

July 1996

PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Research Inconclusive About Effectiveness of Child Education Programs



General Government Division

B-272553

July 26, 1996

The Honorable Bill McCollum
Chairman, Subcommittee on Crime
Committee on the Judiciary
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This report responds to your request that we review and synthesize the current state of research knowledge on ways to prevent sex crimes against children. Our first report, issued in June 1996, described and synthesized reviews of the research literature on the effectiveness of treatment programs for sex offenders.¹ In this report, we describe and synthesize reviews of the research literature on education programs designed to help children avoid becoming victims of sexual abuse. We describe these reviews, report their findings on the effectiveness of education programs in preventing sexual abuse, and report their assessments of the supportability of conclusions drawn from existing research studies.

The third report, which we plan to issue later this year, will review the research literature on the likelihood of child victims of sexual abuse becoming adult sexual abusers of children and what may be done to prevent this from happening.

Background

The problem of child sexual abuse has received increasing attention in recent years. Deriving accurate estimates of the magnitude of the problem is difficult, however, because research has indicated that abuse tends to be underreported, definitions of what constitutes sexual abuse and the ceiling age used (e.g., whether abuse occurred prior to age 16 or 18) may vary across studies, and there are numerous other methodological difficulties in collecting data on this subject. These caveats provide a context for the abuse figures that follow: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that about 140,000 new cases of child sexual abuse were reported to and determined to be indicated or substantiated by state child

¹Sex Offender Treatment: Research Results Inconclusive About What Works to Reduce Recidivism (GAO/GGD-96-137, June 26, 1996).

protection agencies in 1994.² It has also been reported that between 25 and 35 percent of all sexually abused children are under the age of 7 and that 75 percent of the victims are abused by someone they know.³

Since the early 1980s, there has been a tremendous growth in sexual abuse prevention programs targeted at children of preschool and elementary school age. In 1989, 18 states mandated school-based child sexual abuse prevention programs.⁴ Surveys of school administrators have found that 48 to 85 percent of school districts offer these programs.⁵ The programs, typically delivered in classroom settings, are based on the assumption that children will be able to protect themselves from sexual abuse if they are taught to recognize instances of abuse and are trained in personal safety skills. Programs may also focus on helping children who are victims of past or ongoing sexual abuse, by encouraging them to disclose these incidents to parents or other responsible adults.

The growth in prevention programs has proceeded faster than the evaluation of their effectiveness. Questions exist about whether children learn and retain material taught in the programs, and whether informed children are truly capable of resisting abusive behavior directed at them by older and stronger offenders. Demonstrating empirically that prevention programs work is a difficult and challenging task. Methodological obstacles include selecting the criteria for judging success of the program, ruling out alternative explanations for results obtained by using a comparison group of children who were similar to those exposed to the education program except that they did not receive instruction, and studying children for a long enough period to ensure that the program has

²U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, Child Maltreatment 1994: Reports from the States to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996). The figure of 140,000 sexual abuse cases was based on responses from 47 states and the District of Columbia. Connecticut, Maryland, and West Virginia did not provide figures on the number of substantiated or indicated sexual abuse cases. A substantiated or indicated case represents a type of investigation disposition in which sufficient evidence is established under state law to conclude that maltreatment occurred, that the child is at risk of maltreatment, or that there is reason to suspect maltreatment. State agencies differ in how they report incidence data, with some counting each incident of abuse once regardless of the number of children involved, and others counting each child involved separately. Some children may be counted more than once if multiple incidents of abuse are reported during the year.

³S. Wurtele, "Sexual Abuse." In Handbook of Prevention and Treatment with Children and Adolescents: Intervention in the Real World Context, eds. R.T. Ammerman and M. Hersen (New York: Wiley, in press).

⁴J. Kohl, "School-based Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs," Journal of Family Violence, Vol. VIII (1993), pp. 137-150.

⁵Deborah A. Daro, "Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse," The Future of Children, Vol. IV, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 1994), pp. 198-223; D. Helge, Child Sexual Abuse in America — A Call for School and Community Action (Bellingham, Washington: National Rural Development Institute, 1992).

lasting effects. There are also ethical obstacles to determining program effectiveness. These include the issue of denying a comparison group of children a potentially beneficial education program. Ethical considerations also arise in trying to measure accurately whether young children can use what they have learned to resist offenders. Some argue that exposing young children to a simulated abusive episode, while potentially a good measure of children's capability to respond to an actual assault, may be unduly traumatic, or may desensitize children to dangerous situations.

Results in Brief

We identified 16 reviews that provided qualitative or quantitative summaries of research on education programs designed to prevent sexual abuse. The reviews discussed the studies in terms of program effectiveness and methodological adequacy.

There was general consensus among the reviews that there was not as yet any direct evidence that these programs were effective in preventing the occurrence of child sexual abuse. The reviews focused on whether children could acquire knowledge about sexual abuse and learn skills that might prove useful in an abusive situation, as well as whether programs prompted victimized children to disclose ongoing or past abuse. There was general consensus that children could learn concepts about abuse, although it was clear that some concepts were more difficult to grasp than others. For example, children had a difficult time grasping the concept that abuse could be perpetrated by a family member. There was less consensus about whether knowledge was retained over the long term, whether children could learn skills for resisting abuse, and whether children would disclose new instances of abuse after participating in the program. Finally, the reviews generally agreed that programs were more effective in teaching concepts to older children, and that concepts and skills could be grasped better when taught with active participation (e.g., modeling or role-playing techniques) than with more passive methods (e.g., films or lectures).

Most reviews reported that methodological limitations in the research precluded conclusions about the effectiveness of education programs in preventing sexual abuse. The problems identified may be grouped into two broad categories: (1) limitations in the outcome measures used, and (2) limitations in the design of studies.

A majority of the research reviews noted that the outcome measures used in evaluation studies were not valid indicators of prevention. These

reviews emphasized the need to develop measures that would directly indicate whether sexual abuse was avoided following education programs. The reviews also criticized the reliance on verbal self-report measures because studies have found little correspondence between what children say they will do and their actual behavior. More generally, the reviews noted the lack of standardization of outcome measures in this field, including the tendency of evaluators to develop new and unique outcome measures for each study, and their failure to measure or report information on the statistical properties of the testing instruments (such as test reliability) that would enable other researchers to refine the instruments and replicate earlier results. The reviews pointed to the need for systematic data collection about disclosures of sexual abuse and about potential negative side effects produced by the programs.

All the research reviews identified design weaknesses in the studies. Chief among these was the absence of comparison groups (against which to compare groups exposed to an education program) and, alternatively, the use of comparison groups of children who differed in systematic ways from the children receiving the education program. The latter situation made it difficult to judge whether differences in outcomes were a result of the program or were an effect of selecting only certain kinds of children for the program. Half of the reviews noted that some studies failed to pretest children on measures of knowledge, skills, and anxiety prior to their introduction to the program. This made it difficult to establish a baseline against which to compare changes that occurred as a result of participation in the program. A number of reviews identified inadequate follow-up periods. Only a few studies collected follow-up information on children's knowledge for periods longer than 3 months.

Scope and Methodology

To examine the effectiveness of education programs to prevent child sexual abuse, we collected, reviewed, and analyzed information from 16 research reviews issued between 1986 and 1996. These reviews were identified through a multistep process that included contacting known experts in the sex offense research field, conducting computerized searches of several online databases, and screening over 100 studies on sexual abuse prevention programs. We sent the list of reviews to two experts, who have done extensive research in the field, to confirm the comprehensiveness of our list of research reviews.⁶

⁶Appendix II lists the experts we used for identifying research in this area.

We used a data collection instrument to systematically collect information on the research reviews of education programs. We collected information on program targets, settings and objectives; methods of presentation and characteristics of presenters; outcome measures; methodology issues; follow-up periods; and conclusions reached from these reviews. (See app. I for a more detailed description of our methodology.)

We sent a draft of this report to the two experts previously consulted, and one additional expert, to ensure that we had presented the information about the reviews and research articles accurately.⁷ Their comments were incorporated where appropriate. We did not send a draft to any other agency or organization because we did not obtain information (other than study citations) from such organizations for use in this study. We did our work between October 1995 and June 1996 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Description of the Research Reviews

The 16 research reviews covered about 135 studies on education programs designed to help children prevent sexual abuse. Of these studies, 65 were cited in 2 or more reviews, and 34 were cited in 5 or more reviews. Given the widely varying levels of detail provided in the research reviews, we could not always determine whether reference was being made to an evaluation of an education program or to other types of studies on education programs (e.g., descriptions of programs, or specific materials available for use by schools or parents). We therefore could not precisely determine the total number of studies on education programs covered in these research reviews. We also did not determine how many studies covered in the 16 research reviews were duplicative in terms of researchers publishing multiple articles based on the same set of data. The earliest study included in a research review was published in 1979; the most recent was published in 1995.

Almost all of the research reviews provided narrative assessment of original research studies, with approximately one-half providing a tabular summary of at least some of the studies covered. Two reviews performed a meta-analysis, a statistical aggregation of the results from multiple studies, to derive an overall quantitative estimate of the effectiveness of education programs.

Most research reviews did not restrict their coverage to a single type of setting (classroom, home, or other community setting), specific target

⁷Appendix II lists the experts who reviewed this report.

group (children, teachers, or parents), or specific outcome measure (knowledge, skills, or disclosures of abuse). The two reviews that employed meta-analysis focused specifically on knowledge and skills acquired by children. Two other research reviews limited their coverage to published studies.

Research Reviews Found No Direct Evidence That Education Programs Prevent the Occurrence of Child Sexual Abuse

Fifteen of the 16 research reviews concluded that there was no evidence from the empirical studies they reviewed that demonstrated the effectiveness of education programs in actually preventing the occurrence of child abuse. This did not mean that the programs were ineffective, but rather that none of the studies had been designed so that the link between what was taught in education programs and actual prevention of sexual abuse could be adequately tested. The one review that did not offer a conclusion about prevention was limited in scope in that it only reviewed program effects on knowledge and skills.

Most education programs aim for more short-term objectives than prevention of sexual abuse, and nearly all of the research reviews included some discussion of these short-term objectives. Fourteen of the 16 reviews discussed the goal of teaching children concepts about sexual abuse (defining “appropriate” and “inappropriate” forms of touching, defining what are “private parts,” and informing children that abuse could be committed by people known to them). Fifteen of the reviews discussed the goal of teaching children skills for resisting or avoiding abusive situations (saying “no,” physical defense, or leaving the scene). Fourteen of the 16 reviews discussed the programs’ goal of encouraging children to disclose past or ongoing incidents of abuse to parents or other responsible adults.

Thirteen of the 16 reviews concluded that education programs were generally effective in teaching children new concepts about sexual abuse. Eight of the reviews concluded that these programs were effective in teaching children skills, such as saying no or leaving the scene. Many reviews noted that some concepts were more difficult to learn than others—for example, the concept that abuse could come from someone in the child’s family was particularly difficult for children to grasp. Most of the reviews discussed whether knowledge and skills gained in programs were retained by children over the long term. Nine of the reviews concluded that studies showed that knowledge or skills could be retained for periods ranging from 3 months to 1 year. Four other reviews concluded that results for long-term retention were mixed or that the research was inconclusive. Reviewers who concluded that children made knowledge or

skills gains after participating in education programs nevertheless cautioned that little was known about whether these gains made children any more capable of resisting actual attempts at sexual abuse. Of the 14 reviews that looked at disclosures, 4 noted that there was at least tentative support for the conclusion that programs were effective in encouraging children to disclose past or ongoing incidents of sexual abuse. The remainder either offered no conclusions or noted that the findings were inconclusive. Many of the reviews, including those with positive conclusions regarding disclosure, also noted that more systematic research was needed in this area.

Half of the reviews discussed side effects of education programs, both negative and positive. Some critics of education programs have raised concerns that children who participate in these programs may have increased anxiety or fear that abuse might “happen to them,” may become oversensitive to appropriate situations involving touch, or may develop negative attitudes towards sexuality. Proponents of education programs have argued that programs may make children feel safer and more able to protect themselves or more willing to discuss sexual abuse concepts with their parents. Five of the eight reviews that discussed side effects concluded that there was little evidence of negative side effects, and three concluded that the research findings on this topic were mixed. Five reviews mentioned possible positive side effects, including increased discussion of child sexual abuse between children and parents.

Most of the reviews included some discussion of the techniques used to present concepts or skills to children. These techniques vary considerably, ranging from classroom lectures; to films, puppet shows, or theatrical performances; to programs that involve more active participation by children, such as role-playing abusive scenarios or rehearsing behaviors that might be used to avoid or resist abuse. Twelve of the 16 reviews concluded that children who participated in programs that used more active techniques (e.g., modeling, role-playing, or behavior rehearsal) made greater knowledge or skill gains than children participating in programs that used more passive techniques (e.g., lectures or films).

A majority of the reviews did not specifically mention, for at least some of the studies they reviewed, the total length of the education program or the total number of sessions involved. Those reviews that discussed program duration and frequency of sessions noted that programs varied considerably, from single sessions lasting less than an hour, to ones presented over several days. Nevertheless, education programs typically

are short in duration and limited in intensity. One review noted that a school-based education program is “most likely offered during one session of less than 2 hours duration.”⁸ None of the reviews had specific conclusions regarding the optimum duration or intensity of programs, although several noted that programs that involved multiple sessions, periodic “booster” sessions to review material covered in earlier sessions, and/or active participation were most likely to have positive results.

All of the reviews discussed programs targeted towards elementary school children, and 15 of 16 reviews discussed programs targeted towards preschool children. Eleven of 16 reviews concluded that education programs were more likely to be effective with older children than with younger ones. Nevertheless, some reviews concluded that preschool-age children could gain knowledge about sexual abuse if they participated in programs that included repetition, active learning techniques, and parent education.

Discussion of programs targeted at adolescents, parents, and teachers and other professionals was much more limited in the research reviews. Only two of the reviews discussed programs targeted towards high school or junior high school students, eight reviews discussed programs that involved some components of parent education, five reviews discussed programs targeted at teachers, and two reviews discussed programs targeted towards school counselors, nurses, or childcare workers in residential institutions. Noting that most education programs were focused on children, and that most were delivered in school settings, several reviews suggested that programs might be more effective if they were linked with comprehensive community efforts to prevent child sexual abuse.

Only two reviews attempted to quantify the overall effectiveness of education programs, and they did so using a statistical aggregation technique called meta-analysis. Each meta-analysis found that participants in both preschool and elementary-school programs made knowledge gains that were either moderately or substantially greater than those of comparison groups.⁹ One of the meta-analyses further reported that programs that used more active formats (modeling and role-playing) were

⁸S. Wurtele, in press, p. 11.

⁹J. D. Berrick and R. P. Barth, 1992; T. Heidotting and S. W. Soled, in preparation.

more effective than those that used passive formats (lecture, films, and stories).¹⁰

Most reviewers, even those who were quite positive about the effectiveness of programs in teaching concepts and skills, agreed that more work was needed before firm conclusions could be reached. They cited the methodological limitations of studies as a major obstacle to drawing firm conclusions about program effectiveness.

Research Reviews Identified Methodological Limitations in Evaluating the Effectiveness of Education Programs

The research reviews found that conclusions about the effectiveness of education programs were impeded by methodological weaknesses in the studies. The problems identified may be grouped into two broad categories: (1) limitations in the outcome measures used and (2) limitations in the design of studies.

Limitations in Outcome Measures

A majority of the research reviews noted that the outcome measures used in evaluation studies were not valid indicators of prevention. These reviews emphasized that most research studies measured whether children learned concepts about sexual abuse and personal safety skills, but that no study had developed reliable and valid measures to examine whether education programs resulted in long-term reductions in the incidence of sexual abuse.¹¹

¹⁰T. Heidotting and S. W. Soled, in preparation.

¹¹A survey conducted by the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research asked federally appointed liaisons for child abuse and neglect in each state and the District of Columbia to provide data on the number of children reported for sexual abuse (C. Lung and D. Daro, *Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1995 Annual Fifty State Survey*, National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, 1996). The results showed that the number reported as sexually abused grew in the 1970s and 1980s, reaching a high point of over 400,000 cases in 1991, and then declined in recent years to around 300,000 cases in 1995. In addition, of all reported cases of abuse and neglect, the proportion involving sexual abuse has dropped from 16 percent in 1986 to 10 percent in 1995. One expert reviewer of our draft report commented that a possible explanation for these declines might be the efficacy of sexual abuse prevention programs. However, there are as yet no research data demonstrating a causal link between outcomes of prevention programs and changes in incidence rates. Without such data, it is difficult to tell whether decreases in the number of reported sexual abuse cases are due to the effectiveness of prevention programs, changes in how data are recorded, changes in the appeal process, changes in definitions of information and referral calls, or other possible explanatory factors.

The reviews noted other limitations in measures of more proximal outcomes—i.e., gains in knowledge and skills. Five reviews criticized the primary research studies for their overreliance on verbal self-report measures. Such measures are widely used, both to test for gains in knowledge about sexual abuse and to test whether children say they will use the self-protection strategies that they have learned in education programs. But self-reports may be unreliable measures of what children have learned and what they are capable of doing. Some studies have found little correspondence between what children say they will do and their actual behavior. The reviews recommended supplementing verbal self-report measures with behavioral measures that could more reliably indicate how children would behave in actual encounters with an abuser.

Twelve of the reviews discussed studies that had attempted to test children's behavior using "real life simulations." In these, children were lured by potential abductors who were associates of the researcher. Reviewers cautioned that these kinds of measures have several limitations. Since they measure children's responses to strangers, and since research shows that most sexual abuse is perpetrated by persons known to the victim, they may not be valid measures of children's ability to resist most abusers. And there are potential ethical problems. For example, such simulations may unduly frighten children, on the one hand, or may desensitize them to truly dangerous situations, on the other.¹²

One review mentioned a recent set of studies that used a different method for collecting data on children's resistance skills in real-life situations.¹³ The investigators conducted a national telephone survey of children ages 10 to 16 in which they queried them about their experiences with sexual abuse and with prevention programs. The survey found that 67 percent of respondents had been exposed to a prevention education program in the course of their schooling. Approximately 40 percent of the children who

¹²Two expert reviewers of our draft report commented that researchers who intend to use behavioral measures face a host of logistical and ethical challenges. For example, they both noted that it is very difficult to devise behavioral measures of resisting abuse and that simulating the perpetration of child sexual abuse for research purposes may be unethical. One of the reviewers also noted that obtaining approval from human subject protection committees and obtaining parental consent to use such behavioral measures may be difficult. Even if parents consent, researchers still have a responsibility to debrief the study participants when the study is concluded. Researchers are reportedly struggling with determining the best ways to debrief children, many of whom may not be able to fully understand the explanation given.

¹³David Finkelhor, Nancy Asdigian, and Jennifer Dziuba-Leatherman, "The Effectiveness of Victimization Prevention Instruction: An Evaluation of Children's Responses to Actual Threats and Assaults," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (1995), pp. 141-153; David Finkelhor and Jennifer Dziuba-Leatherman, "Victimization Prevention Programs: A National Survey of Children's Exposure and Reactions," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (1995), pp. 129-139.

were exposed to a prevention program reported specific instances where they used the information or skills taught in the programs to protect themselves. Children who reported being victimized were more likely to use self-protection strategies if they had received comprehensive prevention instruction, which included opportunities to practice the skills in class, multiday presentations, and materials to take home to discuss with parents. While the findings are suggestive, the reviewer stated that the study relies on self-report information with no independent confirmation of such reports, and the findings apply only to older children (those aged 10 to 16).

Several reviews pointed to the need for systematic data collection on whether children were more likely to disclose past or ongoing instances of abuse after exposure to an education program. A 1996 review noted that too few researchers provide information about disclosures during or subsequent to education programs, and that those who do report disclosures report only the actual number or percentage and fail to provide additional information (e.g., type of abuse, past versus ongoing, consequences of disclosure, disposition of case).¹⁴

More generally, several reviews noted the lack of standardization of outcome measures in this field. Investigators have tended to develop new and unique outcome measures for each new study, making it difficult to compare findings and make overall generalizations about program effectiveness¹⁵. This problem has been compounded because many studies have failed to measure or report information on the statistical properties of the testing instruments (for example, test reliability). Such information would enable other researchers to refine the instruments and replicate earlier results.

¹⁴S. K. Wurtele, in press.

¹⁵Outcomes have been assessed in different ways, depending on the types of program effects the researcher is investigating. Researchers have developed questionnaires to assess changes in knowledge of sexual abuse concepts, which may include items covering definitions of sexual abuse, descriptions of victims and perpetrators, and other concepts (e.g., "The victim is never at fault."). Measures used to assess knowledge of prevention skills may include descriptions of hypothetical encounters with adults, followed by questions about whether these situations are safe or unsafe and what would be an appropriate response on the part of the child. Some researchers have enacted a role-play of an unsafe encounter and required children to say "no," leave the situation, and immediately tell a parent about the incident. Children's scores are based on the degree to which they perform the response correctly. As described above, actual resistance behavior has been measured by the use of simulated stranger abductions, where children's responses are observed and coded for correctness.

Limitations in Study Design

All of the research reviews identified design weaknesses in the studies. Over half the reviews noted, for at least some of the studies they reviewed, the absence of comparison groups (against which to compare groups exposed to an education program) or the use of comparison groups of children who differed systematically from children who were exposed to the program. This made it difficult to judge whether differences in outcomes were a result of the program or were an effect of selecting only certain kinds of children for the program. Some more recent reviews noted that absent or inadequate comparison groups was more a problem in earlier studies, and that a number of well-designed studies now existed.

Eight of the reviews noted that some studies failed to pretest children on measures of knowledge and skills, or on measures of fear and anxiety, before exposing them to the education program. Without a baseline measure, it is difficult to determine whether post-program knowledge, skill, or fear levels changed as a function of program participation.

A number of reviews identified inadequate follow-up periods. They reported that only a few studies collected follow-up information on children's knowledge for periods longer than 3 months, with the longest follow-up period being 18 months. There was also a large variation in the follow-up period used across studies. Reviews noted that it is important to establish whether programs have lasting effects, as well as to determine what kinds of ongoing education are required to maintain or enhance initial program effects. In addition, some reviews pointed out that follow-up studies need to pay more attention to side effects or unforeseen consequences of participation. Although the reviews that discussed side effects found little evidence of initial negative consequences, many reviews noted that there was as yet little information on the long-term consequences of participation.

Conclusions

A growing number of studies are being done on the effectiveness of child sexual abuse education programs, many of which were assessed in the research reviews described and synthesized in this report. The most optimistic reviews have concluded that education programs showed some promise for imparting knowledge to children about sexual abuse, as well as teaching them personal safety skills for preventing sexual abuse. However, nearly all these reviews reported that definitive conclusions could not be drawn because no study yet had developed measures of whether these programs were effective in reducing the incidence of child sexual abuse. There was consensus that to demonstrate the effectiveness

of sexual abuse education programs more and better research would be required.

We are sending copies of this report to the Ranking Minority Member of the House Subcommittee on Crime. Copies will also be made available to others upon request. The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix III. Please call me at (202) 512-8777 if you have any questions about this report.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurie E. Ekstrand". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'L'.

Laurie E. Ekstrand
Associate Director, Administration
of Justice Issues

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Scope and Methodology

We collected, reviewed, and analyzed information from available published and unpublished reviews of research on education programs to prevent child sexual abuse. Identifying the relevant literature involved a multistep process. Initially, we identified experts in the sex offense research field by contacting the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and Office of Victim Assistance, the National Institute of Mental Health's Violence and Traumatic Stress Branch, the American Psychological Association, and selected academicians. These contacts helped identify experts in the field, who in turn helped identify other experts. We also conducted computerized searches of several online databases, including ERIC (the Education Resources Information Center), NCJRS (the National Criminal Justice Reference Service), PsycINFO, Dissertation Abstracts, and the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse.

We screened over 100 studies on sexual abuse prevention programs to determine their relevance to our work. This process revealed that a number of reviews of the research literature had been written. And, because of the level of effort involved in identifying and analyzing the large number of original research studies on sexual abuse education programs and our identification of a sufficient number of reviews of the research literature, we decided to base our synthesis on the research reviews.

A limitation of basing our work on the reviews was that we did not assess the original studies, but rather relied on the descriptions and assessments provided by the authors of the reviews. The reviews did not always cite the specific information, such as the outcome measures used, or whether comparison groups were used, on all studies they covered. This sometimes was because full descriptions of the research were not provided in the original studies themselves. This made it difficult to assess, in some cases, the extent to which limitations noted by a review characterized most of the studies that were reviewed or a small subset of the studies.

We sent the list of reviews to two experts, who have done extensive research in the field, to confirm the comprehensiveness of our list of research reviews.¹⁶ Also, as a final check, we conducted a second search of computerized online databases in March 1996 to ensure that no new reviews had been published since our original search in October 1995.

¹⁶Appendix II contains the list of experts we used in this effort.

We identified 20 research reviews on sexual abuse education programs issued between 1986 and 1996. We included 16 of these 20 reviews in our analysis. We were unable to obtain three reviews in time to include in our analysis. One other review was not included because the authors had written a more recent review that was more comprehensive. Of the 16 reviews, 9 had been published since 1990, 1 had been submitted for publication but had not yet been published, and 1 had been presented at a professional conference and was being revised for initial submission to a journal for publication.

We developed a data collection instrument to systematically capture information on program targets, settings, and objectives; methods of presentation and characteristics of presenters; outcome measures; methodology issues; follow-up periods; and conclusions reached. Each research review was read and coded by a social scientist with specialized doctoral training in evaluation research methodology. A second senior social scientist then read the research reviews and verified the accuracy of the coding of every item on every completed instrument.

We sent a draft copy of our report to the two experts who reviewed the comprehensiveness of our list of research reviews, as well as one additional expert. Appendix II lists these experts. They generally agreed that we presented information on the research reviews fairly and accurately, and made technical suggestions that we incorporated into the report as appropriate. We did not send a draft to any other agency or organization because we did not obtain information other than study citations from such organizations for use in this study.

Experts Consulted

The following experts commented on the draft report. The objective of the review was to ensure that we were presenting information fairly and accurately. Those with asterisks next to their names also reviewed our listing of research reviews to help ensure that our coverage of the literature was comprehensive.

Dr. David Finkelhor*
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Research Reviews Used in the Synthesis

Berrick, Jill D., and Richard P. Barth. "Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: Research Review and Recommendations." Social Work Research and Abstracts, Vol. XXVIII, No. 4 (December 1992), pp. 6-15.

Carroll, Leslie A., Raymond G. Miltenberger, and H. Katherine O'Neill. "A Review and Critique of Research Evaluating Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs." Education and Treatment of Children, Vol. XV, No. 4 (November 1992), pp. 335-354.

Conte, Jon R., and Linda A. Fogarty. "Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs for Children." Education and Urban Society, Vol. XXII, No. 3 (May 1990), pp. 270-284.

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Wurtele, Sandy K. "School-based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs: A Review." Child Abuse and Neglect, Vol. XI (1987), pp. 483-495.

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