

The Challenge of Continuing Awareness

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Recently, I had a conversation with an acquaintance living in a large city who specializes in prosecuting sex crimes against children. As a result of her work, she is a strong advocate for prevention efforts and particularly for educating parents about how to teach their children to protect themselves.

Because of some work she has done, from time to time she has access to national media connections. On this particular day, she expressed her frustration because of a telephone call... She and I both know that the more we learn about child sexual abuse and how to prevent it, the more we realize we are just scratching the surface of the issue. It will likely take years of concentrated effort before the identifying warning signs of potential molesters and intervention to prevent abuse becomes part of the mainstream thinking and actions of caring adults.

However, there is evidence that some are becoming desensitized to the issue. In a discussion about the possibility of a program that emphasized the importance of educating children about their private parts and teaching them the touching rules, the person with whom my friend had been talking was adamant that parents already know how to talk to their children about these issues and that they know how to teach them to protect themselves. This reaction reminded me of how easy it is for people to become desensitized about issues. Sometimes when an issue has been in the news a great deal, people begin to assume that somehow the situation must be resolved by now.

The topic of child sexual abuse has been addressed for years, so it stands to reason that by now we have a handle on the issue, right? After all, that much attention has to yield positive results, don't you think?

A great deal of attention has been focused on abductions of children from school yards, neighborhoods, shopping malls, and parks. In addition, major networks have produced shows that demonstrate the repetitive nature of these offenses and the ability of predators to make excuses for their behavior. Another focus of media attention is a few high profile cases involving teachers or coaches that were caught in the act and prosecuted. The attention to these cases, however, *rarely brings attention to the thousands of daily reports that child protection services is dealing with alleging sexual abuse of family members, students, and other children we know and love.* Ninety percent of the problem of child sexual abuse is a result of the actions of family members and people that we know and trust and that our children also know and trust.

There is a real danger that society will become desensitized to the issue of child sexual abuse. Those that are committed to creating safe environments must also keep the issue in the forefront and become advocates for making sure that parents and other responsible adults have all the tools they need to protect children—including knowing the touching safety rules and how to teach them.

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