

# Richard Alexander and Eugene Hyman: Child sexual abuse prevention has to start in elementary school

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The Crimes Against Children Research Center reports that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys suffer sexual abuse. The 2000 Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that "more than half of all juvenile victims of sexual abuse were under age 12."

That is outrageous.

Childhood sexual abuse causes youngsters to be depressed, angry, withdrawn and unhappy -- the red flags of post-traumatic stress disorder. In many cases, changes are noticed but no parent is prepared to face the chilling signs of abuse. Red flags are clear in hindsight, after serial abuse is discovered. And even then, many adults do not want to talk about it, which means we must.

The time to start educating children to prevent abuse is elementary school. We wait longer, and it's too late.

The average molester is 14 and learned abuse by suffering abuse. Locking up adult pedophiles does not prevent children from abusing children.

When molestation impacts personality development, the result is pedophilia. Pedophiles seek positions of responsibility that offer secrecy. They are trusted adults who manipulate innocent children in schools, scouting, nursery programs, camps, churches, special classes and sports.

Parental education, reinforced by age-appropriate curriculum in schools, and a community commitment to prevent children from being placed in risky settings are necessary to break the chain of molesters creating molesters.

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents to teach these points early in childhood: the proper name of genitals; after diapering ends, no one has the right to touch another person's private parts; the privacy of others must be respected; and there are no secrets between child and parents.

AAP recommends discussing news of molestation to remind a child that when uncomfortable touching occurs, it's time to tell. The youngest children can be taught "no," "go" (run away) and "tell" (right away) Mom, Dad, a teacher, or a police officer. Age-appropriate protective instruction should be the backbone of parental education and supported in elementary schools. Yet today schools are not required to teach innocent children molestation prevention.

When abuse is suspected, California law mandates that school employees, social workers, medical personnel, clergy and coaches report to Child Protective Services. But the Evergreen School District never taught its staff to report grossly suspicious conduct like that of a third grade teacher who molested four 7- and 8-year-old girls 40 to 50 times in his classroom during recesses. Only this year are all California schools required to train employees on reporting requirements.

Yet the state education code is silent on molestation prevention. The law "encourages" school districts to collaborate with consultants in sexual abuse and sex trafficking prevention and suggests staff training "may" be conducted on prevention. That's not enough. Age-appropriate curriculum must start in early elementary grades.

Institutions serving children must never allow an adult to be one-on-one with a child and should reinforce "no" "go" "tell" training. Had this been followed at the Walden West Science Camp, an alleged predator would never have had carte blanche access to children.

Adults must listen carefully. Children often are not believed because of their inability to fully express themselves, so when they report an experience with the "last person anyone would expect to be a molester," their voices are not heard.

We can break the circle of molesters creating molesters. Age-appropriate preventive child molestation education is a must. Hold responsible anyone who places a child in a setting where abuse is likely to occur. The anguish inflicted on children and

their families should not be born by them alone.

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