



INTRODUCTION

Based on the Royal Commission theme of “How can child sexual abuse in institutions be prevented?” the aim of this research project is to review the available literature about the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs aimed at pre-school aged children (0-5 years).

Specifically, the report summarises the findings outlined in 23 selected articles for the primary purpose of ascertaining what is known, from the existing literature, about the extent to which pre-school child sexual abuse prevention programs are effective.

The researcher in particular examines whether the programs:

- Increased pre-schoolers’ knowledge of child sexual abuse, and resulted in retention of preschoolers’ knowledge of sexual abuse over time
- Resulted in adverse effects
- Resulted in pre-schoolers learning protective behaviours in the event of an (attempted) abuse event
- Resulted in disclosures of child sexual abuse, and
- Were cost effective.

KEY LEARNINGS

Baseline knowledge of concepts related to child sexual abuse was found to be low among pre-schoolers and also their parents. For example, less than a quarter of Australian mothers had discussed issues related to abuse from known and trusted adults with their children, and were more likely to have had these discussions with children in the 5-12 age bracket, rather than the preschool age.

Generally, pre-school child abuse prevention programs appear effective at increasing children’s knowledge about sexual abuse and increasing their skills about what to say and do, who to tell and what to report, following an inappropriate touch.

The studies also suggest that the knowledge that pre-school aged children gain in child sexual abuse prevention programs is retained over time.

The programs were found to be more effective when both parents and teachers were the educators, and when the focus was on behavioural skills rather than on interpreting one’s feelings, and also when ‘explicit’ rather than ‘abstract’ concepts were taught.

Five of the studies measured adverse effects such as fear and anxiety experienced by children as a result of undergoing child abuse prevention training, and none of these studies detected any such adverse effects. Parents, children and pre-school teachers generally view such training positively.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

TITLE

‘Child sexual abuse prevention programs for preschoolers: A synthesis of current evidence’

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Abuse

KEY FOCUS

The aim of this evidence review is to determine the efficacy of preschool child sexual abuse prevention programs.

KEY OBJECTIVES

To examine the efficacy of programs in relation to; a preschooler’s knowledge of and disclosure of child sexual abuse; adverse effects; protective behavior and cost effectiveness.

DOWNLOAD REPORT AT

<http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/94203a28-eaf5-4553-b6ec-bf7e49a8ae74/Child-sexual-abuse-prevention-programs-for-presch>



The report recommends future studies should evaluate cost effectiveness and also examine ways to reduce program delivery costs. Studies to date have not evaluated the cost effectiveness of prevention programs for preschoolers.

Some studies assert that children under five years of age are too young to understand and act upon prevention information, and in particular, to understand concepts such as 'safe', 'strong', and 'free'. This extends to a concern that whilst children may understand the difference between a 'good' and a 'bad' touch, it's in the 'grey' areas such as might be involved in grooming that are more difficult for children to appreciate. The report however concludes this section by stating that:

"The majority of research supports child sexual abuse prevention programs for preschoolers, however more research is needed to determine the size of the effect; the extent to which training during pre-school years acts as a critical foundation for later learning; whether some groups benefit more than others; and optimal instructional techniques to maximise learning and behavioural outcomes for young children."

LIMITATIONS

The researcher notes that the study limitations, including very small samples sizes, limit the generalisability of results. Dr Pitt's explains that "More methodologically rigorous studies using large, culturally diverse samples of pre-schoolers are required before strong conclusions can be made about the overall efficacy of child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers."

Furthermore, the research is not able to measure how effective pre-school programs are at increasing the use of protective behaviours among young children because the method of testing this outcome is not considered ethical for pre-school children (children's self-protective skills are measured using simulated abduction/abuse situations – these not appropriate for very young children).

To accurately measure the relationship between participating in prevention training and disclosure of abuse, more extensive studies are required than have been conducted to date.

CONCLUSION

The report concludes with an assessment that the available literature generally supports the efficacy of child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-school aged children, in terms of increasing young children's:

1. Ability to detect inappropriate touch requests
2. Knowledge about what to do and say, who to tell and what to report in the event of an inappropriate touch request.

However, the overall conclusion is that "program evaluations are currently of insufficient quantity and quality to make strong assertions about the overall efficacy of prevention programs for pre-schoolers. While there may be little harm associated with prevention programs in the form of increased anxiety or fear among participating pre-schoolers, there is insufficient evidence of the benefits of pre-school prevention programs relative to cost...but there is currently insufficient evidence about program design to inform recommendations about best practice design and delivery systems. More methodologically rigorous studies are required, ideally using Australian pre-schoolers as participants."