
This article is based on the Campbell Review:

Zwi KJ, Woolfenden SR, Wheeler DM, O'Brien TA, Tait P, Williams KW: *School-based education programmes for the prevention of child sexual abuse*. The Campbell Collaboration 2007. The review is also published in Cochrane Library.

*This article is written by the Nordic Campbell Centre. The article has been approved by the authors of the review.
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Education programmes increase children's knowledge of sexual abuse and may promote protective behaviour

School-based education programmes on the prevention of sexual abuse may increase children's knowledge and protective behaviour but this does not necessarily reduce the number of incidents of abuse. The programmes should be seen as part of a community approach to prevent child sexual abuse. This is the conclusion of a Campbell/Cochrane systematic review of the best international research findings.

Children are better informed

Sexual abuse is a serious problem that can have a major negative impact on a child's psychosocial development. School-based education programmes have been developed in an attempt to prevent sexual abuse against children and young people. There are a lot of different types of education programmes that are used today in many parts of the western world. A new Campbell/Cochrane review supported by Nordic Campbell Centre attempts to provide an answer to the question of whether school-based programmes actually work by reviewing the top studies in this area.

Research shows that education provides children and young people with a considerably greater knowledge of sexual abuse and of the possibility of protecting themselves through preventive behaviour. There is a clear indication that children can remember what they have learnt 2-3 months after the programme.

Only a few studies have examined actual changes in behaviour of the children. An overall analysis of these shows that children who have participated in an education programme on the subject are six to seven times more likely to demonstrate protective behaviour in simulated situations than children who have not taken part in the programme. Protective behaviour might include saying no to going with strangers or simply running away. The education programmes therefore have a positive effect where both knowledge and behaviour are concerned.

- but does it make any difference?

The researchers behind the review stress, however, that children's knowledge of sexual abuse and protective behaviour does not necessarily help to limit the incidence of abuse. The question is whether children are able to "translate" and apply this knowledge in non-simulated scenarios. On the basis of current research, it is not immediately apparent whether increased knowledge makes a difference with regard to avoiding or preventing abuse in reality.

Researches also point out that increasing children's knowledge about sexual abuse is not in itself a sufficient intervention. The programmes should be seen as part of a community approach to prevent child sexual abuse.

A major problem as far as sexual abuse is concerned is that the majority of incidents go unreported. Only a few of the studies have focused on this problem. On the basis of these studies, the review points to a weak, yet positive indication that participation in the education programme may lead to a higher number of abuse cases being reported.

Different programmes

The education programmes in the review are all different and involve varying combinations of role-play, film/video and discussion. Around half of the programmes run for less than 90 minutes in total, while the duration of the rest is longer, from 90 minutes to four hours. All of the education programmes, however, share the common aim of increasing children's knowledge of sexual abuse and/or their ability to demonstrate protective behaviour.

Some of the education programmes are established prevention programmes such as STOP! (Stop, Tell someone, Own your body, Protect yourself), CAPP (Child Abuse Primary Prevention Program) and the Good Touch/Bad Touch Programme.

It has not been possible to establish whether there is a difference in the effect of the programmes with active and passive participation. The results of one study would, however, indicate that the effect of role-play, whereby children are active, is greater than the effect of e.g. a multimedia presentation, whereby they are passive spectators.

Facts about the systematic review

The review includes 15 studies of a total of 5,598 children. Fourteen studies are from North America, and one is from China. The age of the children varies in the different studies from nursery school children to high school students. The majority of the children are in the middle years at elementary school. In 12 of the studies, gender distribution is more or less equal, two studies do not state the gender of the children, while the Chinese study refers exclusively to girls.

All except one of the studies are randomized controlled trials, where the group of children participating in the education programme is compared with a similar group that has been taught in another subject or has just had regular classes.

The quality of the studies varies. Over half have methodological problems, making it difficult or impossible to cross-analyse on several points. The researchers behind the review have taken these problems into account in their analyses and conclusions.

Recommendations for future research

The researchers stress that a greater awareness of method-related problems is required in future studies. More research is necessary to establish how an education programme should be formulated for optimum effect – how long should it be, should participation be active/passive, and should it be repeated on a regular basis to ensure that the information learnt is retained? The ideal age of the children is another important question and, in future, there should be greater focus on how the education programmes affect the children. Increased anxiety or aggression may be reactions to be

aware of. In continuation of the question of whether the education leads to fewer incidents of abuse, it is also necessary to take a closer look at other methods which may increase the safety of children.