Protecting God's Children for Adults

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Disclosures Part 1: Why are Disclosures Important?

By Crispin Ketelhut Montelione

Editor's Note: *This is part 1 of a 2-part series regarding child disclosures. Part 1 will address why it is important to help children disclose, and Part 2 will review how to help create*



environments where children feel comfortable disclosing abuse or other harm.

Introduction

Helping children and youth disclose when they have experienced abuse or other harm is paramount within ministry. This article will address some challenging statistical realities involving survivors of abuse—and what happens when safe adults do not intervene. What happens to children during and after being abused should never be reduced to statistics or research. However, what is outlined here does provide key elements about the necessity of our involvement and the resilience of survivors that should animate us and give us great hope.

Studies show that when children know that adults are willing to believe them, and advocate for them, children are more willing to come to adults with their problems. When children are more willing to come to us with their problems, they are much more likely to disclose abuse—

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The Importance of Child Abuse Prevention Month—All Year Long

Crispin Ketelhut Montelione

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and this is really important! It matters because most children do not actually talk about the abuse that happens to them in the surrounding years or later. In fact, research says the average age of someone who ultimately discloses is 52, if ever! If it takes this long for people to successfully talk about what they experienced with abuse, this means there are decades where they did not receive help and support that could have potentially changed the trajectory of their lives.

Most people believe that children will go to their parents about abuse or grooming, but research tells us that children actually do not often (successfully) go directly to their parents to disclose. **This is when other adults, who are not the parents, become *really essential* to child protection.** Studies also show that children will go to other adults, such as educators, or volunteers and employees of child-serving organizations, more frequently than they do their parents. When children come to us and tell us that they are being abused or that their boundaries are being violated, this allows us to put measures into place to provide help, by preventing it from happening in the first place or helping to stop it from continuing.

We must address suspected and disclosed abuse quickly to help mitigate or reduce the potential negative impact of abuse, and subsequently increase the child's resilience. There is a robust body of research that has shown that when a person has been sexually abused in their childhood, the risk of negative associated outcomes of the trauma increase over the person's lifetime. Child sexual abuse has been linked to many negative outcomes, including: poor mental health, higher chances at attempting suicide, more likelihood of future sexual abuse and revictimization, greater likelihood of sexual assault and partner violence even into adulthood, more cognitive deficits, lower educational attainment, more negative physiological outcomes such as earlier onset of puberty, higher rates of eating disorders and obesity, greater likelihood of chronic health issues such as cancer, and ultimately, a reduced life expectancy—just to name a few.

Devastatingly, the effects of abuse do not only increase the child's vulnerability for negative outcomes, but it can also impact the child's family and can have later generational impact. In fact, the abused child's future grandchild will be more likely to experience sexual abuse if no changes or interventions are accomplished.

We can see that child sexual abuse is a public health issue for each and every one of us. All adults are involved in the safety of children in our communities, because this issue of at least one out of every 10 children being sexually abused affects us in our day to day lives, and can affect future generations.

Crispin has presented the Protecting God's Children program to several thousand participants. She has also trained and managed a diocesan team of facilitators through multiple Train the Trainer sessions, and continues to train administrators, trainers and facilitators for the VIRTUS programs nationally and internationally.

However, here is hope for healing! This can depend on a lot of factors. Our interaction with abuse survivors, even when we don't know they're survivors, is a tremendous aspect that influences that wellbeing, the future outcomes mentioned above, and their recovery, healing and resilience. Let's be clear: ***any*** *intervention or supportive response from a safe adult can reduce the risk of many or all negative outcomes.*

Many feel uncomfortable with potentially intervening or communicating with a child about abuse/online exploitation and then reporting it. This admittedly takes tremendous courage. One of the important things to remember when we consider our role as protectors is that we often need to consider the most vulnerable person and their potential needs. Knowing the increased risk of all the potential negative outcomes from abuse is a compendium of factors that compel us to act swiftly in the interest of a child's current and future welfare. Sometimes, this needs to be prioritized over our own possible discomfort.

When safe adults are willing to place the welfare of children in the center of every decision regarding their safety—rather than our own worries or fears—it increases opportunities for children to talk about it, reduces so many of these negative outcomes and increases opportunities for healing and wellness. This means that we have great power in our role as employees and volunteers. We never really know when a child is going to see us as a safe person they trust.

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1) Which of the following statements is FALSE?

A) ◯ When children have experienced abuse, they will typically go directly to their parents first and disclose to them before they talk about it with anyone else.

B) ◯ Child sexual abuse is a public health issue for each and every one of us, and all adults are involved in the safety of children in our communities.

C) ◯ When a person has been sexually abused in their childhood, the risk of negative associated outcomes of the trauma increase over their lifetime.

D) ◯ When safe adults are willing to place the welfare of children in the center of every decision regarding their safety—rather than our own worries or fears—it increases opportunities for children to talk about it.

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