Prevention Approaches

These guidance materials provide examples of several approaches to sexual abuse prevention education that are based on evidence-informed effective prevention programs. When developing a sexual abuse prevention education program, best practices recommend incorporation of the following approaches:

1. **Whole-School, Whole-Community, Whole-Child Approach (WSCC)**
2. **Social-Ecological Approach**
3. **Trauma-Informed Approach**
4. **Culturally Responsive Approach**

Whole-School, Whole-Community, Whole-Child (WSCC) Approach
The *WSCC approach* places each child in our education system at the center of a collaborative system of support that includes educators, families, community members and policymakers (CDC 2020). Research indicates that effective prevention practice involves schools working with the larger community in the development of sexual abuse prevention programming and not in isolation. Schools collaborating with community partners in developing and delivering sexual abuse prevention education can significantly reduce the financial and time burden on local education agencies. State and local resources that schools may want to partner with are cited in Appendix A: National, State and Local Agencies and Organizations.

The whole-child approach to sexual abuse prevention assumes the involvement and interconnectedness of several systems, including families, community organizations, the health care system and state agencies. Schools are encouraged to do sexual abuse prevention work in an intentional and collaborative manner. Collaboration ensures that child sexual abuse prevention education addresses and is based on an understanding of the complexities of the problem and avoids unintended risks to students.

Social-Ecological Approach

The *social-ecological approach* is a public health approach developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020). The model recognizes the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community and societal factors that influence issues such as sexual abuse:

- Individual: Identifies a biological or personal history that increases the likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of abuse including age, education, income, substance use or history of abuse. Prevention strategies at this level promote attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that prevent violence. Specific approaches may include conflict resolution and life skills training.
- Relationship: Examines close relationships that may increase the risk of experiencing violence as a victim or perpetrator. A person's closest social circle—peers, partners and family members—influences behavior and contributes to the person's experience. Prevention strategies at this level may include parenting or family-focused prevention programs and mentoring and peer programs designed to strengthen problem-solving skills and promote healthy relationships.
- Community: Explores the settings, such as schools, workplaces and neighborhoods, in which social relationships occur and seeks to identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. Prevention strategies at this level impact the social and physical environment.
- Societal: Addresses larger macro-level factors that help create a climate in which abuse is encouraged or inhibited. These factors include social and cultural norms that support abuse as an acceptable way to resolve conflicts. Other large societal factors include the health, economic, educational and social policies that help to maintain economic or social inequalities between groups in society.

The most effective prevention efforts move beyond the individual and wrap around the community. Being attentive to factors at all levels ensures that sexual abuse prevention education efforts are successful. Similar to the WSCC approach, the social-ecological model addresses multiple factors and systems that are interrelated and integral to providing effective education and services.
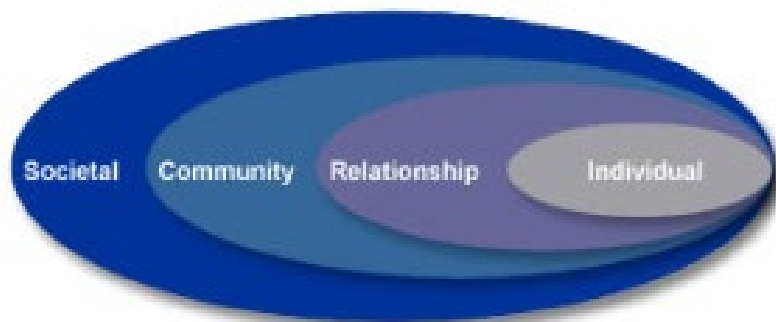
Trauma-Informed Approach

In sexual abuse prevention education, one of the most important considerations is to "do no harm." A trauma-informed approach recognizes that many students have already experienced some form of sexual abuse. Given the statistics regarding child sexual abuse, teachers should assume that some students in every classroom have been affected by sexual abuse, and administrators should also assume that survivors will be required to teach this content to their students. To prevent unintentional retraumatization of those who have experienced sexual abuse, it is essential that schools offer education, planning and staff training with community organizations, social workers or psychologists before delivering education. This training is critical and necessary for the support of students who may be triggered or who may disclose abuse as a result of education. Staff support may also be needed for those who are triggered when delivering education.

While children experiencing abuse may be removed from instruction by parents or guardians who are perpetrating abuse, providing advanced notice will also allow family members of survivors to appropriately prepare their child and plan for additional support if needed to avoid retraumatization.

Culturally Responsive Approaches

School culture is a microcosm of the greater societal culture. Issues of power and control found within the greater societal culture contribute to conditions in schools that may lead to sexual abuse. To execute effective prevention education, these conditions must be addressed. Violence and inequity are rooted in abuses of power. When power is apportioned unevenly, only some benefit and may use their power to target others. Sexual abuse is not necessarily about sex. Recognizing sexual abuse as an abuse of power and control produces a clear relationship/path between culturally responsive prevention efforts and the root causes of sexual abuse.

Students at greatest risk of being targeted for sexual abuse include those with cognitive or physical disabilities, very young students, students who identify as or are perceived as being LGBTQ, students representing racial or ethnic minorities and students in out-of-home care or who are experiencing homelessness. These students tend to have fewer natural supports, increased dependence on adults and greater barriers to self-advocacy and self-determination. These students may also have greater barriers to accessing sexual abuse prevention education in school. An effective sexual abuse prevention education program provides equitable access and support to these students.

Recognizing the most vulnerable students can help schools tailor their prevention efforts. It is best practice to include a representative of at-risk groups or someone who specializes in the treatment and support of people who are in those groups. To facilitate this, schools need to have identified staff from as many identified populations as possible who possess the extra training to support those who are experiencing abuse or who identify as being at risk. Developing and maintaining an active working relationship with local agencies serving the populations represented in your school is also important.

Nine Principles of Prevention

The Nine Principles of Prevention are a set of criteria used to evaluate the potential, usefulness and efficacy of child sexual abuse prevention programs. The criteria are taken from *What Works in Prevention: Principles of Effective Prevention Programs,* which used a "review of reviews" approach across four areas (substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, school failure, and juvenile delinquency and violence) to identify characteristics consistently associated with effective prevention programs (Nation, et. al. 2003). Implementing these principles will provide a solid foundation for influencing positive outcomes in sexual abuse prevention and awareness.

1. **Comprehensive:** A comprehensive program will incorporate lessons and skill-building into a variety of settings such as student and parent orientation, school sports/activity groups and other school-wide programming or opportunities to reinforce the messages.

2. **Varied teaching methods:** Utilizes varied teaching methods to engage students, including interacting through presentations and dialogue.

3. **Highlights the importance of sufficient instructional time:** Sufficient dosage occurs when participants are exposed to enough of an intervention to produce the desired effects and in addition provides follow-up as necessary to maintain the effects. Research has consistently shown that programs that emphasize a one-time presentation focused on raising awareness rarely produce behavioral change. Concepts must be delivered multiple times per year (or at least in two sessions per year) and reinforced and built upon each year as developmentally appropriate.

4. **Theory driven:** Theory driven requires scientific justification of a preventative intervention. Strategies should be supported by well-validated behavior or social change theories.

5. **Highlights the importance of fostering positive relationships.** An effective program fosters strong, stable, positive relationships between students and adults as well as between students and their peers. Children who have an open and communicative relationship with at least one trustworthy adult are far less likely to become targets of sexual abuse. Adults may need training on how to be open and approachable as well as how to implement steps to intervene, such as reporting or responding to potential sexual abuse, exploitation or violence. Students also need guidance on how to foster positive peer relationships. Respect for boundaries and education around issues of consent are very important to preventing sexual violence in peer relationships.

6. **Appropriately timed.** Program activities should be implemented at developmentally appropriate intervals. Appropriately timed strategies focus on changing the potential trajectory of sexual abuse by reducing risk factors prior to a person perpetrating or experiencing abuse. It also takes the developmental (i.e., intellectual, cognitive and social) needs of participants into consideration.

7. **Socioculturally relevant.** Stresses the importance of socio-culturally relevant programming in order to best reach the target population that is being served. Each school and each district will need to tailor educational materials to best reach the children that they teach in ways that are relevant and motivating to them. This might include establishing a collaborative workgroup to plan, design and evaluate prevention efforts; its members would include students, teachers, administrators and a variety of community members who represent constituent populations such as minority and immigrant communities.

8. **Outcome evaluation.** Emphasizes the importance of building in outcome evaluation methodology into the program in order to assess the efficacy of the programming. The outcome evaluation principle is incorporated when it has clear goals and objectives, and its design includes systematic documentation that enables users to determine whether the training produced the desired effects. Good programming will constantly be evaluating and refining to generate the best outcomes for their students. For example, a school district may use recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data for behaviors specific to the school district. The school will use future YRBS results to measure whether the program goals and objectives were achieved.

9. **Well-trained staff.** Training needs to be implemented by staff members who are sensitive, competent and have reached sufficient training, support and supervision. Staff tasked with implementing sexual abuse training need to be well-trained in both the content of the child abuse training materials used and be prepared to discuss matters of sexuality. Even well-developed, research-based programs can prove to be ineffective when the people charged with delivering them are not adequately trained. Other factors that can negatively impact the ability to deliver training effectively include personnel turnover and lack of "buy-in." For example, a school district could offer sexual abuse training materials and teaching methods during an annual in-service day for school personnel.