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Preparing Students (and Yourself) for Sexual Abuse Prevention Lessons

by schoolcounselingbyheart | May 16, 2013 | abuse | 1 comment



Let's face it: it's not easy to teach lessons about hard topics. And there's not much that gets harder than talking about sexual abuse, even when the subject is actually sexual abuse *prevention*. It's a loaded topic. It's scary, disturbing, and anxiety provoking. It makes some administrators nervous. You have to walk the line between notifying parents and giving a heads up to someone in the home who may be abusing a child. You have to be prepared for disclosures (and you hope like crazy that they don't happen in the classroom setting.) The lessons might bring up your own issues or be an uncomfortable reminder about things that have happened to people you care about. There might be a state mandate that you have to meet. There may be no state guidelines at all. Even if you use the terms "personal safety" or "body safety," "sexual abuse prevention" contains the word "sex" – *never a particularly welcome word at school!* Your graduate program may have covered the topic only generally, or not at all. It's hard to find good lessons and resources, and even if you do, there's often no "**how-to-do**" to go with the "**what-to-do**."

All this can make it hard to get started, but good preparation can help you feel more comfortable as you teach your lessons. Once you have identified which [lessons and materials](#) you are going to use, one of the best ways to feel prepared is to make sure your students are prepared too.

Here's my **go-to how-to** for preparing kids to participate in sexual abuse prevention lessons, gleaned from stumbles in the early days and many years of tweaking and practice. After just a few times, you'll find that it's not as hard as you thought it was and you'll be amazed at how calm you are and how natural it feels to talk so openly and matter-of-factly about what had once seemed like such a difficult topic. Once you take the anxiety out of it it gets a *lot* easier! *Go figure!*

Ahead of Time

The week before I plan to begin a sexual abuse prevention unit, I let students know that **we are going to be talking about ways to keep our bodies safe just in case and that, as in other years, we're going to talk about it in a way that feels safe**. If at all possible, I have this unit follow directly after other lessons that have already introduced related concepts – e.g., lessons on telling vs. tattling, reporting about bullying, Internet safety, etc. If I know of students who have experienced sexual abuse (and they know I know), I touch base with

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them to see how they are feeling, if they want to read the book with me in advance, where they would feel most comfortable sitting, etc. When I know about students who have been more recently traumatized, I consult with their parents and/or therapists about whether it would be helpful or detrimental to have them stay in the classroom for the lesson and whether or not I should do the lesson with them individually. If the parent and therapist agree that it's appropriate, I may consult with older students to see if they want to attend the lesson and if so, what would make them most comfortable. Often their response has been that they *do* want to stay with accommodations (see above), but I don't make the assumption that everyone will feel that way.

Introducing the Lesson

At the beginning of each lesson I use a script that goes something like this (I use this script pretty much verbatim with grades 2-5 and simplify it for kindergarten and first grade):

"We are going to be learning about what to do in case someone ever tries to touch you in a way that is inappropriate, unsafe, or scary. Sometimes people feel uncomfortable when they talk about this, and it's okay to feel that way. Now, sometimes people laugh or smile or get silly when they feel uncomfortable, but we're not going to laugh or smile or be silly today and here's why. We need to make sure that everybody is able to pay attention to everything we talk about today so that all of you can know what to do if something unsafe happens. I don't want **you** to miss any of this information because you're being silly, and I don't want any of **your classmates** to be in a situation where they don't know what to do because your being silly distracted them from learning how to keep themselves safe. Here's another reason: You never know if something like this has already happened to one of the kids or grown-ups in the room, because people usually keep this private. If you laugh or smile or get silly because you feel uncomfortable, it might make someone that this happened to feel like you are making fun of them, and that would be a terrible feeling for them to have, right?"

If you feel uncomfortable, and think you might start smiling or laughing or being silly, just tell yourself 'I am feeling uncomfortable' and that will help you stay focused. You can say 'I am feeling uncomfortable' out loud if you want to. You can also ask yourself, 'Would this be funny if it happened to me?' If anyone laughs or smiles or gets silly I will help them by asking, 'Would this be funny if it happened to you?' Okay? So we're all set, right?"

This kind of upfront, direct conversation has worked EVERY time! Occasionally there have been kids who covered their mouths or put their heads down for a moment, and even more rarely I have had to say, "*Would it be funny if it happened to you?*" but usually before I finish the sentence other kids have said, "*It's not funny!*" which takes care of the problem. If someone says out loud that they feel uncomfortable I acknowledge and normalize the feeling by saying, "*Yes, of course we feel uncomfortable, because it's an uncomfortable topic. You're doing a good job of noticing that you're having a 'yucky' feeling. We're all getting practice trusting our 'yucky feelings.'*"

If a student feels particularly distressed about the topic, you should allow him/her to take a break, but thanks (I think) to advance preparation, I have not yet had to do so. Giving the class a few days notice about the topic and checking in directly ahead of time with individuals I know have experienced abuse, as well as sharing the above script at the beginning of the lesson, has helped make it possible for everyone to comfortably stay in the classroom.

I also lay some ground rules for our discussion:

"We are not going to talk about things that really happened to us or that almost happened to us. We are not going to talk about things that really happened to someone we know or almost happened to someone we know. It's important to talk about these things, and you **SHOULD** tell about them, but we talk about these things privately. If you want to tell me about something that was unsafe you can say to me after class or

anytime, ‘Mrs. Lallier, I need to talk to you privately.’ You could say the same thing to another adult that you trust or you could write a note to me or that other adult.”

Sometimes kids, especially second graders and younger, need a reminder about this during the lesson, particularly when we’re reading a book, because they’ve been so well taught to make personal connections to what they read. If it seems like they’re about to tell about a real event, I interrupt and ask, *“Is this about something that really happened or almost happened?”* and then refocus them on the story or discussion. Sometimes, depending on the group, I add that we are not going to talk about things they saw in a movie or on TV, because often the details of what they have seen get in the way of them learning what they need to know how to do. I don’t do this as a matter of course, because sometimes there are good points to be made, but if I have a group that is exposed to a lot of crime shows and violent media I add it in before we even start.

During the Lesson

In general, **the classroom discussions that we have during our sexual abuse prevention lessons are the most tightly controlled ones I lead.** It’s important to allow the kids to ask questions and share their thoughts – you want to be sure that they understand the concepts, and if they don’t share their thoughts it’s impossible for you to assess that understanding. It’s also important that these concepts do not get muddled with a lot of tangential what-if’s, and that kids do not get overly worried or scared. It’s a fine balance! I’ve found that the best way to navigate this is to maintain a firm focus on the objectives for the particular lesson, by quickly reining in any conversation where I’m not sure what the kid is going to say (kind but abrupt interruptions are sometimes necessary), and by posing direct questions and scenarios that address and redirect toward the objectives. You can find a number of questions and scenarios in [Teaching Kids How to Tell About Sexual Abuse](#).

Role plays and practice are an important part of many of my sexual abuse prevention lessons. The kids know from lessons on other topics (speaking up for yourself, apologizing, reporting bullying, etc.) that **the expectation is that everyone will participate, because they are practicing an important skill that everyone needs to know how to do.** They also know that the silliness rules outlined above are still in force, although I sometimes give a reminder before we start this part of the lesson. Generally these role plays are simple scripts such as “*Stop, I don’t like it!*” or “*Somebody touched me in a way that I didn’t like,*” or “*Something happened that I need to tell an adult about.*” You can find examples and further explanations of role plays for sexual abuse prevention in [I’ve Got a Secret . . .](#) and [Second Grade Lessons for Sexual Abuse Prevention](#).

Practicing in this way makes it more likely that kids will know what to do if a similar situation arises. But that is not the only benefit! Because every student practices with me or their choice of any other adult in the classroom, **they repeatedly hear the reassuring adult response** of, “*Thank you for telling me. You are really brave. I’m going to work to make sure that you are safe.*” Even though it is only pretend, many students smile with relief at hearing this said to them! A number of students who disclosed sexual abuse to me later told me that knowing that the adult they told would stay calm, would believe them, and would help them made it easier to tell.

To End the Lesson

The end of the lesson is a great time to compliment and reinforce the kids for listening and responding so respectfully! I always tell them that I am so proud of the way they helped themselves and their classmates stay safe, because now they know what to do in case anything ever happens (or already happened).

It’s also a great time to compliment and reinforce yourself for being so calm and matter-of-fact while delivering difficult content and proactively managing potentially challenging behaviors. Be proud of the kids, but be proud of yourself too!

You’ll find lots of sexual abuse prevention “what-to’s” and a few more “how-to’s” in the links to lessons, scripts, and guidelines at [A Collection of Sexual Abuse Prevention Resources](#). I keep this list of links updated as I add more posts on sexual abuse prevention. Stay tuned for units and lessons for grades 3-5, which I *promise* will come soon. They are actually

partially written, and just need finishing up, but, you know . . . *It would be a lot easier to blog about being a school counselor if I wasn't actually busy being a school counselor!*

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Traci on May 17, 2013 at 11:04 am

Thank you for posting this...it is really helpful! It can be gut wrenching to teach this topic, but it's so important, so I appreciate ideas that can help it go a lot smoother. I love your "opening" script!

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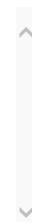
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