
The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education: Child Sex Abuse Prevention

School-based sex education plays a vital role in the sexual health and wellbeing of young people. The results of [Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#) found that sex education has the potential to impact so much in addition to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention.

There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of child sex abuse prevention efforts in elementary schools.

- Effective child sex abuse prevention in elementary schools typically use **behavioral practice and role-play, and encourage parental involvement**. They teach about **body ownership** and **children's right to control their bodies**, and about **communication and self-protection**.
- A range of studies show significant effects on a **wide range of outcomes**, including behaviors in simulated at-risk situations.
- In general, **parental involvement, opportunities for practice, repeated exposure, and sensitivity to developmental level** were key characteristics of effective child sex abuse programs.

Improved knowledge, attitudes, skills and social emotional outcomes related to personal safety and touch.

- Significant **increases in knowledge** across programs, **improved self-protective skills**, particularly among older elementary students, and **gains in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and feelings of safety**.
- Significant **improvement in knowledge of appropriate or safe touch**. Notably, intervention/control group differences were larger when "stranger danger" items were removed, suggesting that this curriculum was able to address inappropriate touch in a more nuanced way.
- Programs for second to fourth graders demonstrated significant **increases in knowledge of appropriate and inappropriate touch, what to do in an inappropriate situation, and increased knowledge and skill to identify unsafe situations**.
- Gains maintained at 1 year, with **no increase in anxiety**, in a very strong study, concluded that it is **safe to discuss sensitive subjects with young children**, and demonstrating the value of early education.
- Significant **improvement in knowledge of unsafe secrets and distinguishing between tattling and reporting** in a kindergarten program.
- **Improved sense of control and safety felt by children**, including, **more positive feelings about their genitals** (e.g., **it's OK to touch own private parts**).

Improved disclosure skills and behaviors

- Improvements in skills and behaviors related to **disclosure and reporting** and significant improvement in **self-protective behaviors** among young children.
- A systematic review of childhood sex abuse curricula in the U.S. and Canada concluded that one of the most common effects was **increased knowledge of a resource person to whom children would report abuse**.
- Behavioral outcomes **include increased parent-child communication** about child sex abuse, and when implemented with a group of children known to have been abused, **increased disclosure**.

Recommendations for Schools and Educators

- Actively engage parents and other caregivers in the implementation of all child sexual abuse lessons.
- Pay careful attention to the language used and keep it developmentally appropriate. Avoid using terms like “good touch” and “bad touch”, since it can be confusing to young children and bring out feelings of shame if the bad touch made their body feel good. Instead use terms like safe and unsafe touch. In addition, remove any “stranger danger” language from your sexual abuse lessons since 93% of child abuse survivors know their perpetrator.¹
- In your lessons, be sure to include lessons about disclosure, reporting, and how to identify a resource person to whom children would report abuse. Young people also need to be able to distinguish between tattling and reporting.
- **The Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education** can help educators to identify areas where they may need professional development to successfully teach this content. Links to professional development programs can be found at <https://sexeducationcollaborative.org/offerings>.

Reference

Goldfarb E. and Lieberman L. Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2021; 68, 1: 13--27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>

¹ Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement (2000).