuse and specific training on how to implement the program in their classrooms. Fourth, a series of parents' nights were provided to inform parents about the program and to answer questions.

The Present Study

As part of the implementation process, the members of the committee decided that it was judicious to gather evaluative information from teachers, parents, and students. It was felt that each of the parties involved in the program would provide a unique perspective on the effectiveness of the program. Teachers could provide their impressions of the program and report on their experiences in implementing the program. The parents could respond by providing their perceptions of the program and their attitudes about the content. The students could be assessed from the standpoint of measurable changes in knowledge acqui-

sition and attitudinal shifts. The remainder of this paper will present the results of that evaluation process.

Given the difficulties involved in designing an evaluation to determine whether a prevention program can reduce the incidents of sexual abuse (see discussion section), it was decided that the current evaluation would restrict itself to evaluating program implementation (including appropriateness of the materials), the knowledge gained (if any) by the students, teacher opinions of the program and materials, and finally, parental opinion of the program and its effect on their children.

'One-shot' programs suffer from a number of suspected deficiencies: students may not be in attendance for the program, the single presentation does not allow for on-going reinforcement of the material, or the singular presentation may not be appropriate for all age levels, developmental levels, represented in the audience.

METHOD

Subjects. The subjects in this study are the parents, teachers, and students of five kindergarten through grade 6 elementary schools located in working class neighbourhoods in a large (population approximately 700,000) midwest Canadian city. All five schools volunteered to take part in the pilot and therefore were not randomly chosen. The school division is made up of 28 elementary schools, 11 junior high schools, and 3 high schools. The total student population of the division is 13,000, with a teaching staff of 830.

Procedure

Student Instruments. The instruments designed for the students by the researchers are meant to assess changes in knowledge acquisition and attitudes. Student instruments focus on the content of "Talking About Touching" curriculum by presenting questions which essentially parallel the decision-making situations presented by program material. Following the suggestion by Conte (cited in Finkelhor, 1986), the questions include items which consist of short vignettes. This method not only assess what the students have gained in terms of knowledge, but also if changes have occurred in what they *might do* if presented with specific situations. For example, a vignette presented to kindergarten students was: "Michael really loves his mom. They like to wrestle with each other. Michael's mother starts to tickle him and Michael likes it. But sometimes the tickling starts to hurt. If you were Michael what would you do? (a) Not wrestle with your mother ever again; (b) Tell your mom that you like her tickling, but that sometimes it hurts; or (c) Don't say anything to your mother."

Due to the fact that the curriculum for each grade level was different, a different test was designed for each grade level. However, where the

curriculum overlapped, so did the items on the different instruments. Before being utilized, each instrument was pilot-tested on a small number of students. Based on this pilot testing, appropriate changes were made to the instruments. A total of 25 items were developed as a pre-test and post-test for students on grades 2 through 6.

However, due to the fact that "paper and pencil" testing was judged not to be practical with kindergarten and grade 1 students, a structured interview using simple "what if" vignettes was used in place of tests which would require reading. Pilot testing indicates that the attention spans of children in these age groups would be such as to prohibit more than a few questions. As well, there is the ethical consideration of assuring that children would not, in any way, be frightened by the line of questioning. With this consideration in mind, 6 items were developed for the kindergarten and grade 1 students and were read to the students on an individual basis.

Parent and Teacher Instruments. Parent and teacher surveys were designed to: (1) ascertain opinions as to how important it is for schools to offer the "Talking About Touching" program as part of the curriculum; (2) evaluate the perceived quality of the teacher and parent in-services; (3) ascertain if parents think that they know what is being included in the curriculum; (4) ascertain if parents are aware of how the curriculum is being presented to their children; (5) obtain opinions from teachers as to the appropriateness of the content of the program; (6) obtain information regarding teacher comfort levels with teaching the program; (7) obtain opinions from parents and teachers as to the positive and negative effects of the program on K-6 students; and, (8) obtain parent and teacher opinions as to the overall quality of the program.

Kindergarten and Grade 1. Because of the impracticality of individually interviewing all of the kindergarten and grade 1 students, it was decided to draw a limited random sample of these grade levels from each of four schools (the fifth school chose not to include these grade levels as part of the pilot). Four students were randomly selected from the kindergarten and from the grade 1 classes in three of the schools. In one school, which was larger than the others, samples of six (6) kindergarten students and seven (7) grade 1 students were selected (see Table 1). These 37 students were interviewed two weeks prior the start of the "Talking About Touching" program and again two weeks after the program had been completed. Interviews were carried out by trained research assistants and lasted approximately 20 minutes. Children were interviewed in their classrooms during class. Interviewers were instructed to terminate the interview upon any indication of stress on the part of the child.

Grades 2 Through 6. There were five schools involved in the grade 2 through 6 portion of the evaluation. For these grade levels, all students present on the day of the testing were tested. Students not present for

both the pre- and post-test were eliminated from the study. A total of 833 grade 2 through 6 students were tested (see Table 1). The students were tested two weeks prior to the start of the program, and again two weeks after the completion of the program. To deal with the problem associated with students being at different reading levels, the questions and response options were read to all students by the research assistants. Testing took approximately 30 minutes.

Teachers and Parents. Parent surveys were designed and sent to all parents who had children in the pilot program. The surveys were sent home with, and returned to school by the oldest child.

All teachers who were involved in the pilot project were given surveys to complete.

RESULTS

Kindergarten/grade 1. A total of 17 kindergarten students and 18 grade 1 students were tested. Due to the small sample sizes and the limited number of items included in the test procedure (6 items), a descriptive analysis was carried out. Based on the analysis it was found that students at both the kindergarten and grade 1 levels were reasonably aware of personal safety issues before the "Talking About Touching" program. That is, 4 of the 17 (23.5%) kindergarten students answered all six questions correctly while 6 of the 18 (33.3%) grade 1 students answered all six questions correctly. Furthermore, it was found that 7 of the 17 (41.2%) kindergarten students answered four out of six questions correctly, 4 (23.5%) answered three questions correctly, and 2 (11.8%) students answered one out of six questions correctly. For the grade 1 students it was found that 5 (27.8%) answered five out of six questions correctly and 1 (5.6%) answered one question out of six correctly.

Based on the post-test results, there is clear evidence that the program of instruction did result in increased awareness of personal safety issues among these students. It was found that a total of 9 of the 13 (69.2%) kindergarten students not obtaining perfect pre-test scores improved their scores on the post-test and that 7 of the 12 (58.3%) grade 1 students not obtaining perfect pre-test scores improved their post-test scores.

Grades 2 through 6. The analysis of the pre- and post-test twenty-five item questionnaires consisted of conducting paired-samples t-tests on the scores of each grade level. The results are presented in Table 1.

The t-test scores are all statistically significant, indicating that measurable changes occurred as a result of the "Talking About Touching" instruction. The levels of significance are for a one-tailed test, since the direction of change predicted was an increase in scores in the post-test.

Statistical significance is not in itself an indication of social significance. However, the fact that the increase in the number of correct response, was sufficient to be statistically significant means that the

TABLE 1
The Pre- and post-Tests Results for Grades 2-6

<i>Grade</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Number of Correct Items (n=25)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>t-TEST</i>	<i>p</i>
2	173				
pre-test		18.31	73.2		
post-test		20.04	80.2	8.16	.000
3	161				
pre-test		19.75	79.0		
post-test		20.61	82.5	4.11	.000
4	150				
pre-test		20.26	81.0		
post-test		21.46	85.8	4.81	.000
5	199				
pre-test		20.22	80.9		
post-test		20.83	83.3	3.42	.000
6	200				
pre-test		19.41	77.6		
post-test		20.07	80.3	2.94	.002
All	883				
pre-test		19.58	78.3		
post-test		20.57	82.3	10.21	.000

desired learning did occur. What remains problematic in any study such as this is the unknown relationship between knowledge and behaviour.

While the grade 2 through 6 pre-test results indicate, as do the kindergarten and grade 1 pre-test results, that students have a degree of awareness about personal safety issues before the program, the "Talking About Touching" program did result in students obtaining statistically significant higher scores on the post-test. As the 't' values suggest, the greatest change occurred among the younger students, especially grade 2 (see Table 1). Although the percentages were not utilized in the actual t-tests (raw scores were utilized), the percentages suggest something about the degree of change that occurred across each grade. The mean percentage score on the pre-test ranged from 73.2% for grade 2, to as high as 81.0% for grade 4. The range on the post-test was from 80.2% (grade 2) to 85.8% (grade 4) (see Table 1). A further analysis of the data indicates that three quarters of the students in grades 2 through 6 improved their scores on the post-test, while one quarter either did not improve, or obtained lower scores.

Parents' Survey Results. A total of 575 parents of kindergarten to grade 6 students returned completed or partially completed surveys. Analysis of the returned surveys indicates that the return rate was 58.4%. While no

follow-up on the non-responding parents was conducted, or could be under the terms of reference mandated by the school division authorities, there are reasons to believe that these parents were not opposed to the program. The low number of negative responses was therefore viewed as a sign of widespread acceptance of the program. Since preliminary analysis of the data indicates that there are no differences between parents who have attended Parents' Night and those who did not, these two groups were combined for all remaining analyses. The results are as follows:

1. Of the 575 parents, 416 (72.3%) felt that it was "very important" that the school district offer the program to students, while 142 (24.7%) parents felt that it was "important" and 9 (1.6%) parents felt that it was "not at all important." The most often reported negative responses dealt with issues such as: the program takes time away from reading, writing and mathematics; schools are not the appropriate place for social programs; and, parents not schools should be teaching issues related to sexual matters. None of the parents reported that the program had resulted in their children becoming fearful of strangers.
2. In terms of program quality, 182 (31.7%) parents rated the "Talking About Touching" program as being of a "very high" quality while 316 (55.0%) rated it as being of a "high" quality. A total of 7 (1.2%) parents rated the program as being of a "very low" quality and 48 (8.3%) stated that they did "not know" how to rate the quality of the program. Finally, 408 (71.0%) parents felt that parents' night should be offered "once a year," while 37 (6.4%) stated "every second year" and 97 (16.9%) parents felt that there isn't a "need to hold parents' night, just send notices home describing the program."
3. Most importantly, analysis of the survey results indicates that 45.7% of the parents felt that their children understood all of the material presented to them, while 45.5% felt that their children understood most of the information presented by the program.

Elementary Teacher Results. A total of 34 out of 65 elementary teachers (52.3%) in the pilot program returned completed surveys. The results are as follows:

1. Of the 34 teachers, 17 (50.0%) reported that they felt that it is "very important" that the school division offer the program to students, while 17 (50.0%) felt that it is "important" that the program be offered to students. In addition, 29 (85.3%) teachers felt that the topic areas covered by the program are appropriate for all grade levels. Of the 3 (8.8%) teachers who felt that some material might

not be appropriate, the main concern seemed to be that the materials at the grade 3 to 6 levels were judged to be too "babyish" by some of the students.

2. Of the 32 teachers who had attended the teachers' workshop, 30 (93.7%) stated that "it presented useful information to me," and 31 (96.9%) stated that they felt better prepared to present the program to students.
3. When asked how comfortable they felt about their involvement in the program, 15 (44.1%) teachers reported being "very comfortable" and 16 (47.1%) reported being "somewhat comfortable." Two teachers reported being "somewhat uncomfortable" and none of the teachers reported that they were "not at all comfortable."
4. When asked whether they felt that their students had benefited from the program, 29 (85.3%) teachers said "yes" and 3 (8.8%) teachers said "no." Of those who said "no," the main concern was that some of the materials for the older students were at a level too young for them. A total of 30 (88.2%) teachers reported that none of their students had a negative reaction to the program (e.g. fear of all people), while 3 (8.8%) teachers reported that a total of 6 students did have negative reactions related to the fact that the materials were at too young a level for older students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There are a number of limitations that are associated with this study. First, there was not a non-treatment control group and therefore it cannot be stated with certainty that it was the prevention program per se that resulted in the measured changes. Because the research was conducted as part of a field test under the auspices of a school division, a control group was not possible. The responses of the parents provide no reason to believe that the subject of sexual abuse is discussed in the home, so it is reasonable to assume that the instruction did in fact result in the increased knowledge. Second, there is the possibility that the pre-testing may have sensitized the students to the issue of sexual abuse. It should be noted, however, that merely sensitizing the students to the topic is not enough to explain the learning that took place. A gain in knowledge would not likely follow sensitization.

Finally, there are the limitations associated with using a "knowledge test" and then drawing conclusions as to what students might do when confronted with unsafe situations. While it is understandable that the intention of the curriculum is to provide students with the opportunity to think about personal safety issues before actual decisions have to be made, there is no way of knowing for certain that knowledge will be translated into action. Actual situations contain many other factors that

may result in the less appropriate action being pursued. Given the ethical problems associated with measuring what "action" a student might take in an "unsafe situation" (i.e., creating an unsafe situation and observing what happens), knowledge and attitudinal measures are the only means available for directly assessing program effects.

The responses to hypothetical situations certainly indicate that the students learned the desired appropriate responses. With some caution, it is probably reasonable to assume that in many, hopefully most, cases the appropriate action would be pursued. Nevertheless, educators should always be aware of the attitude-behaviour discrepancy which exists in real-life situations. While it is always appropriate to report sexual abuse by parents or relatives, it is not always easy to do so!

There are other important consequences of the program which also cannot be directly measured. The presence of the program allows for communication and creates the environment where students who are subjects of abuse can learn that they should report their situation. The fact that such issues are talked about in the school means that those who need assistance might come forward. Finkelhor (1984) provides data which is in support of the hypothesis that the vast majority of victims neither report the abuse, nor seek professional assistance in overcoming the trauma associated with being a victim of sexual abuse. It is data such as Finkelhor's which has led to a general consensus among professionals that child sexual abuse is probably one of the most under-reported and undiagnosed types of child abuse. In previous research, programs such as "Talking About Touching" have been shown to result in an increase in disclosures. The six pilot schools were no exception relative to the program being a catalyst for disclosures. Within the eight week period during which the program was being taught in the six schools, there were at least nine disclosures.

Teacher Opinion. Based on the results of the teacher survey, it can be concluded that the elementary teachers in this pilot program felt that it is important that the school division continue to offer "Talking About Touching" to students. With regards to course content, the teachers felt that the content in the program is appropriate for students in kindergarten through grade 6.

One area that deserves further investigation is the comfort level of the teachers charged with presenting this kind of program to students. Two teachers reported that they felt "somewhat uncomfortable" with their involvement in the program. Less than half (44.1%) reported being "very comfortable," while an almost equal number (47.1%) reported being "somewhat comfortable" with their involvement. These results were obtained even though the teachers had been given an in-service regarding program implementation. This information, along with the fact that three parents reported that their children had been able to identify the

uncomfortableness in their teacher leads to the recommendation that this issue be further investigated. If the teachers are uncomfortable with the topic area, how does this effect the program outcomes?

Parent Opinion. Based on the results of the parent survey, it can be concluded that slightly more than 90% of the parents who returned surveys viewed the program as a positive addition to the school curriculum. In addition, the students were perceived as understanding the program content. The results also indicate that the parents felt that the parents' information nights provided useful information and that these information nights should be continued on a yearly basis, at least for the next few years. Once the parents become familiar with the program and feel confident that they understand its content, the school division might consider only offering the parents' night on a rotating basis.

While the parents reported noticing few negative side effects, it was noteworthy that there were no reports of fear among the children who had participated. A number of parents of older children (grades 3 through 6) did mention the fact that some of the visual materials utilized were reported by their children to be too "babyish." This information was in concert with comments made by a number of teachers at the higher grade levels and resulted in a review by the implementation committee of the decision to use lower level materials.

Finally, 98% of the parents felt that the program should continue to be offered by their child's school. For the 2% of the parents who did not want the program to continue, there appeared to be two main reasons. First, some of these parents felt that all subject matter dealing with sex is the responsibility of the parents and should *only* be taught in the home. Second, social programs took valuable time away from the core subject areas such as English, mathematics and history.

Concluding Remarks. Providing children with the knowledge necessary to resist sexually abusive situations is, at best, a difficult task for parents and educators. The main difficulty associated with research of this nature lies with the assessment of whether the programs are actually effective in preventing the sexual victimization of children. At the very minimum, it would appear that the "Talking About Touching" program did provide the children with knowledge they did not have before the program.

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