

Symposium Review of

With the Best of Intentions: The Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Movement

Author Jill Duerr Berrick and Neil Gilbert
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With the best of intentions: The child sexual abuse prevention movement, by Jill Duerr Berrick and Neil Gilbert, is a 123 page book consisting of eight chapters with tables and endnotes. The first chapter provides some background on child sexual abuse and makes the argument that efforts to prevent it constitute a social movement. Chapter 2 discusses the passage of legislation for prevention programs in California, particularly as related to pre-school programs. In chapter 3, the authors provide a comparison of 15 (of a total of 84) pre-school and elementary school prevention curricula employed in California. Chapter 4 discusses some aspects of some theories of child development in relation to some concepts found in some prevention programs. In chapter 5, data from a study conducted by the authors of prevention programs employed with first and third graders are presented and discussed. Chapter 6 provides the findings of this study regarding parental opinion, which is very positive, and parental participation, which is quite modest, and queries whether parents should view

these programs positively. Chapter 7 describes teacher opinion of the California elementary school prevention programs, which is also quite positive, and advocates for a more central role for teachers in identification of potentially abused children. Chapter 8 focuses on policy and proposes what the authors regard as a different model for prevention. There is an Epilogue, which announces that funding for prevention programs in California has been eliminated and responsibility for the delivery of prevention training has been transferred to the Department of Education, with no funding, presumably because of the authors' evaluations of the pre-school and elementary school programs.

With the best of intentions: The child sexual abuse prevention movement is neither a book written with the laudable intentions, nor a book that addresses the full spectrum of child sexual abuse prevention programs. The book appears to have an agenda of minimizing the positive aspects of sexual abuse prevention and maximizing negative aspects. Thus, it is not a balanced account. It also primarily describes a study conducted by the authors of sexual abuse prevention programs for elementary school children in California, with comparisons to a study conducted by the same authors of prevention efforts with preschoolers in California and some references to other research. They have an earlier book, *Protecting young children from sexual abuse: Does preschool training work?*, which describes their evaluation of pre-school curricula (Gilbert, Berrick, Le Prohn & Nyman, 1989).

I will critically examine a number of Berrick and Gilbert's assertions and some of their interpretations of data.

The authors take the position that sexual abuse prevention efforts represent a social movement, with an underlying feminist ideology, and an overriding objective of empowering children to protect themselves. These characteristics of prevention efforts are regarded negatively, a somewhat surprising position for persons from the social work profession. Social work is a field that supports social change and social movements, gender equality, and empowering clients. Nevertheless, these assertions about sexual abuse prevention are not supported by the authors' arguments, nor by characteristics of sexual abuse prevention programs.

Prevention of sexual abuse is no more a social movement than any other child welfare intervention. Although it has considerable appeal to persons concerned about sexual abuse, it is an educational program, delivered primarily in established institutions, such as Headstart programs, churches, and schools. Initial funding to develop prevention programs came from the federal government. This is not to diminish the important volunteer and community-based contributions.

With regard to the influence of feminism, some of the curricula draw parallels between the oppression of women in our society and the

subordinate role of children, but most do not. There are some feminists involved in curriculum development and program delivery, but also persons with other perspectives.

The authors assert that these programs teach empowerment, which they appear to equate largely with self defense strategies. Empowerment (that is that children do have some rights) is one concept that is taught by most programs, but more central are three concepts: 1. that there are private parts of the body, 2. that these generally are not to be touched by others, and 3. that children should tell someone if they are touched. Although most programs teach children to say "no", to run away, and to yell, very few programs teach children self defense. In fact, when the authors catalogued contents of programs they chose to review, they only found one (that CAP program) that taught self-defense at all levels and two that taught it to third graders.

They use a quotation from Carol Plummer, a pioneer in the sexual abuse prevention field, to support their assertion that the primary goal of these programs is to promote "self defense and psychological empowerment" (p. 12). They quote: "If we inform children about sexual abuse, and ways to prevent it...we adults believe children can be empowered to avoid and prevent their own victimization" (p. 11). The actual quote from Plummer is as follows: "we adults believe children can be empowered to help avoid their own victimization sometimes. This limitation must be acknowledged" (p. 4). Moreover, the Plummer's statement is made in a context of discussing how the role of informing and empowering children fits in a broader context of prevention strategies. Such deliberate misquotation and distortion of statements is unconscionable.

A troubling aspect of this book is its evident bias in describing and discussing its research findings. For example, when describing their data from first and third graders, instead of discussing all of the results, the emphasis is on the concepts children had difficulty with, for example, on the fact that the majority of the first graders responded that only a stranger could sexually abuse a child. (Eighty-seven per cent of third graders responded that "anyone" could sexually abuse.) The fact that on 9 of 14 questions, between 77 and 96 percent of children gave the correct responses, was found only by going through the tables in one of the appendices.

Similarly, the authors make a good deal of the fact that average increase in knowledge is modest and opine "it is difficult to imagine that so small a gain in knowledge would have much of an effect on behavior" (p. 69). In total mean scores, children improved from 72% correct responses to 80% (76% for first graders and 87% for third graders). Perhaps the authors did not consider the children's knowledge acquisition in light of other classroom learning. To have students score on average at the eightieth percentile would seem quite respectable, particularly when the post-test was conducted six months after the prevention training.

Berrick and Gilbert appear to have very high expectations for sexual abuse prevention programs, which they view as not having been met. Most professionals concerned about child maltreatment would argue that sexual abuse prevention programs are not a panacea, nor a strategy to be used in isolation. Such programs are part of an array of interventions that include public education, prevention training for parents and teachers, specialized training in abuse identification for health care professionals, treatment of sexual abuse, and other interventions. It seems appropriate to have modest expectations for prevention, especially for a single undertaking with a particular group of children. The goal is for children to gain incremental knowledge about personal safety through repeated exposure to school based programs and other information. If children accumulate knowledge about sexual abuse over time, then the authors' findings that third graders know more than first graders at both pre- and post- test, and that the level of pre-test knowledge of third graders surpassed the post-test knowledge of first graders are not reasons to question program efficacy.

The authors fault efforts to prevent sexual abuse because the concepts have not been adequately researched. Nevertheless, one of the authors (Berrick) with a different co-author (Barth) found over thirty studies that evaluate prevention programs within a year of the publication of *With the best of intentions* (Berrick & Barth, 1992). Although more research is always needed, this is quite a respectable number for outcome research in child welfare. Of additional interest is the fact Berrick and Barth conclude "this meta-analysis confirms that most evaluations have demonstrated both immediate and long-term gains after exposure to a prevention program" (p. 14). This conclusion is supported by the majority of researchers who have examined the impact of prevention programs (e.g. Conte & Fogarty, 1992; Daro, 1991; Hazzard et al., 1992; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1992).

Berrick and Gilbert point out repeatedly that knowledge gained during a prevention program does not represent knowledge applied. In that regard, Wurtele and Miller-Perrin (1992), in their thoughtful and carefully researched book, *Preventing sexual abuse: Sharing responsibility*, have suggested that the use of the term, "sexual abuse prevention", is inappropriate. Programs would more aptly be called "personal safety" or "body safety" programs (p. 85). Most would agree that it is difficult to document that programs prevent sexual abuse because of the notable obstacles to measuring a non-event. However, these programs have been presumed to have additional goals. The most important is the one discussed already, teaching information about inappropriate touching and what to do about it, but other goals include putting offenders on notice and facilitating disclosure of children who are being abused. Although Berrick and Gilbert discount the latter purpose and report only two disclosures from their preschoolers and none from their elementary schoolers, Hazzard and

colleagues (1991) report a five percent disclosure rate of ongoing or past sexual abuse in a population of 399 third and fourth graders. Similarly, Plummer reports that almost 50 reports were made in the month after the delivery of the Bridgework Theater program to 1,200 adolescents (Plummer, 1986).

After such sharp criticism of current prevention effort, one anticipates innovative suggestions for change. However, the solutions proposed by the authors are somewhat disappointing. What the authors describe as a new approach is precisely what many programs provide already. Berrick and Gilbert call it the protection approach and identify four components: body awareness, communication, secret touching, and adult responsibility. Their model includes a concept recognized some time ago and incorporated in many programs, the importance of parent and teacher involvement.

Others have suggested more innovative programs. For example, it seems sensible to target potential abusers and future parents of victims, that is high school students. Programs that inform participants of appropriate and inappropriate handling of children, that provide information about the effects of sexual abuse, and describe common indicators of victimization might result in prevention and early identification of sexual abuse. An even more intriguing and challenging strategy is that suggested by Conte, Wolf and Smith (1987), based upon interviews with offenders: television announcements using former offenders, urging those who are abusing children to stop and seek help.

Finally it is worth considering Berrick and Gilbert's conclusions about sexual abuse prevention in light of an exciting new study by Finkelhor (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1993). The research consisted of a national telephone survey of 2,000 10-16 year olds. After obtaining parental permission, the children were asked about their experience with and perception of prevention programs. Seventy percent of respondents reported exposure to school-based prevention programs, 39 per cent within the previous year, indicating that exposure is widespread and not limited to young children. Seventy-one per cent of respondents rated programs as helpful, and 78 per cent described the content as a mixture of things they knew and didn't know. Even more interesting, 42 per cent said they had used the information to avoid or get out of problem situations, and 26 per cent reported using the information to help a friend. Girls, younger children, African-American children, and children of lower socioeconomic status rated the programs more positively. These findings are in sharp contrast to the conclusions of Berrick and Gilbert.

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Review of *With the Best of Intentions*

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For too long, the tragedy of child sexual abuse was hidden behind closed doors. When children came forward seeking protection, they were too often disbelieved--many were punished for saying such terrible things about their parents (or other adults). Sexual abuse is a serious national problem, requiring a sustained community response.