

Teaching children in schools about sexual abuse may help them report abuse

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Children who are taught about preventing sexual abuse at school are more likely than others to tell an adult if they had, or were actually experiencing sexual abuse. This is according to the results of a new Cochrane review published in the *Cochrane Library* today. However, the review's authors say that more research is needed to establish whether school-based programmes intended to prevent sexual abuse actually reduce the incidence of abuse.

It is estimated that, worldwide, at least 1 in 10 girls and 1 in 20 boys experience some form of sexual abuse in childhood. Those who are sexually abused as [children](#) are more susceptible to depression, eating disorders, [suicidal behaviour](#) and drug and alcohol problems later in life, and are more likely to become victims of [sexual assault](#) as adults. In many countries, children are taught how to recognise, react to, and report abuse situations through school-based programmes designed to help prevent sexual abuse.

The Cochrane researchers reviewed data from 24 trials in which a total of 5,802 children took part in school-based prevention programmes in the US, Canada, China, Germany, Spain, Taiwan and Turkey. Schools involved in the trials used a variety of methods to teach children about sexual abuse, including, teaching of safety rules, body ownership, and who to tell through films, plays, songs, puppets, books and games. In children who did not receive the intervention around 4 in 1,000 children disclosed some form of sexual abuse. This contrasts with 14 in 1,000 children in the intervention groups, who disclosed some form of sexual

abuse.

Studies also suggested that programmes were effective in increasing children's knowledge about sexual abuse. Four trials assessed children's knowledge again up to six months after, and showed that they remembered much of what they were taught. Children who participated in programmes were also more likely than other children to try to protect themselves in a simulated abuse scenario in which they were asked to leave the school and go with someone they did not know.

The researchers suggest that there are many reasons why it is difficult to prove that children have learned the skills considered necessary for recognising and reporting sexual abuse. "Even if a child demonstrates that they know how to behave in a certain scenario, it doesn't mean they will behave the same in a real situation where there is potential for abuse," said lead author Kerryann Walsh of the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. "Tests cannot mimic real abuse situations very well. For example, we know that most sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone known to the child whereas in the test situations, unfamiliar actors or research assistants were used."

There was little evidence to show that children experienced unnecessary worry as a result of sexual abuse prevention education, nor were there any other reported adverse effects.

"This review supports the need to inform and protect children against sexual abuse," said Walsh. "But ongoing research is needed to evaluate school-based prevention programmes, and to investigate the links between participation and the actual prevention of child [sexual abuse](#). To really know whether these programmes are working, we need to see larger studies with follow-up all the way to adulthood."

Provided by Wiley

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