School-based child sexual abuse prevention programs: a review of effectiveness

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CRD summary
This review concluded that, although many studies of school-based interventions to prevent child sexual abuse showed positive effects, in some cases this reflected sample size and the real gains were very diverse. These conclusions reflected the evidence presented in the review, but a relatively limited search and poor reporting of the review process made their reliability unclear.

Authors' objectives
To assess the effectiveness of programmes based in schools for the primary prevention of child sexual abuse.

Searching
The Education Resources Information Center and Social Sciences Citation Index were searched from 1990 to 2005. Google searches were carried out. Two key journals were handsearched. References of included studies were checked. Only studies reported in English were eligible for inclusion.

Study selection
Studies of any design that evaluated school-based programmes focused on working with school-aged children on primary prevention of child sexual abuse were eligible for inclusion. Studies were required to specify the evaluation methods, assessments and outcomes employed and report outcome data. Studies that focused on children or young people with learning difficulties were excluded from the review, as were studies that focused on physical, emotional or ritualistic abuse or neglect and those that focused on working with parents or teachers.

Included studies predominantly assessed programmes aimed at primary school age children; no studies exclusively assessed programmes targeted at secondary age children. Gender balance within study populations was inconsistently reported. All of the programmes assessed included discussion and several involved modelling and/or interactive learning. Core themes of included programmes involved teaching children: recognition of child sexual abuse and other types of abuse; to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate touching; to distinguish between good and bad secrets; to say "no" to unwanted approaches; to tell an adult; to know they were not to blame; and use of strategies to reduce the likelihood of abuse or to report abuse. Most programmes involved one or two sessions that lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. A range of different measures of effectiveness was used; few had known psychometric properties. Key outcomes were personal safety knowledge, self-protection skills, emotional impact, perception of risk, changes in disclosures, maintenance of gains and negative effects of the programme.

The authors did not state how papers were selected for the review.

Assessment of study quality
The authors did not explicitly state that validity was assessed, although a number of variables relevant to study validity were included in the synthesis. They did not state how many reviewers were involved in appraising these variables.

Data extraction
Data were extracted on the outcomes assessed and a range of variables that pertained to study design, implementation and population. Effect sizes were calculated where possible.

The authors did not state how many reviewers performed the data extraction.

Methods of synthesis
The studies were combined in a narrative synthesis grouped by the outcomes reported.

Results of the review
Twenty-two studies were included in the review. Eleven studies used a control group. The authors stated that participant identification and selection, sampling frameworks or procedures, attrition rates and implementation fidelity were inconsistently or poorly reported.

Nearly all studies found a small but significant average gain in self-protective knowledge; actual changes represented by these results were unclear due to the small size of the improvement and the impact of ceiling effects. The impact of the programmes on self-protection skills was unclear and in some cases the evidence was conflicting; this was partly due to issues with the measurement tools employed. Where effect sizes could be calculated (11 of 22 studies) they ranged from 0.14 to 1.40 for knowledge and skills. The mean effect size was 0.61 (n=5,821).

More than one third of studies reported some kind of emotional gain for participants; a range of outcome measures was included in this outcome. The impact of the programmes on risk perception was mixed and inconclusive. Maintenance of gains was reported at two, three and five months for knowledge (six studies); the impact on skills at two or three months follow-up was more mixed; self-esteem gains were maintained for younger children at three months. There was some evidence that multiple exposures to programmes significantly boosted outcomes (three studies). More than half of the studies reported some negative impact on children; these were mostly small in number, mild in nature and of short duration.

Programmes with the largest effect sizes and with multiple outcome gains were associated with use of each of the components: modelling, group discussion and role play.

The impact of population variables such as socioeconomic status, gender and ethnic origins on outcomes was discussed.

Authors’ conclusions
Although many studies showed positive and statistically significant effects of some sort, effect-size analysis indicated that in some cases this reflected sample size and that the real gains were very diverse.

CRD commentary
The review question and the inclusion criteria were clear. The authors searched some relevant databases and other sources. However, the decision to limit the review to studies reported in English may have led to the omission of some relevant studies and the possible introduction of language bias. The authors did not report that they used methods designed to reduce reviewer bias and error at any stage of the review process. The authors did not report that they carried out a formal assessment of study validity, although they discussed issues related to validity in the course of the narrative synthesis presented. The decision to present such a narrative synthesis was clearly appropriate in view of the degree of clinical and methodological heterogeneity between included studies.

The authors’ cautious conclusions reflected the evidence presented in the review, but a relatively limited search and poor reporting of the review process made the reliability of the conclusions unclear.

Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors stated that school-based programmes for the prevention of child sexual abuse should incorporate evaluation of effectiveness, incorporate modelling, discussion and skills rehearsal and be at least four to five sessions long. They should also have the capacity to be delivered by a range of personnel and involve active parental input.

Research: The authors stated that further research with larger sample sizes with better representation of a range of age groups was required to assess the effectiveness of school-based programmes for the primary prevention of child sexual abuse. The authors advocated replication of the assessment of specific programmes or common programme content and use of randomisation to waiting list controls. Further detailed recommendations were made in the paper.

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This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.