

## Adapting the *Stay Safe* Programme for Special Education

Up to 10% of children under 18 years will experience some form of sexual abuse. Children with special needs may be even more at risk. In consultation with special education teachers, the organisers of the Department of Education/Department of Health sponsored *Stay Safe* Programme for schools suggest adaptive mechanisms for its use with children with special educational needs

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### HISTORY

In 1987 the Child Abuse Prevention Programme was set up by Dr. Maria Lawlor, Consultant Child Psychiatrist and Deirdre MacIntyre, Senior Psychologist with the Eastern Health Board in response to the unprecedented rise in the reported cases of child sexual abuse in previous years. The number of reported cases had risen from 285 in 1985 to 1,242 in 1989. The aim of C.A.P.P. was to tackle the problem of abuse through prevention by developing a teaching programme which would be suitable for Primary School children in Ireland.

Research indicated that up to 10% of children will experience an abusive incident before the age of 18 - with 4% suffering prolonged and serious abuse. Children between the ages of 4 and 11 years are most likely to become victims because of their inability to control what goes on around them, their dependence on adults, and, because of their lack of knowledge and language - their inability to report incidents. It was with this information in mind that C.A.P.P. decided to target Primary School children for their programme.

## **STAY SAFE PROGRAMME: BEGINNINGS**

The *Stay Safe* programme was designed in consultation with teachers assigned to the project by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation and was financed through contributions and fund raising. A package, consisting of two curricula - one for junior and one for senior classes, a video, and an audio cassette were put together and piloted in 10 schools in the Dublin area in 1989. The pilot programme involved teachers, parents and children from 2nd and 5th classes in these schools. The response to this initial pilot programme was so positive that the Department of Education and the Department of Health decided to introduce the *Stay Safe* Programme to all schools in the Eastern Health Board area in the school year 1991 - 1992. This involved the secondment of three teachers and three social workers to introduce the programme to teachers during a full day seminar and to parents at parent meetings organised by the schools themselves.

### **AIMS AND CONTENT**

The *Stay Safe* Programme is based on the following concepts:

- **That children should speak up for themselves. Establishing the right to say 'No' is an important element.**
- **That given the set of rules, children can generalise and apply them to a variety of situations.**
- **That children have strong instinctive feelings about certain situations and that they should learn to recognise, respect and respond to these feelings.**
- **Children need to be told quite clearly that they can and should turn to adults for help. Breaking the secrecy which surrounds child abuse is an essential part of prevention.**
- **Children need to know that they will be believed and protected by adults.**

In the lesson plans these concepts are developed by helping children to identify their feelings, by giving them a simple language through which they can communicate problems and assert their right to tell. The lessons deal with all situations in which a child might feel threatened - getting lost, bullying, and unwanted inappropriate touches. The secrecy which surrounds bullying and child abuse is countered by constantly asserting the child's right to tell, the correctness of telling, and teaching them to identify good and bad secrets. The language of the lessons is deliberately simple and the themes are dealt with in a clear and

what is acceptable in relation to behaviour and touch.

## **CHILDREN WITH PHYSICAL HANDICAP**

Teachers of physically handicapped children who rely on assistance with washing, dressing and toileting expressed concerns on two points.

- (a) That the children might misinterpret the message about touch.
- (b) The vulnerability of these children. The emphasis in the programme, however, on breaking the secrecy surrounding abuse by establishing the child's right to say "no" and to "tell" was seen as a positive way of alerting children to the issue of abuse.

## **EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN**

In dealing with emotionally disturbed children, teachers felt that this programme might be better taught to the children on an individual basis rather than in groups. Emotionally disturbed children, it was felt, were made very vulnerable by their own life experiences and allowing children to talk about these in this "public manner" might be counter productive within the group. Teachers of autistic children did not feel that the programme was suitable for them.

## **CONCLUSION**

Clearly, the general response from teachers in special education was very positive. The C.A.P.P. team decided in response to that reaction to consult further with teachers and to prepare additional materials and suggestions to be included in the *Stay Safe* Pack for teachers in special education. This work, it is hoped, will begin this year.

The *Stay Safe* Programme is not unique in its approach to abuse prevention. Similar programmes have been available in the UK and in Europe, Australia and the U.S.A. It was however, developed with Irish children in mind to be culturally appropriate and acceptable to parents and teachers. Its development through the Department of Education and the Department of Health is probably more unusual. In 1992 the Department of Education decided to make the programme available to all schools nationwide. By the end of the present school year all teachers will have had the opportunity to participate in day long in-service courses. This in itself will have done much to highlight the problem of child abuse.