

JHU Office of External Affairs | 560 - Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN: Welcome to *PublicHealthOnCall*, a podcast from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, where we bring evidence, experience, and perspective to make sense of today's leading health challenges.

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If you have questions or ideas for us, please send an email to publichealthquestion@jhu.edu. That's publichealthquestion@jhu.edu for future podcast episodes.

Dr. Elizabeth Letourneau, thanks so much for joining us on *Public Health On Call* to talk about a topic people don't think about very much, the prevention of childhood sexual abuse. There's a lot in the news about the punishment of people who have committed childhood sexual abuse, which is, of course, very important. But talk to me about prevention.

ELIZABETH LETORUNEAU: So yeah, I'd love to tell you a little bit about prevention. One area that we've done work in is with whether these are schools or after-school organizations, we have organizations that are in news all the time, religious organizations, scouting organizations, and so on.

And so we've done a couple of things with in collaboration with youth serving organizations who really want to provide the best possible experiences for the children that they work with. And one thing that we've done is look at, how are they addressing child sexual abuse? What do they do to try to prevent it? What are the policies they have in place to try to detect it if they suspect it's happening? And to really try to organize those into a more coherent set of strategies that any organization can use.

Right now we see the big organizations that have national footprints implementing these policies. But what about the mom-and-pop shop that is just running a soccer program down the road? We want them to be able to implement good prevention strategies as well. And until we developed a Desk Guide, with support from the Bloomberg American Health Initiative, there really wasn't a coherent strategy that--

What we want to have organizations do is think through, what is their goal? And what their goal usually is developing professional and caring relationships between the adults that work or volunteer at an organization and the children that they serve. And how do we support that? And how do we not allow that to turn into sexual relationships? Or how do we make sure that somebody doesn't come into an organization with the intent to exploit those kinds of professional and caring relationships for their own purposes? And that's where we try to intervene.

JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN: So how do you do that? What if somebody doesn't have a criminal history? How can you prevent that kind of problem?

ELIZABETH LETORUNEAU: Yeah, absolutely. Most people don't have criminal history. So background checks are necessary, but they don't really do much in terms of prevention, to be perfectly honest. What we think makes the most sense is for an organization, whether it's big or small, to really signal that their primary goal is child well-being, that no matter what else they're trying to achieve, whether it's academic success or sports prowess or performing arts, their top goal is child well-being and that they will be focused on child well-being throughout all of their programs, all of their policies, and to embed that mentality in everything they do, that is the first point.

So you're not going to focus more on winning a game than you are on child well-being, for example. That's one thing. That's setting the culture that puts the child at the center and child well-being at the center of everything that happens around it.

And then there's other structures that you can put in place. If another goal is to limit, for example, unmonitored adult-child contacts, so that's another way to prevent child sexual abuse is to ensure that adult and child contacts are either interruptible or observable, easily interruptible, easily observable. So you might implement rules where adults aren't alone with children. Those rules can be broken quite often, for example, if a parent is late picking a child up. You're not going to leave the child alone just because you're the only adult around.

So you want to have strategies that go back and look at when rules are violated, what was happening there? Do we need to modify a rule? Do we need to make sure that this doesn't seem to be happening with the same person again and again, to have those kinds of checks and balances in place.

But the main point that we want to convey to organizations is that you want to look first at, what is your goal? Your goal is child well-being. Your goal is professional caring relationships. How do you get there?

A single rule or a single policy isn't going to get you there. 50 rules and policies aren't going to get you there. You have to start with a culture. And then you can put in rules and policies and make sure you're following through on them.

JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN: Sounds like part of this is to create an environment where if someone is concerned about something developing, they can report it, and people can look into it more carefully, rather than feeling like, it's not my business, if it's a different part of the organization, for example.

ELIZABETH LETORUNEAU: Absolutely. There's two barriers to peers reporting concerning behaviors about their coworkers. One is that they may not know how to report or feel like they have the ability or the power to make a report. So you want to make sure that there's a clear path reporting and clear expectations so if somebody has a concern that an adult at the organization is harming a child or seems to be on a path towards harming a child, that there are really clear obvious ways and an expectation that you will intervene.

The other issue is that people who work together are friends. And if you believe by speaking up you're going to derail someone's entire career, that also makes it hard to speak up. So we want to make sure that people can speak up earlier before derailing someone's career is the next step. And that's another part of changing the culture of organizations.

JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN: What role does educating or teaching children about what's appropriate or not appropriate play in childhood sexual abuse prevention? I know that historically, some of the teaching has been, be afraid of strangers. And yet, it's most likely people that children know who wind up being the perpetrators. What is the right way to think about that challenge?

ELIZABETH LETORUNEAU: Yeah, that's exactly right. Since 1939, we've been focusing on stranger danger. And that messaging unfortunately has not changed very much in a lot of places in the US in all that time. And one thing that is it certainly can be helpful to teach children about child sexual abuse. We know that programs that teach children to recognize, resist, and report abuse have some good outcomes.

Kids disclose ongoing abuse, which is good. We want those that to be disclosed. And kids are less likely to feel guilty if they become abused later if they've had that kind of programming. What teaching children to protect themselves does not do is actually prevent child sexual abuse, because children just don't have the agency to prevent someone else who's bigger, older, stronger from committing harm.

JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN: So it sounds like the work with youth serving organizations and their policies is an important part of childhood sexual abuse prevention. What else is your center on this topic working on?

ELIZABETH LETORUNEAU: We are looking at preventing abuse from happening due to other causes. So there's several risk factors that can increase the likelihood of child sexual abuse. One of those is age. So about 70% of sexual abuse against children is actually caused by other children, typically, because as kids are becoming sexual, they really don't know the rules. They don't know the norms. They're impulsive, because they're children.

And so there's a lot of reasons that kids might engage in harmful sexual behavior against younger children and against peers. So we've developed a school-based prevention program that gives children the skills and knowledge and tools so that they themselves won't engage in harmful sexual behavior against kids who are either their same age or younger than them.

JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN: What does that kind of program entail?

ELIZABETH LETORUNEAU: So we have about eight sessions where we talk about a variety of things. We kind of lead into it. This is a difficult topic. I'm sure this is a difficult topic for many of the people listening to this podcast. And it can be a tough topic for kids and educators.

We start out with developmental differences between kids who are in middle school versus younger kids and developing empathy. But then we quickly get into why it is important not to include younger children in sexual behavior. And we lean on those developmental differences as we engage in that explanation and also give them information about what's the law, what are the expectations.

And at the same time, we also include some information on peer-on-peer sexual harassment. Kids don't know the definitions of consent. They don't know the definitions of harassment. We give them these definitions and we help them engage in interactive strategies to really learn about these instead of just having someone lecture at them.

JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN: Dr. Letoruneau, what evidence exists about these kinds of programs?

ELIZABETH LETORUNEAU: There's actually excellent evidence. This is one area of child sexual abuse prevention that is bolstered with really strong, rigorous evidence base. We completed and just recently published a study on a small, randomized controlled trial that involved middle schools at four schools where we showed that kids who received our school-based intervention did learn about what child sexual abuse is, did learn about what consent is, did learn about what the laws are.

But even more importantly, they reported more behavioral intention, stronger behavioral intention to avoid engaging in child sexual abuse than kids who did not get the intervention. So that's as close as we can get to really showing a reduction in abuse. That's a very, very strong finding.

Two other prevention programs that are targeted at young teenagers also are strongly supported by randomized, controlled trial studies that show that when you teach kids explicitly about what are the expectations and rules about sexual behavior, they learn them, and they implement them. And it reduces sexual harassment. And reduces sexual violence to a significant degree.

So these are the kinds of programs we really need to see disseminated throughout schools.

Well, Dr. Letoruneau, thank you so much for your work and the work of the Moore Center at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. It's a difficult topic. It's a very important topic. And thanks for coming on the podcast.

ELIZABETH It's a pleasure, Josh. Thank you for having me.

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JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN: *Public Health On Call* is a podcast from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health produced by Joshua Sharfstein, Lindsay Smith Rogers, and Stephanie Desmon. Audio production by JB Arbogast, Holly Cardinale, Philip Porter, Spencer Greer, and Matthew Martin, with support from Chip Hickey. Distribution by Nick Moran.

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