

# Transforming Communities to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation:

## A Primary Prevention Approach

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© May 2009

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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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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 abuse<sup>1</sup> 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

*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.*

***A primary prevention approach to child sexual abuse and exploitation promotes safe, healthy environments and behaviors, reducing the likelihood of abuse in the first place.***

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

# Environmental Factors Supporting Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

## THE ENVIRONMENT: FACTORS THAT SHAPE BEHAVIOR

Child sexual abuse and exploitation arise out of a complex interplay of individual, interpersonal, social, political, cultural, and environmental factors. The social ecological model<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 1) provides a framework for understanding how individual well-being is nested within family, community, and societal levels. Influences at any level can either increase or decrease the risk of perpetration or victimization.

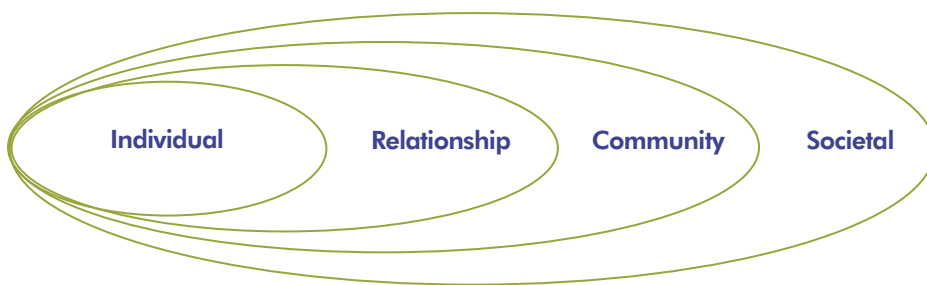
This framework clarifies societal influence on an individual and confirms why it is more important to focus on environmental change than on individual behavioral change. Root factors like sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression shape societal and community factors that in turn influence relationships and individuals. Both root factors and environmental contributors are determinants of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Environmental components in turn affect behavioral outcomes. The Institute of Medicine affirmed this in concluding, “It is unreasonable to expect that people will change their behavior easily when *so many forces* in the social, cultural, and physical environment *conspire* against such change.”<sup>5</sup> When viewed in this light, we can see how child sexual abuse and exploitation becomes a complicated issue deeply embedded in the environment. By understanding and then transforming environments, we can prevent child sexual abuse *before* there is a chance of it occurring.

During the convening sessions, participants outlined a set of key environmental factors that spanned the social ecological model. They identified these elements as representing some of the most promising opportunities for transforming communities and preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation. Further, the participants recommended that these factors be prioritized locally and nationally, with resources and policies put in place to support them.

## ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

- Technology makes it more challenging for young people to maintain healthy boundaries
- Society heavily promotes sexualized children, submissive women, and dominant males
- Consumer culture floods children with negative messages
- Damaging norms impact all communities, but marginalized communities even more so

FIGURE 1. Social Ecological Model



**“We can’t treat, prosecute or educate our way out of this. To actually prevent the sexually abusive and exploitive use of children we...need to move from sexually objectifying and commoditizing children to being concerned about their health.”**

Cordelia Anderson,  
National Coalition to Prevent Child  
Sexual Exploitation

**Advances in the use of technology and its pervasiveness in social life have made it more challenging for young people to learn and practice healthy boundaries among their peers and with adults.** Most recently, national news reports have featured stories of teens who are labeled, and sometimes prosecuted, as sex offenders for sharing nude pictures of themselves via their cellular phones, emails, and social networking sites. This new occurrence is a symptom of a larger social shift of the boundaries between public and private prompted by the growth of technology. What was once private is now broadcast publicly through popular Internet and cell phone platforms. *The National Plan to Prevent the Sexual Exploitation of Children* goes further to say that in addition to historically private material now publically available, “technology has [also] created unprecedented access to sexually exploitive materials.”<sup>6</sup> In this manner, technology has created a “new norm of privacy for kids.” As Larry Magrid, a technology journalist stated, “it is not that technology is bad, it’s that we haven’t responded with clear boundaries for its use, and young people are paying the price.”

**Our society heavily promotes sexualized children, submissive women, and dominant males. Yet healthy sexuality—based on loving and equitable relationships—is largely absent from the flurry of messages that are shaping the environment in which children and adults develop and form relationships.**<sup>7</sup> Destructive images dominate the social landscape. The media hyper-sexualizes young girls, who are expected to emulate popular sexualized toys like the “Bratz” dolls. The media uses sports hero movies, TV shows, and video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*—which extol the virtues of violence and dominance—to encourage boys to be tough and powerful. These rigid gender roles are great for marketing, but they can insidiously promote relationships based on male domination and female acquiescence. These dynamics fuel abuse, normalizing power over others as a form of sexual arousal. Legal pornography also feeds this unhealthy norm, often featuring submissive women marketed as teenagers wearing school-girl outfits and holding teddy bears.

**Consumer culture floods children with input that helps steer their psychosocial development. At the same time, messages from caring adults like parents and teachers have become more limited.** Each year, children watch over 30,000 ads,<sup>8</sup> many of which reinforce skewed gender roles, prescribing how kids should look and what they must buy to accomplish that. Diane Levin, an expert in child development, states, “Children’s development and how they think make them especially vulnerable to objectification in the commercial culture.”<sup>9</sup> This deluge of cultural forces, coupled with normal identity development in children, is helping to create a generation of young people who find value in commodities, view the human body as a sexual object, and learn to develop relationships based on sexual desire rather than on connection and affection.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, healthy sexuality and age-appropriate development have remained taboo topics for children and adults alike. At home, adults are often not armed with the necessary tools to talk with their kids about healthy sexuality, creating an information vacuum that the media exploits to the detriment of children. Families of



recent immigrants are even more acutely affected as they face a growing cultural gap between their young people and their elders. At school, health policies often support abstinence-only education; and zero tolerance policies against sexual harassment have led to children as young as 4 years old being suspended from school when they do things that make perfect sense, given what popular culture has exposed them to. Further, No Child Left Behind places an inordinate emphasis on testing, often at the expense of curriculum that promotes healthy relationships, communication skills, and healthy sexuality. Helping children deal with what they are seeing is a much more effective approach in the long-term than punishing with no help to understand and change.

**Although damaging norms impact all communities, historically marginalized communities are often disproportionately exposed to unhealthy environments.**

For example, low-income neighborhoods have traditionally suffered from an increased concentration of liquor stores and liquor advertising, which brings with it widespread images of sexualized women and girls and an elevated rate of alcohol-related abusive acts. In communities with limited opportunities for economic development, commercial sexual exploitation of youth can be viewed as one of the few money-making opportunities for young females, reinforcing the norm of women having limited roles and girls being sexual objects. The cycle of violence fuels itself: street violence escalates and residents become further overwhelmed by its spiraling effect. This bleak situation remains static for the marginalized, who, by definition, are faced with an environment that promotes more risk while providing less access to the community factors that can build resilience, such as affordable health care, living-wage jobs, and quality schools.

**A lack of resources and support for community based, empowering and healing responses to abuse perpetuates the cycle of abuse.**

Research confirms that someone who knows the child and family commits almost 75% of sexual assaults on children, and one in ten are members of the family itself.<sup>11</sup> In the current environment, reporting abuse usually results in jail time for the perpetrator but rarely results in healing for the child and community. One expert asked, “How do we intervene when the main option for children dealing with sexual abuse and exploitation is to incarcerate the abuser?” The lack of options has created a void filled by state-centered consequences, such as child welfare supervision and incarceration of offenders. This focus on consequences rather than healing reduces a victim’s willingness to report and seek assistance.”<sup>12</sup> We lose a key opportunity for prevention and intervention when victims fail to report abuse or exploitation, as demonstrated by the fact that 40% to 80% of adolescents who sexually abuse children have been abused themselves.<sup>13</sup> This is a factor in every community, yet it is much more pronounced among marginalized groups. Historically, people of color have been denied basic rights and freedoms, oppressed through state-sanctioned violence in the form of police brutality, and over-represented in detention facilities. Thus, they tend to be hesitant to rely on the state for a solution to child sexual abuse and exploitation. Incarceration and state supervision may lead to a perpetrator’s removal and prevent further harm to a child, but these sanctions do not heal the

*“Messages in media and popular culture that promote sexualized and violent behavior toward children from very young ages create another risk factor that must be taken into account in prevention programs. These messages can teach children to objectify sex and treat themselves and others as objects; they also can undermine their ability to have caring and connected relationships—all are factors that can contribute to both victimization and perpetration.”*

Diane Levin, co-author,  
*So Sexy, So Soon*

*“We need to be clear about what we are working for not only what we’re working against. We’re working for health, including sexual health, and need to shift the social norms that feed a toxic culture to ones that nurture health.”*

Cordelia Anderson,  
National Coalition to Prevent Child  
Sexual Exploitation

negative consequences of abuse on families nor do they help transform the underlying factors that allow abuse to occur in the first place.

## **NORMS: COMMONLY HELD ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS THAT SHAPE BEHAVIORS**

Societal and community environments are key in shaping behavior on a fundamental, structural level. Therefore, population-based environmental change strategies are critical to our preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation. People generally conform to certain behavioral conventions and disapprove of deviance<sup>14</sup> from the norms. Norms are not simply habits. Often based in culture and tradition, they are attitudes, beliefs, and standards that we take for granted. In other words, norms pattern our behavior—they are environmental signals telling people what is okay and not okay to do. Norms describe what actually occurs (i.e., descriptive) and also signify a standard of proper behavior (i.e., normative or prescriptive).<sup>15</sup>

A prevention strategy must account for norms because these standards are pervasive, powerful determinants of behavior. If violence is typical, expected, and reinforced by the media, family, community, peers, or school, it is far more likely to occur. It will occur, in fact, with greater frequency and potency. If norms discourage safe behavior and are unsupportive of healthy and safe relationships, then programs focused on change at the individual level will not produce safe behavior unless social norms are changed as well. Thus, changing norms is critical to preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation.

### **There are at least five damaging norms that contribute to child sexual abuse:**

- 1. Traditional male roles,** where society promotes domination, exploitation, objectification, control, oppression, and dangerous, risk-taking behavior in men and boys, often victimizing women and girls.
- 2. Limited female roles,** where from a young age females are often encouraged, through subtle and overt messages, to act and be treated as objects, used and controlled by others. This includes the sexualization of childhood, where young people are sexualized through media and marketing starting at an early age, thus blurring the age of consent, encouraging girls to see themselves as sexual objects, and allowing boys to see themselves as the users and takers.
- 3. Power,** where value is placed on claiming and maintaining control over others. Traditional power expectations promote the notion that children should be seen and not heard, making them an especially vulnerable population.
- 4. Violence,** where aggression is tolerated and accepted as normal behavior and can be used as a way to solve problems and get what one wants.
- 5. Privacy,** where norms associated with individual and family privacy are considered so sacrosanct that secrecy and silence is fostered, sexual violence against children is stigmatized, and those who witness violence are discouraged from

intervening.<sup>16</sup> Though changing, this value placed on privacy enables people in a shame-based culture to perpetuate the abuse, rendering victims and their families immobile in the face of public shame and stigma.

In our society, we glamorize violence, overlook it, accept it as a private family matter, and regularly encourage it through “egging” others on. Further, we sexualize children in advertising and portray relationships where power over others is more common than shared decision-making. Most people do not commit sexual abuse, and therefore it is not *normal* behavior. Yet, when the five norms are taken as a composite, they could lead someone to have a sense of *reasonableness* about sexual violence. Given this, while heartbreaking, it is not surprising that some people behave on the extreme end, abusing and exploiting children, and that bystanders don’t speak up or act against it. This set of norms promulgates a toxic environment that enables abuse *and* inhibits preventive action. While condoning sexual abuse is certainly not the norm, we have an overarching set of norms that insidiously encourage abuse and inhibit people from speaking out against it. We must acknowledge these norms and change them if we are to make major strides in preventing violence.

## A Time of Opportunity: Shifting the Focus from After-the-Fact Approaches to a Primary Prevention Paradigm

A major element in preventing child abuse and exploitation is to shift the norms and environments that contribute to it. Placing the blame entirely on perpetrators we characterize as deviants is ineffective as a singular strategy and leaves the consequences solely to be faced by the children. We *must* tip the balance in communities and replace unhealthy norms and environments with ones that promote respect and equality. It requires our engaging in a process of changing attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and institutional practices. This calls for a primary prevention approach that can change the environment, including norms.

While child sexual abuse and exploitation has become a much more public issue in the last ten years, it is rarely presented within a primary prevention framework. Instead, fear-based messages inform the public that child sexual abuse is a common problem, but they fail to raise awareness that it *can be prevented*. For example, an average of 7 million viewers tuned in to NBC’s *To Catch a Predator*, a program that created and televised an elaborate sting operation targeting adults using the Internet to solicit sex from minors. *Predator* captured the nation’s attention by showcasing, for the first time on television, men from every walk of life being caught in the act and labeled as “sexual predators.” Late-night *Predator* reruns were the highest rated late-night content on MSNBC during this time, and parodies of the show’s format flourished on talk shows and YouTube.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the popularity of Megan’s

*“Many people are working in different ways to challenge current social norms which are undermining the health and safety of our children. I am hopeful this collective energy will soon take us over the tipping point to create a culture where sexual abuse and exploitation of children can no longer take root.”*

Jetta Bernier,  
Massachusetts Citizens for Children

***A broad-based national movement to prevent child sexual abuse must be multi-layered and multi-cultural, and it must inspire efforts on many different levels—from grassroots to legislative action.***

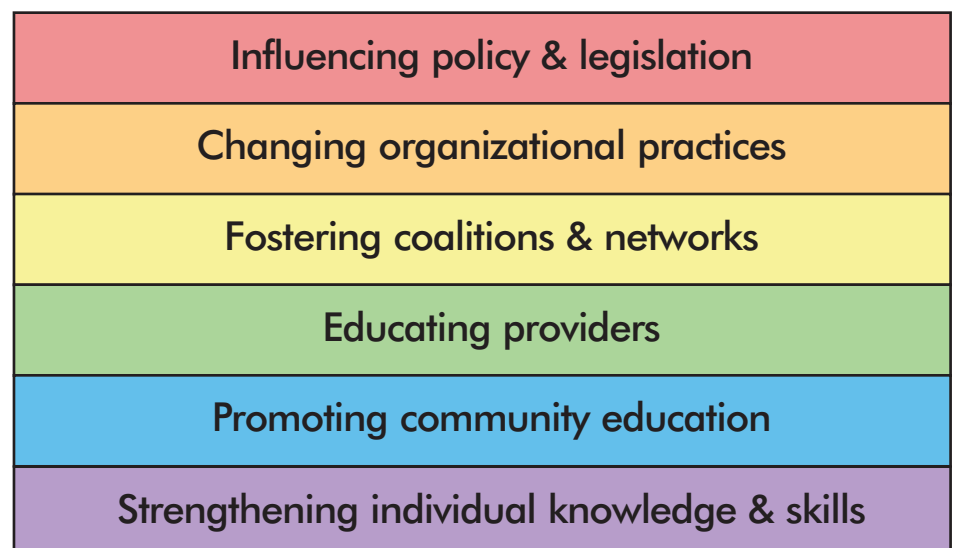
from Ms. Foundation for Women

Law Websites was increasing. These sites provide the address and sometimes pictures of sexual offenders. In this environment, a barrage of fear-based messages clamored for parents to “predator-proof” their children’s online and interpersonal interactions. As one participant observed, “Empowerment and strong social connections should be the motivation to prevent abuse and exploitation. We need to replace the fear-based tactics with prevention to be successful.” Prevention, especially up-front primary prevention, is an important strategy for protecting communities from the widespread impact of abuse that has largely been overlooked.

To gain momentum for a fundamental shift, advocates and leaders must have the tools to mobilize and collectively build capacity to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. Prevention efforts are the most successful when applied in a comprehensive strategy designed to influence structural and economic factors that contribute to unhealthy behaviors. They require the participation of stakeholders from multiple sectors, including government, business, faith communities, the media, and schools.

The *Spectrum of Prevention* (see Figure 2) offers a framework for developing effective and sustainable primary prevention initiatives that have the potential to affect community and systems-level changes. The inter-relatedness, or synergy, among levels of the *Spectrum* maximizes the results of each activity and creates a more transformative force. As Sara Kershner, from Generation FIVE said, “Sustainable models for community education focus on public education tied to collective action. It is not about one project; it is about a community-wide response.” While all levels of the *Spectrum* are essential for sustaining change, community and systems-level change require efforts at the broadest levels of the *Spectrum*. These include changing organizational practices and influencing policy and legislation.

**FIGURE 2. THE SPECTRUM OF PREVENTION**



# Strategies to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse across the Spectrum of Prevention

The *Spectrum of Prevention* delineates complementary areas for change. It comprises six levels of increasing scope. The top three are the emphasis of this brief and include: Influencing policy and legislation, Changing organizational practices, and Fostering coalitions and networks. The other levels of the *Spectrum*, Educating providers, Promoting community education, and Strengthening individual knowledge and skills, contribute to and build upon this momentum for change. For example, policy change initiatives will have a better chance of being enacted when public awareness and support are garnered through educational efforts with providers and the community. National leaders and community advocates prioritized the following policies and practices, choosing them as the most promising strategies for a comprehensive agenda to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation.

## INFLUENCING POLICY & LEGISLATION

Policy change is often the tipping point for norms change. Policies shape the overall environment for everyone in a community. For example, in South Los Angeles, California, community groups organized to reduce the availability of alcohol by changing zoning ordinances. A coalition was able to alter zoning laws and prohibit 200 liquor stores from opening within a three-year period. Evaluation made over this timeframe documented a 27% reduction in violent crime and drug-related felonies within a four-block radius of each liquor store that was to have opened.<sup>18</sup> Although it is a more complex issue, similar strategies for changing norms can be used to develop policy to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. By altering the underlying conditions that affect child sexual abuse and exploitation, such as economic opportunity, sexism, and access to quality education, policies can help foster environments in which abuse is less likely to occur.<sup>19</sup>

### Incorporate Quality Prevention Strategies in Current Policy

- Review and amend current legislation to align with the latest research on the causes and dynamics of abuse. For example, ensure that legislative efforts address root causes, such as limited roles for women and girls, and acknowledge dynamics, such as the high rate of children abused by someone they know well.
- Include questions on sexual abuse, sexual norms, and risk and resilience factors in existing large-scale national youth surveys (such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey) and local ones (such as the California Healthy Kids Survey). Monitor and address changes in risk, resilience, behaviors, and environments of young people through indicators such as positive school connections, links to a caring adult at school and in the community, meaningful participation in their community, and their perception of safety.
- Develop and monitor standardized, measurable outcomes for a rights-based school curriculum supporting healthy social, emotional, and sexual development.

*“If you don’t know policy you don’t know how to use your power.”*

Connie Rice,  
LA Advancement Project

*“We have a shared hope for children and must look at policy and practice in a variety of sectors...to move this work forward.”*

Larry Magid,  
ConnectSafely.org and CBS News

## Hold Industry Accountable

- Decrease the saturation of media messages aimed at children by reviewing and rolling back the legislation that allowed advertising to children, reinstating the ban on advertising aimed at children—especially in children’s television programming.
- Encourage and offer incentives from state and national governments to retailers and other industries that explicitly state they will not promote violence or the sexualization of children in their ads and products.
- Require legal pornography sites to remove sexually objectifying/arousing references to children and teens.

## Adopt Mandates for Prevention Efforts

- Ensure funding to prevent violence against women and adult violence in general, including an investment in the prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Establish a consistent public-health-based funding stream to build the field capacity to prevent child sexual abuse. With sustainable funding, the field will have an increased capacity to: pilot community-led initiatives; evaluate promising pilot projects; bring best practices to scale; and create a national report that highlights the current research and areas of additional research, such as the impact of technology on abuse and exploitation.
- Encourage philanthropic organizations to include prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation and promotion of child/adolescent health in their funding realm or in their related efforts in health, education, and community sustainability.
- Adopt legislation that brings resource parity for law enforcement responses and community-based prevention efforts focused on environmental change.
- Address root factors, such as poverty and oppression, by investing in initiatives that increase access to economic development, healthcare, quality education, and family support services.

## CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

Identifying specific institutions to focus on can make strategies to change norms more doable. Environmental change takes place in venues that are large enough to have a substantial impact, yet small enough for change to realistically occur. Institutional settings offer the opportunity to reach large numbers of people, proactively model healthy behaviors, and offer incentives and disincentives for practices that shape the overall climate of preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation.



## All Organizations

- Enact workplace policies that support the family unit, including leave for family events and mental and physical health coverage.
- Ensure that images, especially images of children, used in advertising, retail, and media organizations are empowering and not sexually exploitive.
- Establish policies and practices that explicitly prohibit sexually inappropriate, harassing, coercive, and abusive behaviors and that promote respect and healthy boundaries. Identify specific procedures that support coworkers who want to report concerns.
- Ensure equity in the workplace by adopting policies that require equal pay for equal work.

## Youth-Serving Organizations

- Require staff training in organizations that work with children and youth specifically focused on developmentally appropriate sexuality and sexual behavior.
- Develop and adopt policies and procedures based on CDC's Youth-Serving Organizations Guidelines.
- Implement organization-wide youth development curricula that is comprehensive and positive. Include education on sexual health and relationships as well as assertiveness skills.
- Require professional schools to provide training to future providers (nursing, public health, medical), focused on increasing community resilience and healthy sexuality.

## FOSTERING COALITIONS & NETWORKS

Coalitions and networks bring together the necessary participants to ensure an initiative's success. They increase the critical mass behind a community effort, help groups to trust one another, and reduce the likelihood of resource squandering through unnecessary competition among groups. Partnerships across sectors and fields can be especially useful for accomplishing a broad range of goals that reach beyond the capacity of any single organization. Like a jigsaw puzzle, each piece of a collaborative is important, and it takes all of the pieces together to complete the whole picture. By working together, coalitions can conserve resources by reducing duplication, sharing expenses, fostering cooperation among diverse sectors of society, and increasing the credibility and impact of their efforts.

## Community/State Level

- Organize state- and community-level child sexual abuse prevention coalitions that include public and private agencies and representatives from multiple disciplines, including child advocacy, child protection, education, faith-based groups, survivor groups, etc.

## ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE CHANGE

Hip-hop magazine *The Source* has announced that it will no longer run ads for pornographic movies, adult websites or escort services. So-called "booty ads" featuring scantily clad women are being banned from *The Source's* pages and its website. Co-publisher L. Londell McMillan told *The New York Times* that *The Source* should be able to appeal to core hip-hop fans and still be a magazine that "you wouldn't mind your kids seeing."

*“Community engagement is key to any successful movement. Elected officials; public health experts; and leaders from schools, religious groups, youth-serving organizations, and law enforcement must partner with parents and local citizens to become the first line of defense against child sexual abuse.”*

Jetta Bernier,  
Massachusetts Citizens for Children

- Create a single, web-based repository of promising practices, links to resources, and organizations working on the issue. Include information detailing how communities and states can localize best practices.

### National Level

- Expand on the existing national coalition, the National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Exploitation.
  - ❖ Explore links with related coalitions including teen pregnancy, cyber bullying, domestic violence, health reform, and Voices for America’s Children.
  - ❖ Use the national coalition to identify shared interests, capacities, and roles of each partner to build a broader national network; conduct environmental scans of existing organizations, noting the specific attributes that each group can bring to the table; create and implement a national blueprint for action directed by identified industry, community, and legislative leaders.
- Develop a rapid response media network to coordinate an alliance of prevention advocates who can respond to breaking news with proactive prevention messages that incorporate an environmental and norms-based understanding of the causes and solutions of abuse.

## EDUCATING PROVIDERS

Providers have influence within their fields of expertise and opportunities to transmit information, skills, and motivation to clients, community members, and colleagues. It is essential, therefore, that providers receive education to improve their own understanding of child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention. With appropriate training, providers such as doctors, teachers, law enforcement officers, child-care workers, and others can become highly effective advocates for prevention policies. In addition, by expanding the notion of provider, it is possible to mobilize a broader group in advancing sexual abuse prevention. This group can include journalists, building owners/managers, movie producers, librarians, staff at recreation centers, and radio station DJs. With sexual abuse prevention training, these groups will be better able to incorporate prevention into their practices.

### All Providers

- Train staff and people that work with children to recognize healthy sexual behavior and sexual acting out. Include tools for them to talk to parents and children about any concerns.
- Build the skills of providers who work with children and their families so they can discuss and answer questions about sexuality in developmentally appropriate ways and counteract the harmful messages about sex and sexuality promulgated by media and commercial culture.



## Media

- Provide training and establish guidelines for journalists covering stories about child sexual abuse and exploitation. Encourage the media to go beyond the individual portrait to show the landscape of environmental attributes and social norms impacting the issue.
- Offer media training for providers and leaders in the field to help them communicate more effectively with journalists. Include training on how to most effectively pitch a prevention approach.

## PROMOTING COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Community education reaches large groups of people with information and resources for improving environments and preventing sexual abuse and exploitation. Effective community education not only alerts individuals to new information, but also helps build a critical mass of support for safer behavior, norms, and policies. Mass media campaigns have been shown to increase awareness, change attitudes, and build support for successful implementation of prevention policies.<sup>20</sup> Media coverage can also foster public support by reflecting community involvement and activism.

### Build on Community Assets

- Ensure that prevention messages are rooted in community needs and assets by using local wisdom and local priorities to develop community education messages, campaign focus, and measurable outcomes.

### Increase Resilience

- Implement sustainable models for community-led initiatives focused on educating the public about preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation and spreading awareness of its relationship to socio-economic issues in marginalized communities. Ensure that educational efforts are closely tied to mobilization for collective action.
- Use public service campaigns and community groups to counter fear-based messages and support healthy norms. Position caring community members as bystanders who take action around appropriate sexual messages and behavior in the community.
- Offer a skill-building curriculum to young people in schools to strengthen protective factors associated with healthy sexual development (e.g., communication, empathy, accountability) and to reduce risk factors associated with sexually inappropriate, harassing, coercive, or abusive behaviors.
- Offer community skill building, such as media literacy, age-appropriate communication, conflict resolution skills, and relationship building, to increase caring connections.

*“We must look at different systems that touch the lives of our children already and implement preventative protocols by training providers.”*

Elizabeth Sy,  
Banteay Srei/Asian Health Services

- Offer parenting skills and education in schools and community centers for parents of all ages. Cover early childhood, childhood, and adolescent development, and information on healthy sexual development.

## STRENGTHENING INDIVIDUAL KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

Strengthening individual knowledge and skills involves transferring information and skills to increase an individual's capacity for preventing sexual abuse and exploitation. In a trusting relationship with a person who is perceived as having expertise or authority, even brief comments have a lasting impact, particularly when reinforced over time or through community norms and practices.<sup>21</sup> Physician advice, for example, has been associated with reductions in morbidity, mortality, risk behaviors, and risk factors, and with increases in healthy behaviors. Physicians, childcare professionals, and teachers have the opportunity to ask about behaviors that can increase safety. Healthcare practitioners can engage patients in strategies to promote healthy relationships and healthy sexuality. Practitioners can talk with parents about how to create safe environments for a healthy community as well as how to teach their children about safe boundaries. Responsibility for strengthening individual knowledge and skills is not limited to health practitioners and human service professionals; neighbors, mentors, musicians, and community leaders can speak to others about the importance of proper boundaries and healthy sexuality.

- Talk to adults about child safety within the family and in the community. Consider recommending prevention resources to friends and family members. For example, share a copy of *A Very Touching Book* by Jan Hindman. This highly acclaimed children's book can help adults talk to children about appropriate touching and about setting boundaries.
- Mentor and model appropriate online behavior for both young people and adults.

# Conclusion

Child sexual abuse has many dimensions and causes and no single program or policy can address the magnitude of the issue or the diverse root factors underlying it. It is a complex problem that requires a comprehensive solution and participation from stakeholders in multiple sectors. Primary prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation is often seen as unachievable, because, in general, prevention efforts rarely receive the level of commitment and attention required for long-term success. Child sexual abuse and exploitation is preventable. Its prevention requires an investment of resources, people, leadership, and commitment. Leadership among key stakeholders can generate a significant level of interest and investment in primary prevention and signal a turning point in the field. Specifically, there has been an eagerness to discuss next steps, including working more broadly within the field to prioritize shared principles, identify joint opportunities for advocacy, and explore more coordinated strategies across the spectrum to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. By building on the wisdom of communities, the experience of national experts, and the infrastructure built through coalitions and networks over the last 20 years, we can collectively construct a national movement to prevent child abuse and exploitation.

*Prevention is a different way of looking at health, one that views every decision we make as a society through the lens of health, and shifts our focus from solely treating individual patients to redesigning communities for everyone.*

from Prevention Institute's  
*Toward a Healthy America: Prevention  
as Part of the Stimulus*

## ENDNOTES

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