

An Evaluation of the Use and Impact of a
School Based Child Abuse Prevention Program



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ABSTRACT

The research reported in this thesis deals with two important issues. The first relates to teachers' implementation and utilisation of a personal safety program in South Australia - the Protective Behaviours program. The second relates to what children learn about personal safety by participating in the program.

The research was undertaken in three linked stages. In Study 1, qualitative methods were used to identify 35 teachers' perspectives on the use of the Protective Behaviours program. In Study 2, insights from this earlier research were used to design a large scale survey (n = 957) that generated more broadly based data on teachers' use of, and decision making about, the program. Finally, in Study 3 an innovative video vignette methodology was used to compare the personal safety knowledge of children who had been taught the program (n = 194) with that of a group of children who had not been taught the program (n = 127).

The studies attempted to address some of the serious methodological and ethical problems encountered in abuse prevention research, while at the same time, contributing to our knowledge about the efficacy of abuse prevention strategies that involve teaching children how to identify, avoid and/or resist maltreatment.

Findings

A: Teachers' Use of the Protective Behaviours program

1. Around 20% of teachers did not teach any part of the program.
2. Most teachers were selective users of parts of the program.

3. There were few secondary teachers trained in Protective Behaviours, and of those who were trained, few implemented the program.
4. Junior primary teachers used more features of the program and in greater detail than their colleagues at other levels.
5. Teachers' main reasons for teaching the program related to the perceived benefits of the program for children.
6. Teachers' reasons for not teaching parts of the program related to the perceived lack of reliability of some parents to meet the expectations of the program, and the inability of some students to comprehend and implement particular strategies.
7. Medium to high level use of the program was linked to the provision of school level support to implement the program.
8. Teachers' beliefs about the prevalence of child abuse, and the efficacy of school based prevention initiatives influenced their use of the program.

B: Children's Personal Safety Learning

1. Protective Behaviours trained children more frequently identified feelings of fear in the sexually and physically unsafe scenes than Comparison children. This was particularly so with younger children.
2. There were few differences between the responses of children in the Protective Behaviours and Comparison groups, or between children of different ages, in response to the very unsafe scenes. The majority of children recognised the damaging impact of maltreatment on the victims.
3. More Protective Behaviours trained children correctly recognised and named sexually inappropriate behaviour than Comparison children.
4. Most children did not suggest using the widely accepted personal safety responses - 'No', 'Go', and 'Tell' - to prevent the escalation of the

physically and emotionally threatening situations to more serious levels.

5. Children's reactions to the sexually inappropriate behaviour were very different, however, with less children suggesting 'doing nothing' in this situation and many more (nearly three quarters of children) suggesting an 'accepted' personal safety strategy. This was so for children in both the Protective Behaviours and Comparison groups.
6. Once sexually inappropriate behaviour had occurred, more Protective Behaviours children in each age group suggested the appropriate personal safety strategy - 'Tell' - than did Comparison children.