

Personal safety curriculum in junior primary classrooms

Are teachers teaching it?

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Previous studies have revealed that the teaching of personal safety strategies to children is spasmodic and selective, avoiding vital information that would help children to identify and report sexual abuse. In this study a questionnaire was used to explore the views of 33 South Australian junior primary teachers regarding the teaching of personal safety to children.

Results showed that most of the participating teachers claimed to teach some personal safety skills, using a variety of materials and methods, but it would appear that they concentrated on 'safe' topics such as road safety and avoided topics relating to child sexual abuse and violence. It was also found that 50% had not undertaken any training within the last two years even though the overwhelming majority felt that further training was required in order to teach topics effectively. This suggested that motivation for teaching personal safety was low. These and other findings are discussed and recommendations for greater emphasis on training of teachers and further research into this area are made.

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Child protection notifications have consistently risen over the past decade in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2000) and there is no indication that this trend will change in the near future. Latest government statistics state that in the year ending June 1999 there were 102,624 notifications of child abuse made across Australia (excluding Northern Territory) (AIHW 2000, p.11). Of this total, 4,100 were substantiated cases of sexual abuse (AIHW 2000, p.14).

It is, however, commonly believed that a high number of abuse and neglect cases go undetected and, therefore, unreported (Briggs, 1997a; Butler, 1986; Daugherty, 1986; Finkelhor, 1986; Johnson, 1996). McGurk & Hazel, (1998, p. i) claimed that:

... the real incidence of child abuse and neglect is considerably in excess of that represented ... [statistically]

and, that the:

... majority of instances of abuse do not become formally known as such (p. ii).

For the purpose of this study the term 'personal safety' is used to describe programs that include child protection issues and provide children with abuse prevention strategies.

School-based abuse prevention programs are important for helping children to distinguish between abusive and non-abusive situations and to report abuse if it occurs. South Australia's Education Department recognised the importance of education for child protection in 1985 when it adopted the American Protective Behaviours program. It confirmed that importance

when it designated Protective Behaviours as core curriculum in 1990.

The teaching of personal safety skills is included in the Australian Health and Physical Education Statement and Profile (Australian Education Council [AEC], 1994). Personal safety is core curriculum within the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) framework's strand, Health of Individuals and Communities (Department of Education, Training and Employment [DETE], 2000).

The DETE's Child Protection Policy (1998) clearly states that:

... children need to experience programs designed to develop skills and strategies for personal safety (p. 3).

It also states that:

All education... workers... are required to... provide children with child protection and abuse prevention programs (pp. 3 & 4).

Paradoxically, it seems that personal safety is the only 'core' curriculum that is optional in South Australia. Research (Briggs, 1989; Johnson, 1995) suggests that this area of the curriculum is taught spasmodically and selectively, if at all.

After families, teachers are the most important providers of personal safety education and training to children. They have the opportunity for long-term contact with children and their caregivers, especially in the pre-school and junior primary years. This creates the potential for the creation of trusting relationships. Teachers are, or should be, knowledgeable in child development, which should allow them to detect any changes in a child's

behaviour that may indicate abuse. Teachers should be able to provide assistance to victims in their classroom just as they provide support for children experiencing other traumatic situations, for example, family separation or death.

Generally, topics such as road, water and fire safety are incorporated into health and safety curriculums (AEC, 1994); it makes sense that children are also taught how to stay safe with people. Even if teachers do not have any suspicions of abuse amongst their students, they are in an ideal situation to teach strategies that will help children to identify, avoid and report abuse, as well as alert them to the existence and whereabouts of people in the community who are able to assist them if needed.

Previously it was believed that children were most at risk of sexual abuse from strangers. However, by the mid-eighties, it was realised that most reports of child sexual abuse involved an offender who was known and trusted by the victim (Briggs, 1997; Calvert, 1993). Therefore, children who are at risk of abuse, or who have already been abused, may have no one to turn to for 'protection'.

Alternatively, the child may find it difficult to reveal sexual abuse to a family member and may prefer to seek help outside the family unit (Kleemeier, Webb, Hazzard & Pohl, 1988). Even if children are able to disclose abuse to family members, it may not be dealt with sensitively and appropriately due to the adults' lack of knowledge of child protection issues. For example, Hawkins and Briggs (1999, p.11) report that parents who have not been involved in teaching child protection are likely to:

- handle disclosures of sexual abuse badly, inflicting further psychological abuse on victims;
- encourage the fear of strangers without preparing children for the risks closer to home (family, neighbours, friends);
- teach children to obey all adults;
- encourage children to keep all secrets, especially adults' secrets;
- deny that risks exist for their own children.

It is therefore essential that parents be included or at least informed of child protection concepts taught in the school and *how* and *why* they are taught so they can be reinforced at home.

In the future, it is possible that teachers may find themselves being sued by victims for not providing adequate personal safety training or for not handling disclosures appropriately. This is suggested from recent events in Victoria where a teenage girl successfully sued her primary school for failing to act on warning signs that she was being sexually abused (*Herald Sun*, 17 June, 2000, p. 12).

The main aim of school based personal safety programs is to prevent abuse from occurring by teaching children to recognise the danger signals, and report inappropriate behaviour. A recent review (Macintyre & Carr, 1999) of a number of evaluation studies regarding personal safety programs concluded the following:

- Child abuse prevention programs can increase children's, parents' and teachers' safety skills and knowledge.
- The most successful programs include parents and others closely associated with the child.
- Effective programs use various strategies and methods to get the message across (discussion, videos, role-play).
- Parents/caregivers should be kept informed of topics presented.
- The longer the program the more beneficial to children.
- Training for instructors and teachers is important.

The American program, Protective Behaviours, was developed by the late Peg Flandreau West with the objective of empowering children by the provision of information that would help them to respond safely before abuse developed and became serious. The program was adopted and promoted nationwide by the Victorian Police Department in 1985 and continues to be used, to varying degrees, in schools today.

The most comprehensive Australian study of a personal safety program is

Bruce Johnson's (1995) evaluation of the teaching of Protective Behaviours in South Australia. Johnson found that the majority of responding teachers used the program selectively, with the sections omitted most frequently being those relating to domestic violence and sexual touching. Teachers also revealed that they did not implement Protective Behaviours because they were concerned about adverse parental reactions. However, there was no evidence to show that teachers had actually sought parents' opinions.

Briggs (1987) and Hawkins and Briggs (1999) have found that parents want schools to teach personal safety to their children. Furthermore, it has been reported that parental involvement in the school program is a major contributor to its success (Briggs, 1997; Briggs & Hawkins, 1997; Butler, 1986; Calvert, 1993; Finkelhor, Asdigian & Dzuiba-Leatherman, 1993; Wurtele, 1987).

Interestingly, Johnson also discovered that few teachers participated in professional development sessions relating to Protective Behaviours although other researchers (Woodward, 1990) have found that many teachers feel inadequately prepared to teach personal safety to children.

THE STUDY

This study was conducted, first, to find out if some teachers currently, or intended to, teach personal safety programs in their current classroom and, second, to investigate which materials and methods were being incorporated into these programs. The researcher also wanted to find out whether teachers were accessing training in this area. This information will be useful for teacher trainers and curriculum writers.

The decision to use South Australian DETE schools was made because Protective Behaviours is core curriculum; therefore it was assumed that teachers would be teaching safety strategies to children.

This was a small-scale study and, because of time constraints and access issues, only six schools were selected. The researcher is aware that the sample is not large enough to be a truly random sample; however, care was taken to

choose schools that had unique elements to their personal safety programs. For example, one had a coordinator, one used the school counsellor as a support and another integrated a whole school approach. It was envisaged that these differences might influence participants' responses, thus giving a range of opinions.

METHOD

Sample

As this study investigated teachers' opinions and experiences, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Forty-four junior primary teachers from six DETE schools located in the Adelaide metropolitan area were invited to complete a questionnaire. The schools were chosen using a purposive sampling procedure (Kumar, 1996). It was made clear that participating teachers could withdraw from the study at any time and that all responses would be anonymous. Schools were guaranteed confidentiality.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by the researcher and included a combination of category, list, scale, open and closed items (Bell 1993, pp. 76-77). The researcher hand-delivered and collected questionnaires. To ensure teachers' anonymity, envelopes were provided. The following questions have been answered in this study:

1. How often has this group of teachers accessed training in the area of teaching personal safety to children? (Category)
2. Are the participants teaching or intending to teach a personal safety program, or aspects of one, in their current classroom? (Closed) If so, how often? (Category)
3. Which factors do teachers believe would/will contribute to successful implementation of a personal safety program? (List)
4. Which features of personal safety programs do teachers have reservations about teaching? (Category; Open for reasons)
5. Which teaching approaches and materials are being used when teaching personal safety to children? (List)

Table 1 Frequency of teaching personal safety

No. terms taught	1 day	Once a week	More than once a week	1 month	Other
1	0	5	2	1	3
2	0	4	2	0	0
3	0	0	0	0	0
4	0	5	1	0	1

RESULTS

Training

A total of 33 out of the 44 questionnaires distributed were completed and returned. Of the total returned, 3 had not completed Protective Behaviours training either at pre-service or in-service levels. The majority (68%) of those teachers who had attended training sessions (n=30) indicated that they had completed 1-3 sessions in total. Fifty per cent (15) of these same respondents stated that they had not attended a training session for more than two years.

Personal safety programs in the classroom

All 33 teachers responded when asked if they taught, or intended to teach, a personal safety program in their current classroom. The majority, 73% (24), indicated that they did or intended to, while 27% (9) said they did not. There were five reasons given for not teaching personal safety. Teachers were able to choose more than one response. The reasons cited were:

- No time within a school year (4).
- Insufficient training (3).
- 'Non-instructional time' teacher only (3).
- Children are too young (1).
- Only on short term contract (1).

All of the teachers who stated that they did not, or did not intend to, teach personal safety had not undertaken any training for more than two years.

Another three teachers indicated that they did not teach a specific program but would incorporate aspects of safety education 'if the situation arose'. It is unclear what the teachers meant by 'the situation'; it is disconcerting if they

meant that they would only provide safety education after a child had already been victimised. Alternatively, they may have meant that they took advantage of 'teachable moments' such as topics arising out of discussions or stories.

I do teach how to be safe at school... [personal safety] is not taught as an individual lesson... there may be an opportunity to remind children how to keep safe within another lesson or story.

Thirty-eight per cent (9) of teachers, who indicated that they did, or intended to, teach a personal safety curriculum, restricted sessions to once a week for one or two terms only. Another 21% (5) stated that they would continue for four terms. One teacher out of the 24 who responded to this question said that they would teach personal safety for four terms, more than once a week. Other responses are summarised in Table 1.

Factors identified as contributing to the successful implementation of a personal safety program

The majority of teachers cited regular training and development as an important factor for the successful implementation of a personal safety program. Other responses can be seen in Table 2.

This study reveals that 67% (22) of teachers claimed to have informed caregivers, albeit briefly, of the topics under discussion. Twenty-seven per cent (9) claimed to have held information sessions for parents and 6% (2) claimed that they held day and evening information sessions and provided a crèche for young children.

Features of personal safety programs that teachers have reservations about teaching

Out of the 24 teachers who indicated that they did, or intended to, teach

Table 2 Factors leading to successful implementation

FACTORS (Teachers were able to choose more than one category)	TEACHERS AGREEING % n=31
Regular training and development	90
Better/more teaching resources	61
Support with planning and implementation from other teachers	58
Regular correspondence with parents to inform them about content and how to reinforce concepts at home	55
Access to a counsellor for self or children	55
Support from parents	52
Parent participation in the program	32
A coordinator for this subject	32
Support/encouragement from the Principal	13

personal safety to children, 10 indicated that they had no reservations about teaching any of the topics. Overall, 19 of the 33 teachers indicated that they were apprehensive about teaching one or more of the topics listed in Table 3.

Although Protective Behaviours is core curriculum designed to protect children from sexual abuse, it can be seen from the responses in Table 3 that the most common areas of apprehension for teachers were those topics intended to provide children with strategies that would aid this protection. Teachers were asked to identify the reasons for their apprehension, however the

majority did not provide one for every category chosen.

Reasons cited for failing to teach concepts in the sexual misbehaviour category were:

- Junior primary children were 'too young' to understand safety concepts (5).
- The teachers needed further training in order to teach the program competently (7).
- The teachers were unsure how to respond if a child disclosed abuse (2).

Table 3 Topics that teachers have reservations about teaching

TOPIC (Teachers were able to choose more than one category)	RESPONSES % n=19
Teaching children how to stay safe from sexual misbehaviour	79
Helping children to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate touches	47
Teaching children how to stay safe from domestic violence	37
Providing correct names of body parts, including genitals	32
Teaching children how to stay safe from verbal abuse	32
Teaching children how to stay safe from physical abuse	26
Theme 2 'Nothing is so awful that we can't talk to someone'	21
Early warning signs	16
Teaching children about their rights and responsibilities	10
Teaching children that they can say no to adults in some circumstances	10
Secrets – which to keep and which to tell	10

Responses to other categories all related to one or more of the following:

- The need for further training (8).
- Lack of confidence to teach the topic (3).
- Junior primary children are 'too young' to understand (2).
- Lack of parental support (1).

One teacher expressed feelings of helplessness about their ability to protect children. This related to their unsatisfactory experiences and disillusionment with statutory child protection authorities.

For many children the right to say no is not a reality. The adults in their house are more powerful and the reality of reporting abuse (the current policy of keeping families together) leaves the child within the home at more risk. I know from experience that this is so. We cannot keep children safe.

While teaching these topics is not a problem, it is difficult when teaching children who are currently being abused and knowing the practicality of being able to successfully intervene.

The reality is that asking for help does not necessarily result in their situation being changed ... It is very hard to prove sexual abuse when dealing with junior primary children and an offender who is experienced ... I worked with a child for 3 years before successful intervention and then 6 months later s/he was put back with the family.

Materials and teaching approaches being incorporated into personal safety programs

Most teachers used a variety of methods and materials when teaching personal safety to children as can be seen in Tables 4 and 5.

Respondents were also asked to recommend materials that they considered would be most useful for implementing a personal safety program. Only 63% (21) of respondents completed this section. Those most frequently cited included:

- Storybooks (9)
- Videos (7)
- School counsellor/coordinator to teach or support (5)

Table 4 Teaching methods used

APPROACH (Teachers were able to choose more than one category)	RESPONSE % n=33
Role play situations	94
Discussion/brainstorming	94
Problem solving	91
Direct Instruction	79
Rote learning of safety rules	30
Guided rehearsal	27

DISCUSSION

It is interesting that while the majority of respondents (90%) specified training as the most important contributing factor for the implementation of a successful program, only 8 claimed to have completed any training within the previous 12 months. In fact, 50% (n=15) stated that they had not undertaken any training for more than two years.

Training sessions are available through the DETE and also Mission Australia. Both organisations offer regular, full day training and half-day 'refresher' sessions. These may be undertaken at a central location or at the participants' worksite, which would allow for whole school training to occur. It is significant that the DETE cancelled 3 sessions in 2000 due to insufficient numbers (DETE, 2000, pers. comm., 17 Dec 2000).

It is not clear why some respondents had not updated their training in over two years. However, it is likely that the motivation for attending training sessions for personal safety was low. Further research needs to be undertaken to ascertain exactly why teachers do not regularly update their training in this area.

The results of this study clearly show that the majority (73%) of teachers surveyed claimed that they did, or intended to, teach personal safety skills. However, it is not clear which specific topics teachers actually used, or intended to use, in their programs or how comprehensively topics would be covered.

It has also been revealed that only a quarter of those teachers who indicated that they would teach personal safety would use it across the school year.

Conversely, the majority claimed that skills would be taught once a week restricted to one or two terms only. This is despite evaluations made of successful personal safety programs which showed that comprehensive programs taught over longer periods are most beneficial to children (Finkelhor, Asdigian & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1993; Macintyre & Carr, 1999). Longer programs would also give children time to practise strategies at school and at home with their families.

Of the teachers who stated that they did not or would not teach personal safety, 44% (4) gave lack of time as the main reason. However, as discussed previously, schools and teachers need to consider the consequences of not dealing with personal safety in a conscientious way as the risk of litigation is increasing.

Ninety per cent (n=31) of teachers cited regular training and development as an important factor for the successful implementation of a personal safety program even though only 26% (8) had updated their training within the last 12 months. Teachers also cited the involvement and support of primary caregivers as an important factor. This finding concurs with Briggs and Hawkins (1997), Hawkins and Briggs (1999), and Macintyre and Carr (1999). Schools should also regularly update their resources for teaching personal safety as 61% (n=31) of teachers highlighted the need for this to ensure successful program implementation.

The four topics that teachers were most apprehensive about teaching were those relating to sexual misbehaviour and domestic violence. This concurs with Johnson's (1995) findings. Interestingly, 47% (9) of respondents who chose the sexual misbehaviour category had not completed any training in over 2 years. It is clear that further training is required to increase teachers' confidence and skills. Training must include strategies that will help adults to deal with disclosures of abuse in psychologically helpful ways as well as discussions about mandatory notification with the statutory services in order to inform teachers about the reporting and follow up process of abuse cases.

When looking at the data relating to teaching methods and teaching

Table 5 Teaching materials used

MATERIALS (Teachers were able to choose more than one category)	RESPONSE % n=33
Story books	88
Work sheets	82
Videos	67
Drawings	61
Puppets	61
Colouring books	27

materials used, it is clear that teachers are using a variety of strategies. This is a positive finding because the use of a variety of methods and materials is advocated to ensure an effective program (Macintyre & Carr, 1999).

Limitations

The limitations of this study need to be mentioned. Firstly, as the sample is small, it cannot be regarded as truly representative of the total population.

The use of a questionnaire as the data collection instrument made it impossible to gain further insight into responses, follow up on any unanswered questions or to clear up any ambiguity. A question should have been included that enabled teachers to describe exactly which topics and programs they had already incorporated and/or intended to incorporate in order for a detailed analysis to take place. While this method of data collection enabled all teachers to maintain anonymity, it would have been beneficial to interview some to gain greater insights.

As the researcher did not include a definition for personal safety in the questionnaire, it is likely that teachers used the term to include topics such as road and fire safety rather than those related to child protection situations. This is suggested by the large number of claims to the use of 'role play'. It would be very difficult to use this method for child protection because it requires considerable expertise and confidence which, in this study, has been found to be lacking for certain topics.

CONCLUSION

While it is clear from this study that some teachers claim to be teaching

personal safety skills, it is still unclear which topics are being offered. From the results obtained in Table 3, it is likely that many of the teachers are selecting non-controversial aspects such as road safety rather than helping children identify, escape from, and report, sexual misbehaviour.

It is also clear that the regular training of teachers in this area is a priority that needs to be investigated if we are serious about providing children with personal safety programs in schools. This training needs to include practical, hands-on activities and information that will aid teachers in planning appropriate lessons to suit the cultures and developmental levels of the children in their care, as well as strategies that will enable them to feel confident in dealing with disclosures when they occur. Training sessions also need to focus on how to engage caregivers in programs, thus facilitating the reinforcement of safety concepts in the home.

The comments made regarding feelings of hopelessness and an inability to stop child abuse through the statutory services indicates that there is a need for *all* schools to have access to a counsellor to support children and teachers in these situations.

The responses in this study imply that the teaching of personal safety is not as comprehensive as it should be. The reasons for this are likely to be varied, including the possibility that some teachers were themselves victims of childhood abuse and may feel uncomfortable with the topic. Educational authorities should consider employing specialist teachers to teach personal safety skills to every grade level in each school to ensure a thorough and consistent approach. Teachers should also undergo training and be present during classroom sessions so that they could reinforce concepts in their day-to-day teaching.

It is recommended that further study into this area be undertaken to ascertain which topics are actually being taught – and in what depth. It would also be beneficial to find out what experiences teachers have had when reporting suspicions of abuse to the statutory authorities in order to highlight any anomalies that may exist with the reporting process. □

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