

Transforming Communities to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation:

A Primary Prevention Approach

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This policy brief presents the distilled research and critical thinking of a diverse group of local and national experts in the field of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Prevention Institute assembled this team and coordinated their efforts with the generous funding and support of the Ms. Foundation for Women.* Via candid dialog and interviews, these leaders developed and prioritized primary prevention strategies, analyzed environmental factors and norms that perpetuate these problems, and outlined policies and practices for transforming our communities and our nation during these turbulent political and economic times. This brief focuses especially on strategies that build on previous successes within this field and hold the greatest promise for transforming communities and preventing child abuse and exploitation.

We thank these leaders for their dedication to the field and for their thoughtful insights throughout this process. Likewise, we thank the Ms. Foundation for Women for sponsoring this vital initiative.

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Prevention Institute

is a nonprofit, national center dedicated to improving community health and well-being by building momentum for effective primary prevention. Primary prevention means taking action to build resilience and to prevent problems before they occur. The Institute's work is characterized by a strong commitment to community participation and promotion of equitable health outcomes among all social and economic groups. Since its founding in 1997, the organization has focused on injury and violence prevention, traffic safety, health disparities, nutrition and physical activity, and youth development.

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OVERVIEW

“I have a ten-year-old daughter and a five-year-old boy. I want the world my children grow up in to be one where my daughter can live free of violence and my son will be expected to treat all women with respect. We need to invest at a level where we can create this future for our kids.”

Jim Hafner, Stop It Now! National Office

Preventing Abuse Before it Occurs: A Primary Prevention Approach

Over the last 30 years, advocates have worked hard to successfully educate us in child sexual abuse and its detrimental effects on children and society. Leaders and the general public alike have a greater understanding of the issue, and this awareness has reached a tipping point over the last ten years, resulting in mobilized groups advocating for social and political solutions to abuse. So far, the response to these demands has largely focused on after-the-fact actions like incarceration and individual protection efforts such as Internet safety campaigns. The next step requires expanding the overarching dialog, moving from a focus on the individual and after-the-fact efforts to an approach that can prevent child sexual abuse from ever happening. A primary prevention approach prevents abuse before it happens by addressing the environmental factors and societal norms that contribute to its occurrence in the first place. Leaders agree that the movement is poised for a greater emphasis on primary prevention, which honors and builds upon past successes and complements the field’s continued commitment to improving responses to this critical issue. This shift will require an increased effort to advance promising primary prevention approaches—essential to achieving dramatic reductions in rates of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

A primary prevention approach to child sexual abuse and exploitation promotes safe, healthy environments and behaviors, reducing the likelihood of abuse¹ in the first place. This approach is often confused with early intervention services for victims and perpetrators. Interventions, such as universal screening in health care settings, may help to alleviate trauma and potentially prevent future incidences; however, early identification is subsequent to actual or threatened violence and seldom alters the broader community and societal environment that gave rise to the violence. Primary prevention moves far upstream to change the environmental factors—such as economic inequalities, sexism, media, and marketing practices—that

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shape norms and behaviors of an entire population. Primary prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation is a systemic process capable of dramatically reshaping our environment and norms. It is a crucial component of community wellness.

Our success in preventing child sexual abuse depends on our ability to maintain a coordinated, comprehensive effort. Research confirms that the issue is deeply rooted in our environment and reinforced by our societal norms. It touches every community—the latest data reports that one in four girls and one in seven boys will be the victim of some type of sexual abuse/assault before age 18.² These numbers do not include the various ways children are sexually exploited through technology, pornography, and other commercial sexual exploitation. Further, we know that victims of abuse are at an increased risk for alcoholism, depression, sexually transmitted infections, intimate partner violence, and suicide attempts.³ The statistics provide an important challenge to our current norms and environments for children and adults: We must begin to shift our focus from individuals to environments, from fear to wellness, and build national momentum for a balanced, targeted investment in quality prevention strategies.

Quality prevention strategies counter environmental factors that support child sexual abuse and exploitation. Examples of these environmental factors include increased marketing towards children and a pervasive media presence with drastically high levels of sexualized messages and rigid gender roles. Root factors, such as marginalization—which increases the risks and decreases the resilience within specific communities—have not been widely acknowledged in policies and practices addressing child sexual abuse and exploitation. As one leader said, “There must be an increased awareness that child sexual abuse and exploitation does not occur in isolation, but instead, stems from deeply rooted social inequities and environmental influences.” These factors are relevant to all communities, and we can focus on them via comprehensive prevention initiatives. As a more progressive agenda is gaining momentum nationally, we have a prime opportunity to examine the current context and push for community transformation on multiple levels, incorporating successful projects from around the nation that help build resilience and protective factors at the individual and community levels. It is also a key moment to organize support for elected officials willing to adopt a legislative agenda that promotes healthy environments for all communities.

This brief is designed for advocates, practitioners, government officials, and funders who are interested in transforming broad social norms and our communities in order to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation before it occurs. The following pages lay out a primary prevention approach with a special focus on effecting change by influencing policies and altering organizational practices. We begin with a short discussion of emerging environmental challenges followed by an examination of specific norms that contribute to child sexual abuse and exploitation. The third section, grounded in the belief that a single individual or sector cannot address the problem in isolation, provides the framework for a comprehensive strategy across the *Spectrum of Prevention* (see Figure 2, page 8) designed to transform environments so all children can thrive in safe and supportive communities.

Full Article Available here:

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