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Prevention of the Sexual Abuse of Children in the School Environment

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the assumptions of the prevention of sexual violence against children in the school environment. Child sexual abuse has become a global problem that affects not only the family environment, but educational institutions as well. One example of such an institution is a school where, under the guise of upbringing, there may be numerous abuses committed by people who are an authority in the child's life. School staff members are often unaware of institutional grooming and its perpetrators, which means that the entire institution may unknowingly contribute to promoting child sexual abuse. The author first presents the methods of grooming used by perpetrators, pointing to activities aimed at children and the mechanisms of institutional grooming that may create a specific culture that makes it difficult to protect children. The author then presents the standards and strategies for prevention in schools, paying attention to the need to involve the entire community: conducting proper recruitment and training of employees and constructing preventive programs adapted to the age and development of children and their proper implementation.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, grooming, institutional grooming, prevention standards, prevention programs

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has been a well-known phenomenon for centuries, although in all types of societies sexual relations between children and adults upset the normative order, always taking the side of children, both legally and morally. However, only in recent decades has CSA, especially when found in different types of institutions, begun to be treated as a societal problem. A succession of reported abuse cases, shocking reports on the extent of child abuse in Church institutions in different countries, and increased media attention have led to a view of CSA as a global problem (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011, p. 80).

The identification of CSA as a "global problem" does not, however, automatically answer the question of how to adequately address child abuse at the individual and societal levels. On the one hand, we can observe efforts to describe the phenomenon by both quantitative (the scale of abuse in individual countries and social groups) and qualitative methods (the characteristics of perpetrators and victims and the functioning of educational institutions); on the other hand, we face enormous difficulties resulting from such factors as imprecise terminology, the low percentage of cases which are reported, the sensitive nature of the problem – for both victims and perpetrators – and the high dark figure of crime, which leads to a deterioration of the problem and to inadequate interventions targeted at both victims and perpetrators (Sajkowska, 2018).

According to Maria Beisert and Agnieszka Izdebska (2012), definitions of CSA can be divided into three groups: clinical, legal, and social. The clinical definitions are the most comprehensive and refer to a specific type of relationship and interaction between individuals. They are created in order to best describe the phenomenon and to make an accurate diagnosis. The legal definitions refer to the law in force in a given country. The definition of CSA set out in the provisions of the Polish Penal Code describes the essence of the phenomenon and contains three elements: the characteristics that describe a victim, the perpetrator, and the act, that is, the type of sexual activity of an adult with a child. Finally,

the social definitions express unwritten social beliefs about the phenomenon of CSA. They are based on information reaching society from the media and are less often based on reliable knowledge derived from scientific research. In this study I adopt the definition presented by the World Health Organization (WHO), which defines CSA as

> the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violate the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person. (WHO, 2019, pp. 15–16)

CSA encompasses a range of behaviors that cause negative effects in the child's psyche and may lead to many disorders of the child's social functioning (Izdebska, 2009). Traumatic experiences are further reinforced by the fact that most perpetrators are people close to the child. According to David Finkelhor (2012), about 90% of children who are victims of sexual abuse know their perpetrator; only 10% of sexually abused children are abused by strangers. In addition, about 30% of sexually abused children are abused by family members, and about 60% are abused by people whom the family trusts. In addition, abuse often takes place on the premises of care and educational institutions, and the perpetrators have direct contact with the children in their care for many hours and may even have permanent custody of the child. With this in mind, the concept of "institutionalized abuse" of children was introduced, which distinguishes this phenomenon from domestic abuse. It can occur in any setting where there are individuals in a position of authority over the children entrusted to them. However, most of the available research on institutional abuse refers to sports settings, residential care, schools, and religious institutions (McNeish & Scott, 2018).

This article addresses the issue of societal prevention of child sexual abuse in schools based on the assumption that prevention is better than dealing with the consequences. Prevention can take various forms and can be directed to various target groups. A distinction is made between interventions that target the perpetrators of CSA, those that target parents and professionals working with children, those that target children, and those that target society as a whole (Finkelhor, 2009).

A school is a special institution whose task is to care of and educate children; therefore, the numerous cases of sexual abuse require adequate and organized action for the protection of children. This is served by adequate prevention, which involves creating a safe environment and strengthening a culture of sexual abuse prevention that involves the entire school institution. These issues will be addressed in this article. I will first discuss the ways in which grooming occurs in a school setting before presenting standards and best practices for CSA prevention in schools.

Ways That Perpetrators Groom Children

CSA is an activity that requires a high level of commitment from the perpetrator, who sometimes takes a long time to plan and prepare before carrying out their intentions. David Filkenhor (1984) distinguished four prerequisites that a perpetrator must meet for CSA to occur. Firstly, the perpetrator must be motivated to sexually abuse the child. Contributing factors include child-related sexual arousal, emotional congruence with children, and difficulties establishing relationships with adults. The predictors of such a motivation include childhood adversity, including experiences of CSA as a victim, but also the absence or inadequacy of a primary caregiver, whether due to drug and alcohol abuse or debilitation by domestic violence. Secondly, the perpetrator must overcome all internal inhibitions, such as the belief that sexual abuse harms the child. This is done by justifying or downplaying the significance of their behavior and its consequences; sometimes an abuser resorts to drugs or

alcohol to overcome their fear or conscience or they may attribute the abuse to the child's wishes and desires. Thirdly, the abuser must overcome external barriers, such as adult supervision, in order to gain access to the child and carry out the abuse. Thus, the abuser "grooms" those closest to the child in order to remain hidden. They may use practices such as presenting themselves in a prosocial light, creating an alibi for their behavior, undermining the child's credibility, or domestic violence. Finally, the abuser must overcome the victim's resistance. Sometimes they use physical force, but more often the grooming revolves around a particular vulnerability of the child (e.g., children who are bullied by peers, who have no friends, who lack confidence, who are sexually naïve, or who have learning disabilities/intellectual deficits).

In the literature, the use of various techniques to manipulate and control victims in order to exploit them is called "grooming." It is a process of preparing a child as well as significant adults and their social environment for the sexual exploitation of that child. In this way, the perpetrator wants to gain access to the child, obtain the child's consent and maintain secrecy with the child to avoid disclosure (Craven et al., 2006, p. 297).

Using a variety of manipulative techniques, abusers may also prepare others to gain access to the child. They reach out to those who can be manipulated to hide the abuse, such as parents and other caregivers. In institutional settings, targets of grooming may be children, parents and caregivers, colleagues, and others through whom access to the child can be gained. Thus, grooming extends beyond the immediate social environment to institutions and their stakeholders (Williams, 2015). Gallagher defined institutional child abuse as

> the sexual abuse of a child (under 18 years of age) by an adult who works with him or her. The perpetrator may be employed in a paid or voluntary capacity; in the public, voluntary, or private sector; in a residential or non-residential setting; and may work either directly with children or be in an ancillary role. (Gallagher 2000, p. 797)

Institutional grooming focuses on the unique characteristics of institutions that may facilitate the crime. The institutional setting includes the physical environment and the organizational culture of the institution. Research has shown that physical factors can create opportunities for CSA because many case of abuses occur in unsupervised locations. Aspects of the physical environment that may create a high risk of abuse are known as "target sites" (Kaufman et al., 2012). These places are isolated and difficult to supervise and have limited access. The location of classrooms, bathrooms, locker rooms, and public spaces can also create risk. For example, buildings with many exits, entrances, corridors, and enclosed spaces increase the likelihood that activities are concealed and that perpetrators can avoid surveillance.

Cultural conditioning influences how an institution views child safety and its attitudes toward CSA. Staller (2012) identified five primary organizational and cultural barriers to identifying and/or disclosing grooming and abuse, related to how the perpetrator constructs their professional image within the organization and thus presents themselves as a trustworthy person: (1) confidentiality and other codes of silence that make it difficult to share information; (2) unclear lines of abuse reporting, where information may fall into the hands of those who are more concerned with discretion; (3) distrust of law enforcement and child protection agencies; (4) extreme differences in the exercise of power between victims, perpetrators, whistle-blowers, and other institutional actors; and (5) strong personal, professional, and institutional loyalties.

The institutional environment can also promote CSA by protecting the offender. Institutional offenders claim that the culture of the institution in which they committed their crimes does not promote the welfare of the child. Offenders often hold a high position in the institution, which gives them a sense of authority, power, and the trust of others; they therefore seem to remain outside the realm of suspicion. Researchers have identified several organizational factors that may be important in facilitating grooming: 1) a lack of knowledge among staff of grooming techniques; 2) inadequate supervision of children; 3) a reluctance to intervene in cases of potentially inappropriate behavior;

4) a lack of clear and formal rules/expectations; 5) institutional trust in the perpetrator; 6) a lack of opportunities to report concerns about CSA; and 7) a lack of communication channels/opportunities to disclose CSA (Leclerc et al., 2011).

Grooming is widely recognized as a complex, step-by-step process that involves three main stages: 1) gaining access to the victim; 2) initiating and maintaining the abuse; and 3) concealing the abuse (Sullivan & Quayle, 2012, p. 89; Colton et al., 2012). A group of researchers centered around the Council of International Schools paid particular attention to how children are groomed in school. The following stages of grooming were identified:

1) selecting a target victim – The perpetrator assesses vulnerability, identifies the love/attention the child is seeking, and assesses emotional needs.

2) gaining the victim's trust – The perpetrator observes and gathers information, easily mixes with children and adults (caregivers, coaches, and teachers), uses positional authority/proximity, and may allow the child to do something the parent does not allow in order to maintain secrecy (candies, staying up late, alcohol or drugs, or viewing pornography).

3) gaining the trust of others – The perpetrator claims to be a normal, nice person, is a great teacher, and can strike up a quick conversation with adults about the child's lies/convictions to sow distrust.

4) satisfying a need – The abuser tries to become an increasingly important person to the child, gives presents, favors the child, and arranges special trips or activities. They show the child that they are the only person who understands or appreciates them.

5) isolating the child – The perpetrator drives a wedge between the child and the caregivers, shows themselves to be the one who loves, appreciates, and can provide what even the parents cannot provide (a positive male role model).

6) gradual sexualization of the relationship – The perpetrator uses desensitization techniques such as tickling, touching during play, hugs,

talking like adults (about marital problems, conflicts, etc.), telling adult jokes and making insinuations, encouraging intimacy, or offering to "play doctor" (Smellie et al., 2020).

Prevention Carried Out by the School

CSA not only arouses indignation and provokes negative emotions, but it also mobilizes for extensive action to reduce it. Individual prevention programs targeted at specific risk groups are insufficient; what is needed instead is a comprehensive approach of the entire child-rearing environment. Sophisticated methods of institutional grooming used by perpetrators make it necessary to focus all the attention on protecting children in care and educational institutions. To this end, standards of universal, selective, and indicated prevention are being developed. In the case of schools, universal prevention seems to be the most important in order to prevent CSA on school premises. However, it is also important to have procedures in place to respond to reports of abuse that has already taken place.

Monica Applewhite outlined the elements of effective prevention at all levels, which include 1) prevention principles that address specific guidelines and programs; 2) "codes of behavior," or guidelines and requirements for interactions between adults and children; 3) procedures when sexual abuse occurs and how to report it; 4) educational programs for children and adolescents; 5) outreach to those harmed and their loved ones; 6) working with families; and 7) procedures for inappropriate behaviors that may already be grooming but are not yet sexual abuse (cited in Kush, 2020).

Considering that child sexual abuse is supported by various factors concerning the victim, the perpetrator, and the situation or organization, Quadara et al. (2015) stated that effective prevention needs appropriate strategies that require in-depth knowledge of each of these factors and how they interact with each other. These strategies include (1) teaching children protective behavior; (2) preventing situational crime; (3) therapeutic interventions prior to referral to the judicial system for problematic

sexual behavior and behavior associated with CSA; (4) post-criminal jus-tice involvement to prevent re-offending; (5) criminal justice and other statutory interventions; and (6) therapeutic work with children who have been sexually abused.

The assumptions of CSA prevention in school should respond to the threats arising from the mechanisms of institutional grooming by perpe-trators outlined above. Therefore, comprehensive institutional preven-tion begins with ensuring the selection of the right educational staff. This is done through screening and appropriate recruitment procedures and is important because many child sex offenders have no criminal record and cannot be identified by examining criminal statistics alone. Appropriate codes of conduct and training are also important for effective prevention in schools. These should provide clear guidelines on what constitutes ap-propriate and inappropriate behavior and staff should be trained to im-plement these procedures. Codes of conduct or professional standards may be developed to communicate what constitutes appropriate and in-appropriate relationships between staff and children and what behavior is acceptable or unacceptable in the institution. Similarly, it is important to create procedures for appropriate reporting of professional abuse by ed-ucational staff. An extremely important element of effective school-based prevention is the promotion of a positive institutional culture. As I indi-cated above, the culture of an organization may inadvertently support or normalize grooming behavior – through group and professional soli-darity, for example – so training staff to understand appropriate and inappropriate behavior can help change the culture of the institution (O'Leary et al., 2017).

One form of preventing CSA is sex education directed at children. Within the framework of sexual pedagogy, two processes can be distin-guished: sex education understood as providing relevant knowledge and sex education understood as an educational influence aimed at forming in children and adolescents the desired attitudes towards their own sexual characteristics, sexuality, and sexual activity. The former is the transmission of a wide body of knowledge that is necessary for proper sexual function-ing, including such issues as human biology, interpersonal relationships,

creating and ending intimate relationships, assertiveness, conflict resolu-
tion, and elements of medicine, sociology, and law. Sex education as the
formation of attitudes, on the other hand, helps children and adolescents
develop the desired attitudes towards their sexuality and prepare the for
family life.

Educational programs for CSA prevention should address issues that
are directly related to the events that children encounter. Agnieszka
Izdebska and Agata Ruchel (2011) proposed the following topics ad-
dressed to children:

- correct nomenclature connected with sexuality – Having knowl-
  edge about their own body and the ability to use correct vocab-
  ulary connected with sexuality increases a child's self-confidence
  in this sphere.
- relationship to one's body – The message is that each person has
  the exclusive right to decide what happens to their body, who
  has access to it, and to what extent.
- types of touch – The message is meant to teach children to dis-
  tinguish between different types of touch; the idea behind its in-
  troduction is that children who are able to recognize potentially
  harmful or inappropriate touch will be in a better position to
  avoid situations where it might occur.
- skills connected with leaving dangerous situations and refusing
  contact – Children learn specific reactions or patterns of behav-
  ior, which they will be able to use in order to leave potentially
  dangerous situations and to express their disagreement and re-
  fusal to potential perpetrators. The most common skill taught in
  this area is the ability to say "no."
- reporting abuse – Many educational programs include modules
  designed to prepare children to disclose abuse if it occurs.

The effectiveness of sex education in schools depends not only on se-
lecting appropriate prevention programs, but also on the manner in which
they are implemented. This is connected with well-prepared educators

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and management, among other things. Appropriate implementation of a prevention program means 1) providing children with enough information to help them make wise choices about disclosing abuse, 2) offering a variety of training scenarios that are sensitive to children's feelings and take into account the inherent power imbalance between children and educators, 3) forming a community perspective that involves parents, teachers, and other school personnel, 4) reiterating complex learning concepts, and 5) providing age- and stage-appropriate educational materials (Kaufman & Erooga, 2016).

Conclusion

The scale of the problem of sexual abuse, its global reach, and the presence of cases of CSA in educational institutions is a serious concern. It even raises doubts as to the possibility of effectively responding to this undesirable phenomenon. Another problem is the limited awareness of educators and leaders of care and educational institutions regarding the grooming of children or entire institutions. Although there has recently been an increase in the level of knowledge and involvement of many institutions and foundations in the prevention of CSA, there is still much to be done.

The aim of this article was to show the methods of institutional grooming and to present the assumptions of CSA prevention at school. The growing awareness of adults about CSA and the rising number of training and prevention programs is encouraging. It should be remembered, however, that as long as there are even isolated cases of abuse, efforts to protect children must not cease. It is therefore necessary to involve parents, educators, and local communities in the protection of children in order to improve preventive measures and their implementation.

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