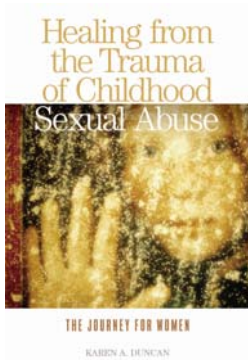


FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Indiana author provides valuable insights for schools in the prevention of sexual abuse by children and teens.



May 1, 2005 – The epidemic of child sexual abuse continues to occur to thousands of children and teens. Schools face a moral and legal dilemma when sexually aggressive behavior is occurring between children and teens or when it is being perpetrated by children against other children. Schools can reduce their risk and protect children by putting in place programs and policies that support the education of parents and staff about how to question if sexual abuse is occurring.

Overview of the Concern:

Child sexual abuse is a national epidemic. While our society has become increasingly aware of the frequency in which this specific childhood trauma occurs, schools face the dilemma of how to address reported sexual behavior by children and teens when it occurs during educational and extracurricular activities at the school or during off-school activities such as sporting events or class trips.

Just as schools came to the realization that bullying, as a form of child abuse perpetrated by other children, is no longer an acceptable behavior and is now viewed as a form of violence escalating to assault and death, so to have schools begun to realize that child-teen sexual behavior will need to be addressed if they are to maintain an atmosphere of safety and control within their school building. When they do they assure that children and teens have the optimum opportunity to learn. Schools are also aware that children today are less supervised and more readily exposed to all types of adult sexuality through radio, videos, television, magazines and movies.

To address the dilemma of child-teen sexual behavior when it occurs within the school system, school corporations will need to develop caring, thoughtful and meaningful policies and educational plans that include an understanding of:

- Sexual behavior that is developmentally and age-appropriate.
- Sexual behavior that is indicating disturbance in the child's development and may indicate the child has been a victim of sexual abuse or is currently being abused.
- Sexual behavior that indicates a child has been exposed to inappropriate information or behavior that is not classified as sexual abuse under state statutes but would indicate further assessment

and intervention is needed in order to prevent future problems with teachers or peers and disruption of educational achievement.

A School's Response Strategy:

A caring and thoughtful response by school corporations is needed to be implemented at the individual school level by knowledgeable and trained principals, counselors, school social workers and teachers if these concerns are to be addressed. A school corporation's thoughtful response will need to be placed within the context of a school's value system, ethics of caring for children who attend their schools to receive and obtain an education, parents who have the right to expect their child to be safe while attending school, state laws that require the reporting of sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment to children and the liability that a particular school district must consider.

Policy and Value System: In general, a school policy is what a school establishes as the general principles for the school's operations. School corporations then set forth their policies in writing and communicates them to the community at-large namely teachers, staff, parents and students. Policies are a reflection of both the state statutes and requirements for funding as set forth by the state department of education, but also a reflection of the school community's values and beliefs.

Ethics of Caring for Children: It is generally accepted that personnel who work at schools care for children, are invested in the well-being of children, and hope the best for the future of the children they educate. Therefore, school corporations establish ethics for interacting with children that often reflects the belief of "first do no harm". This is a guiding principal for school corporations who desire to act in the best interest of the child and is appropriate for use when addressing questions of reported sexual behavior committed by children and the possibility that child sexual abuse is occurring.

Parents Expectations for Safety: Parents provide the foundation for a child's learning. When school communities and family systems are in harmony with each other agreement is easily reached on how to practice the belief of "first do no harm." However, utopia does not exist in most communities, therefore school corporations are going to conflict at times with groups of parents who have a different value system or ethical approach to resolving a concern. What the majority of parents and school corporations have to agree upon is that the safety of children must come first or education will not follow. The difference is often in how to implement this agreement. Therefore, school corporations can refer parents to existing policies that answer questions of safety when posed by parents. Policies also assist parents to anticipate what the most likely response will be from their school when certain behaviors by their children occur. However,

unlike informing parents of attendance policy and how grades are to be reported, issues of abuse are more significant and directly affect their child's safety.

State Laws: State statute requires that where there is a *suspicion* of child abuse and neglect that a report must be made to the appropriate child protection office where the child resides or where the suspected abuse and neglect has taken place. The law provides for confidentiality of this report, which gives some protection to schools. Most importantly, is that the laws of our land are generally regarded as a reflection of our beliefs as a society and one of the beliefs we hold to be true is the protection of children from harm. School personnel face a dilemma with this state law when they are unsure of the suspicion of abuse, but are concerned that the child needs intervention to occur within the home. Additionally, when a child's behavior is disruptive in the classroom or during other school activities, the child becomes a disruption to the education of other children. Finally, the worst-case scenarios exist when:

- ❖ A report of suspected abuse is not made and later it is disclosed that the abuse was occurring and if the report had been made sooner the opportunity to stop the abuse and end the protracted harm to a child could have taken place
- ❖ A report is made and the abuse is not substantiated and the child is placed in danger of parent retribution with no recourse for the school because of the unsubstantiated first report
- ❖ A report is made and the suspected abuse is not occurring and the parent is either irate or embarrassed and school personnel feel conflicted that a "false report" was made on the parent or other family member

The confusion that surrounds the above scenarios occurs for school personnel especially with regard to administrators, principals, school counselors, social workers and teachers because many early childhood professionals are not formally taught about the trauma of sexual abuse nor are they readily taught about children's sexual development.

Recommendations:

1. School personnel who will be directly involved in the assessment of children's behavior on school premises receive specialized training that informs on the sexual development of children at different ages and stages of development.

2. A policy be developed that provides school personnel with procedures that fits within the context of the school corporation's overall child abuse prevention and intervention policy and procedure.
3. Guidelines set forth for principals, school counselors, social workers and teachers that assist them to determine:
 - Sexual behavior that is developmentally and age-appropriate.
 - Sexual behavior that is indicating disturbance in the child's development and may indicate the child has been a victim of sexual abuse or is currently being abused.
 - Sexual behavior that indicates a child has been exposed to inappropriate information or behavior that is not classified as sexual abuse under state statutes but would indicate further assessment and intervention is needed in order to prevent future problems with teachers or peers and disruption of educational achievement.
4. Strategies are developed for the above personnel that assist them with interventions with both child and parents that is keeping with school policy and procedure, reflects the corporation's value system and ethics of caring, maintains parents' appropriate expectations for the safety of their child within school property, state laws are met and accountability by parents to address the concerns outlined by school personnel who provide the intervention with their child. These strategies would be meaningful within the context of not harming a child but also not allowing a child to harm other children—directly or indirectly or disrupt another child's education.
5. The above policies, definitions and general strategies are communicated to parents through the school's handbook *similar yet different* to what is provided for bullying (bully abuse) while understanding that not all traumas are the same and neither will be the approaches to resolve them.
6. As part of the school corporation's overall strategy to prevent and intervene on behalf of children it is in the interest of the school to develop an overall primary child abuse education prevention program that is implemented and communicated school-wide throughout the school year and incorporates the types of abuses that occur to children: bullying, sexual, physical, mental and emotional, and verbal abuse along with child neglect. This overall child abuse prevention program and strategy would then be presented in a general orientation for parents during the beginning of the school year by school counselors and/or school social workers who have been trained in child abuse prevention and sexual abuse prevention in particular.
7. Parent debriefings help to deescalate parents concerns, answers their questions while maintaining confidentiality and gives suggestions on how to handle their children's questions or comments at home.

8. A staffing among school personnel are were directly involved with the take place to review the debriefings and determine outcomes, plan for follow-up, and provide written documentation for school files (not the child's file).

9. Parent debriefing with the child who is reported assures that the care of the child is important and that it is the desire of the school to assist the parent and child in order that the sexual behavior stop on school premises and cease to disrupt learning. It is also an opportunity to ask how the child came to learn the behavior that was reported. This requires that the personnel conducting the parent debriefing be trained on how to ask questions and obtain information in a manner that is conducive to obtaining information and providing guidance to a parent.

10. Parent debriefings help to deescalate parents concerns, answers their questions while maintaining confidentiality and gives suggestions on how to handle their children's questions or comments at home.

11. A staffing among school personnel who were directly involved with the report—teacher, school counselor, social worker and principal--would then take place to review the debriefings, determine outcomes of the debriefings, plan for follow-up, provide written documentation for school files (not the child's file), and if needed reviewed by corporate attorney.

With the above information gathered school personnel are in a position to determine if a report would then be made to child protective services when a first incident occurs or if a series of incidents occurs that is indicative of sexual abuse.

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