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# The importance of age-appropriate sexuality education

*A keynote speech delivered by Professor Freda Briggs at Family Planning Queensland's occasional Wendy Darvill forum: **'Ignorance is not innocence: why talk about sexuality and prevention of sexual assault in the early years'** at the Bardon Centre, Brisbane, Queensland on Tuesday 8 November 2005.*

Most of the information I'm about to give you came from research findings undertaken with children and occasionally with parents. I've been evaluating child protection programs with children in Australia and New Zealand since 1990 and published a report on safety issues for children with disabilities in 2004.

This week, I had several calls from Queensland media journalists.

Was it true that I was going to talk about sex education and child protection education for pre-school children? "Queenslanders will never tolerate this", they said.

The journalists were surprised to learn that South Australian and New Zealand early childhood professionals have been teaching children about their bodies and have used child protection curriculum for the last 20 years.

NSW had a pre-school curriculum module in the 1980s along with a manual for parents. New Zealand has just written a new pre-school program and SA is currently trailing one that covers pre-school through to Yr 12.

The journalists, being young, didn't know that, in the early 1980s, Queensland was ahead of most states in the child protection field, led by Dr Simon Petrie and other pioneering educators. Queensland published the first mini child protection booklets for parents and teachers to use with young children. Although they cost only one-dollar, services were targeted by funding cuts and interest diminished.

Not so long ago, sex education fell into the same category as Santa Claus and the tooth fairy. Children were told lies involving storks and babies found in cabbage patches. When children compared notes they realised that parents lied and wondered why. This caused anxiety and stopped them from asking questions. That suited the adults who were embarrassed by children's interest in their own bodies, preferring to behave as if they were asexual.

There were fears that if we told children about their bodies they might experiment and become promiscuous. The late Professor Goldman and Juliette Goldman (Griffith Uni), then at La Trobe University, conducted interviews around the world and found the opposite was true. Education authorities that didn't provide sex education, such as New York, had the highest rates of teen pregnancy.

Until the 1960s, children were kept in ignorance – adults confusing innocence with ignorance. We were encouraged to believe that babies arrived as a consequence of marriage even though some of us popped out shortly after the ceremony.

Conception, like birth, was beyond our imaginations and even when we reached year 10 at high school, our one and only so-called sex education lesson involved the reproduction system of the rabbit with no mention of fertilisation. Nonetheless we had to get our parents' permission to attend and when I returned home, my embarrassed mother asked whether all my questions had been answered. I said 'No, she (our elderly spinster biology teacher) didn't tell us how babies get there,' to which Mother replied, "How do you think... silly."

That was the only sex-related conversation I ever had with my mother until she reached the ripe old age of 80 and I sent her my first child protection book entitled "*Child sex abuse – Confronting the Problem.*"

"What did you think of it?" I asked a few weeks later.

"Your dad says it has a nice cover" she replied. I don't think they ever opened it.

Without accurate, comprehensible information from parents, young children turn to unreliable sources or concoct their own explanations for how they came into the world. Boys acquire information from mates, porn and lavatory walls but, our research showed that even now, many boys are terrified by their first wet dreams, fearing that an abscess has burst and they're about to die. Until very recently, girls were not given any vocabulary for their genitals. Anything below a girl's waist was dismissed as "down there" or "between your legs" making it difficult if not impossible for them to report abuse. Girls were unaware of the existence of their vaginas until they were either abused or reached puberty and suddenly thought they were bleeding to death. Providing that daughters didn't become pregnant, sex was seldom mentioned again.

The sexual development of boys was virtually ignored once parents realised that masturbation didn't make them blind. They also ignored boys' sexual experimentation comforted by the fact that boys don't get pregnant.

In the 1960s, enlightened parents realised that children needed preparation for puberty. This often meant painfully embarrassing sessions in which a plethora of shocking information was thrust upon them or they were given a book and told "read that" ...usually too late. Everyone was embarrassed. Paedophiles have taken advantage of boys' curiosity and ignorance, presenting sexual abuse as sex education that uncaring parents omitted to provide. Boy victims told us that, in the beginning they felt privileged to be let into the secrets of adult male sexuality. Convicted sex offenders consistently told us that if we wanted to keep boys safe from abuse we must provide explicit information about the functioning of their bodies. In other words, tell them about circumcision, erections, masturbation and ejaculation long before they reach puberty. If we don't, boys are made vulnerable by their own curiosity.

Parents have problems in accepting that children are sexual beings who need to know about their bodies. When the abuse of children by Catholic priests was finally recognized as a reality, SA Catholic Education introduced a Family Life Curriculum which was relationship focused but combined information about the human body and protective behaviours. There was an uproar.

Italian fathers called public meetings, turned to the media and some unwisely phoned me seeking my support.

"Sex and child protection education are the responsibilities of parents," they proclaimed. "We don't want this stuff taught in schools."

I agreed that "this stuff" should be taught by parents but pointed out that school programs were essential because all the Australian research, including my own, showed that parents were not fulfilling their obligations.

"How old are your children?" I asked.

They ranged from 12 to 16. I could hear them in the background.

"And what have you told them about their bodies? What have you told them that will keep them safe from sexual abuse?"

Father after father said that they hadn't discussed these matters with their children. Why?

"They don't need to know anything because they're Catholics", they said. "And they don't need to know about sex until AFTER they're married."

So we had literally hundreds of dads behaving as if there were no problems of child abuse in the church, behaving as if their children were blind to the commercialised sex that

confronts them on a daily basis – and deaf to peer group norms. Mothers remained silent. I found myself offering to support the Catholic Archbishop who promoted the program. Unfortunately there was such a fuss that he backed down and made the curriculum optional rather than compulsory.

“Ah but things have changed” I hear you say.

Yes they have. They’ve changed rapidly and drastically. Childhood has become shorter and puberty can arrive at the age of eight. Babies and toddlers are used to make pornography and child protection units and family courts will tell you that most sex abuse reports involve pre-schoolers. Why? Because without adult witnesses, child sex offenders are unlikely to be prosecuted if children are too young to withstand rigorous cross examination for hours or days at a time in a hostile adult environment. In other words, by choosing pre school children, they are unlikely to be punished.

Some drug addicted prostitute mothers now sell their young children for sex to pay for their habit and even babies have AIDS and other STDs. A nine-year old African refugee recently gave birth in Switzerland and the youngest father in the UK is aged eleven. Our research with high school students in disadvantaged areas showed that girls aged twelve wanted to become pregnant because pregnancy provided status in their peer-group. Better to have a couple of kids and single parents’ benefit than unemployment and the dole. Yes things have changed. We now we have child care centres in high schools to cater for schoolgirl mothers. Our 2004 research with teenage boys showed that more than half thought it was OK to force girls to have sex if they’re girlfriends, drunk, flirtatious or the boys spent money on them. This confirms earlier Queensland research. Girls didn’t insist on contraception because boys don’t like condoms. Worse still, boys don’t associate sex with STDs or babies. Furthermore, boys don’t recognise sexual abuse as wrong and reportable even when it’s happening to them.

Girls of 12 plus are scared of rape, AIDS and unwanted pregnancies but risk all three by frequently going to parties and even night clubs specifically to get drunk and have sex and drugs. Girls — even those from elite schools — offer oral sex to boys they don’t know. Both boys and girls said they didn’t enjoy the sex but they did it because it was a peer group expectation. They had to go with the flow.

Girls’ clothing, advertising and pop music teach the youngest of children that they have to be sexy. Information gained from TV and Internet porn also present inappropriate sex roles. In 2001 we found that some fathers had already introduced Internet porn to pre-school sons claiming that this was what real men like... it’s fun.

Kindergarten teachers making home visits have found three generations watching video porn. “They don’t understand” the adults said. As you know, children are learning from all that they see and from porn they learn inappropriate sex roles and behaviour. If children are emotionally disturbed as a result of viewing, they are likely to act it out with others. Exposing children to porn is child abuse and has to be reported. As educators, we must encourage children to question; given that most kids are given ideas and role models

that are beyond their understanding. The role models presented by parents and the quality of their relationships are vitally important for helping children to resist dangerous situations.

Parenting is more difficult now than ever before. When I asked police why so many 12-14 year old girls were allowed to party all night and visit night clubs, they said that many parents have given up trying to parent. They simply aren't coping. They need help.

Schools and pre-schools are in a position to help.

So when do we start?

Sexuality education ... sexual health education or whatever you choose to call it has to start in early childhood because whether we ignore it or not, children are sexual beings from birth. It's also easiest to start when children are young, open, honest and not inhibited by adult taboos that restrict questions.

Sex related education should be the gradual unfolding of positive information that is appropriate for the developmental level of the child. We want children to respect and take good care of their own bodies and other children's bodies. We want children to keep their bodies safe given that we can't supervise them all of the time. But the reality is that parents avoid these issues. They don't have access to information to support their parenting.

### **Vocabulary**

Ideally parents and child carers begin by introducing the correct biological names for all body parts when children are learning to talk. Typically parents use pet names for genitals. Educators can draw around a male and female child and asked the group to name the different body parts. In one group we collected 20 different names for penis: John Henry, pee-pee, wee-wee, willy, dick, cock, sausage, John Thomas, dingle-dangle, diddly doo, even 'golf set' (explained as a stick and 2 balls in a bag)... amusing but no teacher on yard duty would understand if a child said, "Someone touched my golf set."

Non-English speaking parents gave their children words in their own language that no one else would understand. Most of the girls had no vocabulary for their genitals.

Why?

This has nothing to do with the needs of children.

It is to protect adults from the risk of embarrassment if children refer to toilet matters in public as they do. They want to avoid situations such as the 4 yr old who, after being introduced to the word vagina, walked down the church aisle with her mum and, in a voice that echoed around the building, asked, "Mummy do all these ladies have vaginas?"

My own daughter chose the aisle of York Minster to ask in a very loud voice, “Mum! What does F---- off mean?”

So what? Most parents have at least one embarrassing experience. If we can't cope with that we shouldn't have children.

Kids are essentially curious. Giving them the correct vocabulary at an early age helps them to come to terms with body differences. Most importantly they need correct vocabulary to make a clear report if they encounter sexual misbehaviour. My first experience of a 'flasher' was in a city centre on a busy Saturday morning. Not having a brother, I couldn't believe my eyes. I was embarrassed, confused – why would a grown up be rude when adults punish children for being rude. I felt dirty-minded for even considering that what I saw was a penis. My friend and I ran away.

There was a policeman around the corner but neither of us could report what we'd seen because we didn't have the necessary vocabulary. When their caregivers give the impression that genitals are unmentionable as well as invisible, children are more likely to tolerate abuse, believing they have to remain silent.

In our research we found that young children know about rude behaviour. There's usually at least one rude child in every group. However, they are convinced that they can't report rude behaviour because to do so would involve rude talk, and that's a punishable offence. Children rationalise that rude behaviour is naughty, naughty means you're bad, naughty means it's your fault, that means you're to blame, that means you'll get into trouble. Paradoxically, mothers believe that, if someone misbehaves, their children will tell them immediately, regardless of the fact that they've never broached the subject, have reprimanded children for lavatory talk and have taught them to obey adults and keep adults' secrets. Unreasonably mothers expect children to know instinctively that sexual misbehaviour is wrong and reportable, even when the perpetrator is an adult authority figure. They expect children to break their own rules and report rude behaviour immediately to them. Children, on the other hand, were telling us that they would tolerate rude behaviour (sexual abuse) rather than risk parental wrath and rejection.

To the occasional parents who object to sex education or says, “I don't want my child to learn that awful penis word,” point out that this isn't sex education; it's language development. Tell them that children need the correct vocabulary to report problems they may encounter in the playground or school toilet.

After telling them why you're doing it, ask all parents to use the same terminology at home. If older children have the misfortune to give evidence in court or need attention to genitals, i.e. surgery or abuse, they can be extremely embarrassed if they've never used correct terminology.

## **Body privacy and body ownership**

At around the age of 3 we should encourage children to wash and dry their own genitals explaining that these are special private places that only they can touch. Rarely does a child ask why they are special (but if one does, its OK to say that we have to look after them well because we need them when we grow up... that we might want to share them with someone special when we're an adult but it takes a long time to decide who that special person is).

Does the child understand the concept of private? It may need to be explained. What other things are private? What does that mean? When mentioning private body parts, we need to include the mouth because of the frequency with which young children are forced to provide oral sex. If you find it hard to say that no one is allowed to put their penis in your mouth, say that no one is allowed to put anything yucky, stinky or rude in a mouth. We found that reliance on messages about touching doesn't protect children from being used for oral sex because they relate touching to hands, not mouths.

Affirm that we can touch our own private places but no one else is allowed to tickle, touch or play around with them. Teach children that if someone does, they can yell, "Stop that. Its not allowed," escape, and tell someone. Give them the opportunity to practice saying this in a big loud voice. Teach children to raise their arms to distance themselves when someone tries to touch inappropriately. This action, as well as knowledge, is empowering. We've found that this works well for children who encounter inappropriate behaviour from other pre-schoolers.

Body ownership should be introduced at an early age because young children often think that their bodies belong to their parents. To stay safe, they need to develop the confidence that comes from the knowledge that their bodies are their own, that they can say No and reject and report inappropriate and unwanted touching and be believed and supported ... whoever the toucher happens to be. South Australian kindergarten teachers have been using this aspect of Protective Behaviours for the last 20 years. A helpful little book that's been around since 1982 is "*It's my Body*" by Lory Freeman. I'm pleased to hear that the FPAQ is planning a replacement because little has been published since the early 80s.

However, I wish to emphasise that all resources need to be accompanied by discussion and opportunities for questions.

Parental support is vital because, unless they understand what you're doing and why, parents may reject children who seek their support for stopping Grandad's uncomfortable hugs or Auntie's sloppy wet kisses, giving children the message that they have to tolerate unwanted touching to please adults. This message is quite the opposite of the one that's needed.

## Sexual differences

When youngsters see parents or siblings' naked bodies and ask questions they should be told that men and boys have penises and scrotums/testicles, women and girls have vaginas or vulvas and we all have breasts. Children need assurance that their femaleness or maleness is normal. It's important for them to feel comfortable with their own bodies. It's obviously easiest to deal with this when they're young and aren't embarrassed. When children ask questions it's important that we give them correct information but only as much as they are capable of understanding. Shame is learned from embarrassed adults who become angry, give half-truths or tell downright lies to hide their own discomfort. Children become fearful when adults are secretive or avoid responding to their questions. Children's curiosity increases when they sense there is something wrong about their interest in their bodies.

Although it's good for young children to see parents behaving affectionately, they don't need to know about the mechanics of sexual intercourse. Children are alarmed when they see or hear adults engage in sexual activity.

If they walk in unexpectedly, they need reassurance that daddy isn't hurting mummy and they're not fighting... that parents like to cuddle this way when they love each other. Unfortunately some children are exposed indiscriminately to the sexual activities of a parent who has various partners. Those parents should be receiving the message that this isn't OK and it probably constitutes abuse.

**Parent participation** in programs is vital because unless there are good communications between centres and parents, the parents can unwittingly undermine everything that is being taught. Child protection strategies often counter traditional parenting practices. We are teaching children different vocabulary from that used in most homes. We tell children that, in certain circumstances, they CAN say No to adults, that they CAN reject unwanted and inappropriate touching and that they MUST tell secrets that involve their bodies.

Formal parent information sessions are not well attended: 22-30% attendance rates throughout the English-speaking world. In our research parents accounted for their absence as follows:

- 10% said that they were already familiar with the program;
- 10% said that the meeting was timed inappropriately or there was no crèche available;
- The remainder declared that they trusted the teachers implicitly and were happy to leave the curriculum to them. Schools and centres in low socio-economic areas were less likely to involve parents than middle class counterparts but the latter were more likely to deny that personal safety education was necessary for their clientele.

In New Zealand, teachers increased attendance by sending letters with return slips that required parents to suggest a date and time for a private interviews if they were unable to attend the session. They didn't want a one on one meeting with a teacher about sexual matters they attended – (see *Teaching Children to Protect Themselves* by Briggs with McVeity). We have to provide crèches to ensure that dads don't avoid attendance with

the excuse that they have to baby-sit. Its vital that father figures attend because they are less well informed than mothers and tend to reject children's signals that they've been abused, responding on the lines that their best mates or their brothers or dads wouldn't dream of doing that to their kids and the mothers are paranoid.

Where parents don't return attendance slips, staff should phone them. This is effective. In addition to information sessions, New Zealand made a parent video, provided a parent booklet and sent home weekly letters advising parents what was taught, why and how they could reinforce safety strategies at home. Parents insisted that letters should be limited to one page, readable between the letterbox and the kitchen. (See my book for samples)

For Junior Primary children, New Zealand teacher's manuals include suggestions for joint child-parent homework, which has to be signed and returned.

Parents need to know how important it is that they listen to and support their children. In more than a thousand interviews, 25% of reception class children said they'd already tried to get parental help to stop unwanted touching and failed. Grown ups don't listen to kids, they said. Grown-ups don't believe kids. They stick together. At the age of five, children were already cynical about their parents' willingness and capacity to protect them.

### **Differentiating between what's normal/abnormal**

Parents and early childhood staff often ask me about masturbation. Is it normal for children to masturbate? How should it be handled?

Pre-school boys normally play with their penises in the bath or when being changed. Children should be reassured that its OK to play with genitals but as they are private, they have to do it in private places, in the bedroom, in the bathroom, but we don't do it when others are present or likely to come in. Children need to learn gradually that society has social rules and expectations. For example, while its probably OK to go around the house naked, we don't go shopping without clothes because other people wouldn't like to see our nude bodies...apart from being cold. This was explained well in the book, "*What's wrong with bottoms*" which sensitively explains why inappropriate sexual touching by a favourite uncle is wrong and reportable.

When masturbation is obsessive, it may be a sign that a child is emotionally disturbed and in need of comfort or it may be an indication that the child has been sexually abused. It is appropriate to confirm that touching genitals gives a pleasant feeling but it might also be a good idea to ask, "Who showed you how to do that?" It's advisable to reassure little boys that its normal for penises to stiffen when handled and this happens to adults too.

Its important for parents and professionals to know the difference between children's normal sexual curiosity and indications that a child has been abused and is re-enacting that abuse.

Sexual exploration between same age children is normal unless it's obsessive. It's normal when participants are equal partners – when it's: “You show me yours and I'll show you mine” looking rather than touching. When they're caught, participants giggle with embarrassment. Distract but don't criticise.

It's a sign that children have been abused when they use tricks, secrecy, threats, force or bribes or use younger or less mature children for sexual activity. It's a sign that they've been abused when they insert objects or fingers into children's openings or bully others into acting sexually while they stand and watch. It's a sign of abuse when the instigator uses adult porn language or asks the victim if s/he likes it.

It definitely isn't normal curiosity to demand or offer oral sex in the childcare centre. And watch out for children's sexually explicit drawings, armless and mouthless or faceless self portraits when children can draw arms and faces.

In normal child curiosity children become bored as soon as curiosity is satisfied. Child abuse victims who have become abusers are likely to display an unhealthy long-term interest in genitals and sexual misbehaviour. They often teach others what to do. When caught, the mini abuser denies the behaviour and becomes angry. If punished, the behaviour continues but out of sight of parents and staff.

Because boys' genitals are highly visible and are handled daily in toilets that lack privacy, boys are at high risk of encountering abusive situations. Our research in 2004 showed that the sexual abuse of young boys by older students is widespread in school toilets. Furthermore, while 44% of boys told us they'd been forced to 'wank' older students, they didn't regard this as reportable abuse. This is because the word wank is in their daily vocabulary.

They didn't report it because they were afraid of being disbelieved, were afraid of violent retribution and worse, and were afraid of being labelled as 'poofers' or 'homos'. Sexual taunts are used to bully children even in the reception class.

They may not understand the meaning but they know that it's insulting and will tolerate abuse and remain silent rather than risk being labelled. The problem is that the acceptance of 'wanking' can lead to more violent offences – oral and anal rape.

### **Parental negligence**

Ideally child protection information is taught alongside sex education. Successful educators and parents don't rely on occasional formal sessions; they practice safety concepts on a daily basis – reminding and reinforcing.

Although researchers have found that parents present a rosy picture of their involvement in their children's sex and child protection education, the children say their parents tell fibs.

A study of 98 parents and their 16 year old offspring found that while 88 per cent of parents claimed to have open discussions on sexual matters and 89 per cent said that they'd discussed sexually transmitted infection and contraception, their children said this was false. A second survey which asked 1800 adolescents about the attitudes of their parents towards sexual matters found that 81 per cent had no discussions whatsoever with their fathers and 69 per cent had hardly any with their mothers. Parents expected children to initiate discussion and of course they don't.

The initiative has to come from the adults at the right time. Professor Doreen Rosenthal of La Trobe University confirmed that although parents know that children are likely to be sexually active in adolescence they avoid discussion. When parents were challenged about their untruths, they admitted that they had exaggerated their involvement but added, "I'd be willing to discuss it if they asked me." (*The Australian*, August 31 1993 p3).

The fact is that parents simply don't know what to say because they didn't experience forthright discussion when they were young. At best they were told to avoid strangers. They clearly need help to deal with the issues that children face in this rapidly changing world.

Children are dependent on childcare professionals and teachers to teach personal safety skills. Pre-schools have always taught children how to stay safe with traffic, fire, water, electricity, sharp instruments – it follows that they are the best for teaching children to stay safe with people. For effectiveness, however, parents must be informed what is being taught, why and how they can reinforce safety strategies at home.

### **Stranger Danger**

For decades parents, teachers and police have only warned children to beware of strangers... without telling them why.

Adults felt comfortable with this because, after all, we don't know any strangers. We don't invite them into our homes and its much easier to alert children to dangers from strangers rather than tell them that people we know might misbehave. Children know about rude kids but they don't realize that some grow up to become abusive adults.

In 1984-5, media and police revealed that only about 6% of child sex abuse reports involved strangers – most abuse is committed by people children know and trust. Nevertheless the stranger-danger message continued.

In 1990, we discovered that after more than 70 years of being told not to speak to strangers, children under the age of 8 — and some now say ten — don't know what a stranger is. The concept is too complex and teaching them to fear strangers is not only a waste of time but dangerous.

We found that children's perception of a stranger is a male who wears a black balaclava, leers and has evil eyes. He steals children from their beds and murders them. Whole classes told me they had never seen a stranger in their lives (except on TV) but would know one instantly if they saw one. Six year olds said they have nightmares about half human half monster stranger creatures. The consequence is that children trust anyone who doesn't look like the mythical stranger.

Throughout schools and centres in South Australia and New Zealand I was assured that I wasn't a stranger even though I'd only just arrived.

Why? Because I'm a woman and women aren't strangers. I looked like their grandmas, they said. I looked kind and seemed kind. I carried a brief case, which meant I work. Strangers don't work, they only steal. "And teachers would never let strangers come into our school", they said. In an Adelaide special school, blind children told me I wasn't a stranger because I knew their names or they'd been talking to me for 2 minutes.

Piaget found that young children couldn't assess adults' motives. They judge them on appearance. We found that they will trust anyone who looks pleasant and isn't like the mythical monster.

Last year, with Channel 7 *Today Tonight*, parents put their children to the test with an elderly actor. They said they had instilled the importance of avoiding dangerous strangers and were sure that their children would not talk to, least of all accompany a stranger. They were horrified to see them talk happily to the actor and cheerfully walk away with him to find a non-existent lost puppy and help him carry shopping back to his car. A 5-year old almost climbed into Channel 7's car to show the driver the way to her church on a map.

Older children DID get into the back of a van to collect a package to help the driver who pretended to have a bad back. When older children went indoors to seek their parents' help, they made one giant mistake: they left their young siblings with the actor.

The nicest, most helpful, intelligent children were caught out because they simply didn't identify the man as a stranger and didn't perceive the situation as potentially dangerous. Channel 7 rewarded them with a trip to the studios and videos of their favourite programs and parents assured them that they had helped to protect other kids.

What becomes clear is that we have to alert children to potentially dangerous situations rather than dangerous people. Children need a great deal of practice in problem solving ... working out what would be the safest and best thing to do in a wide range of everyday circumstances. Which stranger would be the best to approach for help if lost in a department store, the royal show, a sports occasion, the Xmas pageant. Parents don't prepare children for separation until after children have been lost and given them a fright.

When we asked children how they could stay safe if lost in a crowded toy department at Christmas, they said they would stand still (as instructed by the parent)... then look for a person, male or female, with a kind face who would take them home to mummy.

They wouldn't approach a shop assistant because she couldn't leave the money and adult customers to take them home. And she might take them to a stranger. They knew about PA systems but didn't think they could utilise them because although they'd heard lost child announcements they'd never heard a child's voice.

Five year old boys think they're Supermen. Some would try to walk home (13km in 40 degrees Celsius heat). Others said they would go to the bedding centre to sleep.

Where teachers had told children about Safe Houses – some said they'd find a safe house although there are obviously none in our main shopping mall. I told them about the PA system and how to stay safe.

A year later I asked the same group what they could do if lost at the Christmas pageant. The 5-year-old boys said they'd climb on Santa's float so mum would see them. None of the kids would say anything to police because police are there to control traffic and crowds or take bad people to jail. They couldn't take them home. Police might tell them off for being lost. They knew that police had radios but it never occurred to them that police could call a police car to take them home. So all but one would look for a person with a smile who would take them home... a stranger.

One bright lad remembered what I'd said the previous year and grinned, "I know. I'd go into Myer and ask them to put out a lost child announcement on the PA system."

Without a lot of practice in thinking things through, children don't make connections. They think in terms of immediacy. Who can take me to mummy here and now?

Problem solving activities should include what children should do if mum didn't collect them. Suppose that someone else offered to take them home? Suggest that parents provide secret codes. Children love them.

Bear in mind that too many children are abused by neighbours. Parents should be advised to set limits —getting permission to visit and establishing who else is there.

Ask children what would be the safest thing to do if they were at home and the phone rang? ...if someone knocked on the door? If smoke came out of the TV? Suppose that a new babysitter wanted to play a game that had to be kept secret? Supposing that mum collapsed and wouldn't waken up. Ensure that children know how to use a phone to report an emergency... that they know their addresses and phone numbers. Role-play with pretend phones is perfect for giving children practice in making clear reports. Without practice, they give only the vaguest of hints that something is wrong, especially when they lack the vocabulary to report. They think they've reported sex abuse when they tell mum that the babysitter was mean or,

“The babysitter wanted me to get undressed.”

“I don’t like the games he plays.”

“I don’t like the way she teases me. Do we have to keep secrets?”

“Granddad put his finger in my private pocket.”

“I don’t like uncle’s ice cream.”

“I don’t like playing horsey with…”

Busy adults don’t stop to ask children what the game or the teasing involves. Lacking help, children then think that no help is available and they cannot stop it from happening.

Child protection programs teach them to be persistent and keep on seeking help until someone takes notice.

Asking questions about babysitters we discovered that 10% of under 8’s had been sexually abused by babysitters in the guise of games.

Last year we investigated what parents had told children to protect them after they had already been abused; 44% of both boys and girls indicated that they had been sexually abused but only the girls had made reports to authorities.

After the abuse, both boys and girls were merely told by parents to avoid strangers – although strangers were not their abusers. One girl was merely told, “Stay away from boys. They get you pregnant” Little has changed.

### **Observation skills**

For staying safe from harm by strangers, children can benefit from opportunities to develop observation skills. We often read about strangers in cars trying to abduct children. If only one person took a description of the car, the abductor would be caught on day one. NEW ZEALAND Police teach children to write numbers down using pebbles or fingers in soil. Play the party game where a tray is brought in then, after a few minutes, is removed and children have to describe what was on the tray. Ask children to describe someone who just left the room. Spot car numbers on the car park and use them for maths. Count cars of specific types, makes or colours. Observation skills are an asset to everyone.

### **Secrecy**

Child sex abusers have always relied on secrecy for their safety. Some threaten victims that dreadful things will happen if they tell. Some assure victims that what is happening is

a special secret. Our early childhood professionals teach children that only good surprises should be kept and secrets about touching must always be told.

In New Zealand we found that if parents were not advised why this was being taught, they undermined the message by instructing children that all family secrets must be kept.

Children then became very confused, concluding that they could only tell other children's nice secrets to make people happy but could never tell bad secrets that make people sad... the opposite to what is needed for their safety.

Without child protection programs children believe that all secrets must be kept. Furthermore, if they told their mothers about secret misbehaviour they would be punished twice over: first for rude talk and second for breaking the adult's secret. Without a program, children believe their mothers would tell the abuser that the secret had been revealed and the children would be punished yet again.

### **Good touch and wrong touch**

Most child protection programs talk about touching, often referring to good touch and bad touch rather than referring to wrong touching. The problem with using bad touch is that genital fondling may not feel bad; the Protective Behaviours Program assumes that if it feels good, it IS good, when of course it can be a crime. 78.5% of boy victims (N=198) told us that they initially thought the behaviour was normal and pleasurable and they only wanted to escape when they had to reciprocate yucky oral sex or abuse became violent.

Associating sexual abuse with being unsafe (as in the Protective Behaviours program) is also a mistake because paedophiles go to great lengths to make victims feel safe and important.

Children need clear information. They can't relate hints to what is happening to them, least of all if perpetrators are family members or authority figures and wield enormous power.

### **Children with disabilities**

The neglect of sex education for children with disabilities is of even greater concern than the neglect of non-disabled children. Numerous research projects including our own, showed not only that children with disabilities are deprived of basic information about their bodies but neither their parents nor the professionals working with them believe that sex education is necessary. Adults often prefer to think of these children as asexual. They are mistakenly perceived as unlikely to be chosen for abuse because they are unattractive by media standards. They forget that abuse is about manipulation and the abuse of power and offenders choose children who lack knowledge and confidence. They also know that when they abuse young and disabled children, they are unlikely to be prosecuted even if the child complains. Our courts simply don't cater for these children.

American and Canadian researchers have affirmed that explicit sex education is vital to protect children with disabilities.

It is a sad and shocking fact that most disabled children learn about sex as victims of abuse, usually abused by their carers — taxi drivers — bus drivers — family friends and their best mates. Canadian writers also confirm that victims with developmental disabilities are also the ones most likely to repeat the abuse creating another generation of victims.

Victims with disabilities are invariably abused by carers and people they know and trust. These children are said to be up to 700% more likely to be abused than non-disabled children. Some people put protection 'in the too hard basket' and think, mistakenly, that children with disabilities are less likely to suffer harm than non-disabled children. And yet the work of Garbarino, Sgroi, Kennedy and others shows conclusively that sexual abuse exacerbates the feelings of low self-esteem and powerlessness relating to the disability.

American researcher Susan Hard (1968) found that developmentally appropriate and comprehensive sex education was the key to the safety of girls with developmental disabilities. Before sex education, 68% of girls in this group were victimised. Chamberlain (cited in Senn) found that 25% of adolescent girls with intellectual disabilities had been raped or suffered attempted rape, one-third by father figures. When sex education was introduced, reports dropped to 12%, i.e. a much lower rate than for the non-disabled population. The protection of disabled children has been given scant attention worldwide.

Given that school based child protection programs have been available in the US since the early 1970s and in Australia since 1985, the neglect of the disabled cannot be explained as a mere oversight. We need to ask ourselves why the victimisation of our most vulnerable children is ignored. Where are the programs in Braille for the blind? Where are the books incorporating sign language for the deaf?

In a British study, Mountry and Fetterman (1989) found that 55% of deaf boys had been sexually abused and abusers deliberately learned sign language to take advantage of them. And yet when Margaret Kennedy from London's Keep Deaf Children Safe project began writing child protection books with sign language, she encountered resistance from teachers in special education.

## **Conclusion**

Researching in Australian and New Zealand schools (1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 2000 and 2004) with children and parents we found that the children with the greatest safety knowledge and the children who used the safety strategies taught were those whose parents were involved in school based child protection programs from the earliest level and reinforced safety concepts at home. Parents confirmed that the program was

beneficial because their children were more open and confident as a result of it. They were able to discuss any subject without embarrassment.

When children attended junior schools that didn't offer the program but joined middle schools that did, they found themselves disadvantaged. At age 11-12 years they were too embarrassed to talk to parents about the program and the parents said they were too embarrassed to talk to their kids. The taboo on sexual matters was already well established.

Centre based child protection programs are essential because, without them, all young children are at high risk if they encounter older victims of abuse who try to involve them in re enactment or deviant adults... male or female. Research involving the pre and post testing of children who had not been exposed to a program believed that:

- they had to obey all adults
- people who look and seem kind are kind
- they couldn't report sexual misbehaviour and had to keep all secrets, especially secrets about their bodies

Children from middle-income families were most knowledgeable but, before they completed the program, few knew enough to stay safe in any potentially unsafe situation. Indians, SE Asians and South Pacific Islanders knew their rights but often said that, in practice, their parents wouldn't be able to support them or stop inappropriate touching by older relatives because of the hierarchy within their culture.

Teachers faced with this dilemma have found that these parents will cooperate if they are aware of what is happening (and why). It's a question of building an open and honest relationship with families. Children with the poorest safety knowledge were those in the least safe families where mothers accepted violence as unavoidable and were often themselves victims.

Dr David Finkelhor, a well known American researcher after interviewing 2000 children for American Boy Scouts, confirmed that school programs and parent partnerships are vital to children's safety. Any program is better than none but the most effective are those that are comprehensive, open and honest and involve the discussion of what constitutes reportable misbehaviour. When subjected to threats or actual victimisation the children who had programs were the ones most likely to have used the strategies taught, felt good about their own performance and reported what happened. Finkelhor also found that parent participation made a difference to children's knowledge, confidence, coping skills and willingness to disclose past abuse, which had not previously been revealed.

The need for comprehensive sex education and child protection programs was also the strongest message arising from our research with 84 convicted child molesters in WA, SA and NSW prisons and 198 adult male survivors of sexual abuse. The men said they would avoid children who knew about their rights from school programs.

Clearly we cannot leave sex education or education for child protection to parents alone; they have to be in partnerships with early childhood settings and schools. For programs to be most effective, they must be realistic, open, and honest with parents are involved.

**End of speech**