

Protecting Children with Special Needs: Adapting the *Stay Safe* Programme

Since 1992 the *Stay Safe* Programme, jointly supported by the Department of Education and the Regional Health Boards, has been available to all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The need to make adaptations to the programme for use with children with disabilities and learning difficulties became evident as a result of surveys and feedback from practitioners. In 1994, a consultative process between teachers, health/care professionals, parents and departmental agencies led to the production of additional materials, methodology and in-service provision for use with children with special educational needs.

MARTIN SHIEL is a teacher working with St. Killian's Special School, Cope Foundation, Cork. He was seconded to work with the Child Abuse Prevention Programme.

JOHN KELLY is a social worker with the South Eastern Health Board based in Cork. He has been a member of the *Stay Safe* Child Abuse Prevention Programme committee.

CHILD PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The *Stay Safe* Programme was designed to teach personal safety strategies to children in Irish primary schools. Although some special schools used the programme in its original form, making adaptations where possible, many teachers found that by using the original lessons alone, it was difficult to address the safety issues in an effective way, and in a manner appropriate to children with disability. They suggested that the development of supplementary material, specifically geared towards children with special needs, would be necessary if they were to adopt a more comprehensive approach to child protection. With this in mind a working group of teachers and social workers, within the Child Abuse Prevention Programme (CAPP), was established for the purpose of developing the programme to cater for children with special needs.

A PHILOSOPHY OF CHILD PROTECTION

The first aim of the working group was to establish our overall philosophy of child protection in the context of children with special needs. The question needed to be asked, "Why do we wish to protect children with special needs?" The answer to this may seem apparent but the impulse to protect may have many underlying reasons. The thought of a child with a disability being abused is quite horrific and distasteful and our impulse may come from our need to protect ourselves from such a horrific thought rather than face the needs of the children.

We may have difficulties accepting the sexuality of children with special needs and our desire to protect them from sexual abuse may be just part of our overall desire to protect them from all things sexual. Indeed, focusing on the disability and not the child may well reinforce a misguided desire to protect the child from "the world out there" where child abuse is a sad reality. A child protection policy that had any of these reasons underlying it would be quite restrictive for children.

CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The reason we wish to protect children with special needs from abuse is not because they are visually-impaired or hearing-impaired, have mobility problems or a learning difficulty but because they are children with the same right to the fullest development of their potential as any other child. We wish to protect them from sexual abuse, bullying and other abuses as these interfere with this right.

The protection strategies in the programme are therefore taught in the context of the child's overall social and personal development. Social and Personal development programmes currently in use in special schools in Ireland emphasise children acquiring a positive self-image and having opportunities for exercising choice and decision making. These ideas underlie any skills that children will learn in the area of child protection. For children to be able to ask for help, to be able to say 'no' to bullying, to be able to tell about inappropriate touching, they need to have a sense of their own value and rights. They need to have the experience of expressing their likes and dislikes, of making choices and of solving problems.

A child who has never had the experience of making a simple choice regarding what they will wear, or which soft drink they would prefer, is unlikely to have the confidence to say 'no' to an inappropriate advance.

THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE PROGRAMME

With these ideas in mind, the working group began the process of developing a programme. A review of available research showed that little work had been done in developing child abuse prevention programmes specifically for children with special needs. It was decided that the focus of our work would be child protection for children in the 4-12 age group. A child abuse prevention programme for 12-18 year olds would best be developed in the context of a wider relationships and sexuality programme.

A series of four one-day workshops was held in Cork and Waterford in January 1994 to address the task of developing the *Stay Safe* curriculum for children with special needs. This was attended by teachers from twenty-six schools in the Southern and South-Eastern Health Boards, Department of Education Inspectors and health professionals working in the area of disability. The programme is the result of many ideas generated through that consultation process. In addition, interviews were conducted with parents and care staff. This resulted in additional material relating to children with special needs, which has been included in the *Stay Safe* parents' booklet.

The programme is currently being piloted in ten special schools nationwide.

DETAILS OF THE IN-SERVICE PROGRAMME

The programme consists of a one-day in-service module and a handbook. The one day in-service module is facilitated by members of the CAPP team and is covered by a Department of Education Rule 60 closure. The aim of in-service is to give the participants an overview of the concepts underlying child protection, to familiarise them with the material in the handbook, and to set objectives for teaching safety strategies to the children in their classes.

THE HANDBOOK

The handbook is divided into a number of sections.

1. Introduction: This section introduces the concept of child protection as part of a child's overall social and personal development. It emphasises the importance of self-esteem and assertiveness for children and the importance of having the opportunities to make choices and decisions and to learn the skills to do so in an effective way.

This section also outlines the central role of a school child protection policy to encompass both curricular and non-curricular aspects in this area. Suggested aims for such a policy and how it may be drawn up are given.

2. Teaching the Programme: The section on teaching the programme outlines what is involved in the curricular area and stresses the role of practical experience, role-play and groupwork in allowing children the experience of drawing up, practicing and learning safety strategies.

3. Concept Areas: The curriculum is divided into four concept areas corresponding to the key concepts taught in the *Stay Safe* Programme i.e. recognising and responding to unsafe situations, bullying, touching and telling.

Each concept area contains an overall objective for that concept. A concept web links the safety concept with other concepts e.g. a child's ability to use a safety strategy on bullying will depend on her/his level of self-esteem and assertiveness. An ability to build friendships, to co-operate and problem solve will help prevent children from becoming bullies or victims of bullies.

The main part of each concept section contains teaching suggestions on how safety strategies and related concepts may be developed e.g. outlines of activities, story lines, role play, projects etc., that teachers may find useful. Suggestions on how the concepts may be reinforced in other areas of the curriculum are then given.

4. Teaching Objectives and Related Material: The final section outlines suggested objectives and issues pertinent to children with different disabilities.

Currently being piloted nationwide, the programme including in-service and the handbook should be available to all special schools in the near future.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The Child Abuse Prevention Programme has also highlighted the crucial role to be played by parents in partnership with teachers in protecting children. So, for example, safety strategies taught during classroom lessons will ideally be reinforced by parents at home by participating with the child in the exercises outlined on the workcards of the *Stay Safe* Programme. The potential for parental involvement is enhanced by the availability of the *Parent Guide* (CAPP, 1994)

which enables parents to learn about the aims of the programme and about bullying as well as about child abuse prevention.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

As well as consulting with teachers at the workshops a number of care staff and parents of children with disabilities were engaged in discussions. Out of this process emerged a number of principles which appeared to be valuable in developing a strategy for the protection of children with disability. These principles were:

- (i) Good channels of communication are essential between parents, teachers and care staff responsible for children with disabilities.
- (ii) Children with disabilities have additional vulnerabilities and dependency needs, and their rights and status need to be vigorously protected.
- (iii) Parents need specific, appropriately detailed and adequate information in order to create a safe environment for their children and protect them from the additional risks of abuse associated with children with disability.

COMMUNICATION

The creation of formal and informal channels of communication are necessary to break down barriers between the key players in the protection of children. For example, a parent would need to be aware of the boundaries placed by care and school staff on children in order that the most consistent care for the child is possible.

In addition, parents can sometimes feel intimidated by the jargon used by professionals, an intimidation which may prevent those parents seeking crucial information in relation to their child.

ADDITIONAL VULNERABILITY AND DEPENDENCY NEEDS

Society is not always aware of the importance of the needs and feelings of children with disability. This may be particularly true in the area of the intimate care of these children, who because they are more vulnerable and dependent could be exploited. These vulnerabilities and dependency needs place an extra onus on carers to vigorously protect the status and rights of children with disability.

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Parents need to be aware of the potential additional risks to their child with disability. This may include, for example, the child's inability to respond to a risk situation. The safety strategies of the *Stay Safe* Programme, for example, "Say No!", "Get Away and Tell", will clearly not be applicable to the non-verbal child. Parents also need information about the sexuality of their child with disability and how to cope with inappropriate manifestations of that sexuality, for example, masturbating in public.

Paedophiles are adept at targeting vulnerable children; children who are unlikely to resist or who are incapable of resisting. Thus parents need to be extra vigilant in supervising their children where such a risk may arise.

One of the myths which abound in the area of sexual abuse of children with disabilities is that severely disabled children are not attractive or desirable to people who might sexually abuse other children. Another myth is that the prevention of abuse of disabled children is difficult, if not impossible. We must believe that prevention is indeed possible and can be achieved through awareness of children's needs, as well as through the key people in the child's life working together in partnership.

THE ROLE OF PARENT AND CARE STAFF

The Child Abuse Prevention Programme has highlighted the crucial role to be played by parents in partnership with teachers in protecting children. For children with disability, the parenting role may be shared with specialist care staff, either day or residential. Thus, for these children, there may be three key groups having a protective role i.e. parents, teachers and carers.

CONCLUSION

Maximising the protection of children with disability involves the partnership of parents, teachers and carers. The school can play a key role in facilitating this partnership to develop. Schools and their staffs can be a great resource for parents in dealing with their children. How successful this will be, will depend not only on how creatively we can inform parents but also how creatively we can listen to them.