

## A Prevention View of the Compliant Child Victim Cordelia Anderson, Sensibilities

People want sexual violence prevention to be simple—one video, one theater piece, one big talk that will cover it all and help our children to be safe. Even with increased understanding that sexual violence needs a public health prevention response; even with increased awareness that it takes multiple interactive sessions that are reinforced over time to change behavior; and even with the clear understanding that messages need to be developmentally appropriate and relevant to the audience we're trying to reach—we still tend to avoid the reality of uncomfortable ambiguities and touchy issues.

Lanning presents several challenges to prevention:

### 1) The Limitations of Simple and Over-simplistic Messages

As the person who authored the touch continuum in 1977, which is often incorrectly referred to as “good touch/bad touch,” I’m constantly countering how such oversimplification is not accurate and is not what was originally intended. For example, lack of touch can be on both ends of the continuum, and a great deal of touch is not clearly positive or negative. Touch is confusing for multiple reasons: liking the person but not liking what he or she is doing; when the touch changes from contact that was okay to something uncertain or unwanted; not being used to touch or sure of the giver’s intent; and when the touch feels good but isn’t suppose to.

Lanning points out that the “say no, yell, and go tell” messages not only play into victims’ sense of guilt when they are unable to practice such behaviors, but also do not reach those victims who are seduced by the offender. Such messages ignore the fact that when victims are seduced, they don’t want to say “no” to an offender, they don’t want to yell, and they don’t want to tell.

In defense of prevention efforts, many include multiple messages and teach multiple skills that are not nearly as simplistic as catch phrases would reduce them to. Alternatively, it is prudent to make sure that prevention messages are inclusive of a wide range of sexual behavior problems and sexual harms.

### 2) The Need to Talk About “It”

#### Range of Behaviors

A big part of prevention is talking about “it.” The “it” includes the full range of sexual behaviors from healthy and appropriate to violent, respectfully, as follows:

**HARS > P > MI > B > H > V**

#### Healthy, Appropriate, Respectful, Safe (HARS)

(Behaviors that are expected, encouraged, and helpful in a given setting)

#### Playful: Teasing, Flirting

(Fun, mutual, no harm done, relationship enhancing, problematic only when detracting from tasks)

#### Mutually Inappropriate

(Consensual sexual intimacy or sexual behaviors in an inappropriate time, place, or manner or language agreeable to the participants but not to the organization, such as the school or to bystanders)

#### Sexual Bullying

(Not fun for at least one party, not mutual, harm done, aggressive, harmful to relationships; policies vary)

#### Harassment

(Unwelcome and unwanted sexual words and behaviors and acts harm done, against school policy, against the law; must be reported)

#### Violence

(Words and actions that hurt people; without consent or equality and with coercion; forced, tricked or manipulated; harm done; against school policy, against the law; must be reported)

Bullying, Harassment and Violence are not a game and not a joke. In some cases, it may be “just the way it is,” but it is not the way it needs to be or something those harmed should have to put up with. Sexual bullying is a large portion of the bullying experienced by children. Children may be made fun of because of how they are or aren’t developing, who they have a crush on; not being male in the right “male enough” ways or female in the right “female enough” ways; being perceived as gay/lesbian or gay sensitive or having gay/lesbian/bi-sexual/transgender family members; alleged sexual behaviors or lack thereof; and so forth.

Many youth are not only confused about what is appropriate behavior, but are also confused about what are illegal behaviors. Educational efforts need to help them understand that some behaviors are against the law.

Part of the challenge in getting educators or others to promptly report harmful behaviors and to not over-react to developmentally appropriate behaviors is getting some clarity on what is what. At this point what one person perceives as teasing another may call harassment and another violence. And, when sex is involved, people tend to be even more uncomfortable talking about the behaviors and more confused about an appropriate response or intervention.

### 3) The Need to Revisit How Consent Is Talked About

Lanning points out several problems with the concept of consent including the reality that a child cannot legally consent and the fact that the basis for a crime having occurred is that lack of consent is presumed, yet the age of consent varies from state to state. Many prevention programs use consent, and lack thereof, as part of the definition of sexual violence. Many include the importance of being aware of whether or not both parties truly consent to any given type of sexual contact or sexual behavior. It is prudent for prevention efforts to add “the problem with consent.” That is, what happens when children or youth cannot legally or developmentally consent but firmly believe they are making an informed choice?

### 4) The Need to Broaden Discussions of How and Why Offenders Do What They Do

Many efforts include discussion of how offenders “trick” victims. Prevention efforts need to include discussions around seduction.

Discuss that seduction is one way some offenders “trick”; and this reality is polar opposite from teaching children and youth to be alert only to force, threats, or aggressive coercion. No one likes to realize that they’ve been duped, especially by someone they thought truly cared. But as Lanning points out, no child or youth is a “match for a 50-year-old man with an organized plan.”

Potential questions that can help get youths’ attention and engage them in dialogue include the following:

- What does it mean to trick someone?
- How does it feel when you get tricked?
- What is appealing for some young people about an older person or adult taking an interest in them? ...a sexual interest in them?
- What are your ideas about why an older person/adult would be interested in a sexual relationship with an adolescent or child?
- What are your ideas about what the problem is with such a “relationship”? (laws; one person having more knowledge/power/control; the adult primarily being interested in sex vs. “true love” and likely having a string of children/adolescents who think somehow this person has a special interest in them; the secrecy)
- How can friends help if they know or suspect a friend is “falling in love with” or being duped by an adult who wants to have a sexual relationship with them?
- What makes it hard to get out of a relationship that others tell you is not good for you? What makes it hard even when you start to think it might not be what you originally thought?
- How do you think you might feel if you thought someone really cared about you or loved you, and later you found out that what he or she primarily wanted you (and others) for was sex?
- What do young people need to know about adults who want to have sex with them?

### 5) The Need to Address Barriers to Disclosure or to Understanding

Prevention efforts that are willing to talk about same-sex incidents are also likely to address what Lanning refers to as the “stigma of homosexuality.” This makes it difficult for those harmed or tricked to disclose what happened. Most programs talk about barriers to disclosing, like having mixed feelings about the offender or being embarrassed, ashamed, or fearful. What may be newer for some efforts is including the reality that, in keeping with the offender’s ability to seduce, some children do not see that they’ve been victimized and indeed may have liked or loved the person and the attention and sexual contact. That said, it would take some effort to make sure students (and adults) understand how and why the child or youth is a victim.

### 6) The Need to Proactively Address Sexual Curiosity and Needs of Adolescents and Children

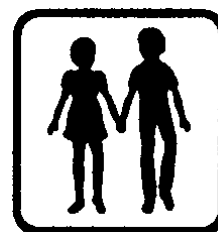
Lanning points out that adolescents have needs and curiosity about sex, are sexually inexperienced and somewhat rebellious, and (especially males) are easily aroused. Although many prevention efforts include developmental information in their professional training, fewer are versed in normal sexual development of children and youth. In responding to a recent survey, several staff at one elementary school did not feel they needed to respond to questions about GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender) issues or even sexual violence. As an elementary school, they believed that these issues were not relevant yet. But, well beyond the statistics about child victimization, elementary children are clearly expressing their interest in and questions about sex. Further, many bullying behaviors in elementary school are GLBT- and sex-related. Children talk about sex, they joke about sex; they need adults to talk with in proactive and constructive ways to provide accurate information.

It is normal for an adolescent to be flattered and charmed by an adult who treats them as if they matter; as if they are more mature and knowledgeable than they are; as if they are an adult. It is normal for an adolescent who is struggling to understand his or her own emerging sexuality to look to adults for guidance, limits, and assurances. It is not unusual for an adolescent to have a crush on an adult. It is not unusual for adolescents to be insecure about whether they are “normal,” “attractive,” or “mature.” It is not unusual for youth traversing through the pitfalls of adolescence to want to be viewed as more mature and worldly than they are. It is not unusual for adolescents to put on the wares of a society that packages everything in terms of sex—and then to look like they know more than they do. It is not unusual for an adolescent (or adult for that matter) to have a lot of sex yet to know very little about sexuality or sexual health. It is critical for adults to protect, not exploit children, and to talk with children and youth about the difference between sexual health and sexual exploitation.

### 7) The Need to Be Clear and Consistent About What’s Wrong With Adults or People in Positions of Power Having Sex With Children or Youth

Part of prevention is having a clear and consistent message that it is never okay to trick, coerce, or force anyone into sexual activity. Why? Youth need to be aware that there are laws against such behaviors including, in many states, something called “sex offender registration.” Legalities aside, tricking, conning, or duping someone into having sex is disrespectful and dishonest and can be harmful ultimately for both the victim and the offender. Much like allowing people to drink themselves into oblivion is not helpful, neither is allowing them to harm others for their own power or sexual gratification. Even if a youth “comes on” to an adult, the adult has more power and control and has the choice and the responsibility to say

Cont’d on page 18



Besides the laws, reasons why it is not okay for adults to have sex with children or adolescents include the following:

- It robs children and adolescents of their own sexual development as well as learning and discovering about themselves and relationships in a developmentally appropriate way—with others who are the same or near their same age.
- Emotionally, socially, and sexually healthy adults want to have sex with someone at their own developmental level.
- Adults are supposed to teach, guide, care for, and protect children and adolescents and not use them for their own sexual gratification.

### Changing Trends in Prevention

More programs (e.g., STOP IT NOW!) understand the importance of a public health approach to prevention. I have found it useful to think in terms of the 3 P's: Promotion (positive youth development, assets, and protective factors), Protection (safety and security measures), and Prevention. For prevention, rather than just focusing on how to reduce chances of victimization, it is useful to think of four levels:

#### a) Reducing sexually harmful behaviors —

This means focusing on stopping people from becoming sex offenders. Actions include the following:

- Parents talking to their children about not harming others emotionally, physically, or sexually
- Providing curricula that teach, practice, and reinforce positive social-emotional skills
- Early intervention in behaviors that may not be serious acts of sexual violence but clearly are not okay (e.g., sexual slander and put downs, spreading of sexual rumors, sexual name calling; inappropriate sexual touch)
- Getting help for those who are sexually harming others so they can stop doing sexually destructive acts.

#### b) Reducing chances of sexual victimization —

- Helping boys and girls to understand the full range of sexual exploitation, from behaviors that are clearly violent to those involving “seduction”
- Teaching children and adolescents about their rights and responsibilities
- Teaching curriculum related to social-emotional skill development
- Encouraging those harmed to tell and get the help they need.

#### c) Increasing the capacity of bystanders —

- Helping all to understand our responsibility to help, not harm others; to be part of the solution, not part of the problem through silence or “putting up with” or “going along with”
- Helping bystanders to talk about it, see it, name it, speak up, speak out, and have the courage to act.

#### d) Addressing the sexually toxic society —

- Recognizing ways that the society is sexually toxic
- Developing a discriminating eye and skills not to be co-opted by harmful and destructive messages and socialization
- Speaking out against norms that may be “accepted,” but are sexually harmful to at least some groups of people.

### In Defense of Prevention Efforts

Most of the foregoing issues are not completely new to most people doing sexual violence prevention work. Some have found ways to address all or part of what is being raised, but have not had the means or taken the time to write it up. On the other hand, too many are doing what they've done for years—one or two sessions with simple messages that are liked and approved by the schools or organizations they present to but lacking current research. It is no small task to bridge what we know about what works in prevention, what we are learning about offenders, and the ever-growing limits of prevention budgets and school resources that may disallow time for topics other than core subjects. Much like our message to students, parents, and educators, these issues are complex. But one basic thing we each can do is to keep talking about “it.”

