

Keeping Children Safe: Lessons Learned from a Children’s Advocacy Center’s Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Project with an Urban Elementary School

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Juvenile Protective Association¹, October 2019*

I. Introduction: The need to address child sexual abuse concerns in schools

Child sexual abuse is one of the most common forms of maltreatment. In one of the seminal studies of the prevalence and effects of childhood trauma (the Adverse Childhood Experiences study), over one-fifth of adults (22%) reported that they had been sexually abused as a child (Felitti et al, 1998). A summary of findings from multiple community surveys of adults estimated the prevalence of child sexual abuse at 16.8% for women and 7.8% for men (Gorey & Leslie, 1997). Perpetrators include both adults and peers. In a phone survey, 17 year old females reported lifetime prevalence rates of sexual abuse or assault of 11.2% by adult perpetrators and 17.8% by juvenile perpetrators (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014). Individuals with disabilities are even more likely to experience sexual abuse. Although estimates vary, children with disabilities are 4 to 10 times more vulnerable to sexual abuse than their peers (Brown, 2010; Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2007). In addition to the manifest short term trauma and stress victims experience, the long term effects of child sexual abuse are profound, including increased likelihood of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicide, risk behaviors, victim-perpetrator cycle, and poor academic performance (Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001).

As defined in the Illinois Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act (325 ILCS 5) school personnel are mandated to report suspected child abuse or neglect. Educators are indeed critical to efforts to identify and report child abuse. The most recent national incidence study of child maltreatment (NIS-4) found that over half of all instances of maltreatment were identified by school staff. However, despite federal and state legislation on mandated reporting, only about 20 percent of incidents identified by school staff (incidents that met detailed criteria for determining maltreatment) were subsequently investigated by child protective services. (Sedlak, Mettenburg, Basena, Petta, McPherson, Greene, & Li, 2010). Thus, child maltreatment incidents that are reported to public child welfare agencies still represent only the visible portion of an iceberg that extends well below the surface (Sedlak & Gabel, 2019).

While most incidents of maltreatment are first recognized by school personnel, it is also important to recognize that school activities and adult-student relationships can put students at risk of abuse. In 2018, investigative reporting by the Chicago Tribune revealed that hundreds of students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) had been sexually abused by teachers or other adults at school. Instances of sexual assault perpetrated by other students were also a focal concern. Tragically, when students had the courage to disclose the abuse, educators often failed to report incidents to child welfare or law enforcement as required by law. Furthermore, background checks had been inadequate, failing to identify perpetrators with histories of abuse (Jackson, Marx, Perez Jr, & Richards, 2018b). As part of renewed efforts to respond to this crisis and increase protections for students, CPS opened the Office of Student Protections and Title IX (“OSP”), which acts as a guide and support to its staff regarding all issues of sexual misconduct. The OSP worked to develop new policies and procedures regarding sexual misconduct in the city’s school district, including the requirement that all schools report sexual misconduct to their office after reporting eligible cases to DCFS and/or the district’s Office of the Inspector General. In the summer of 2018, the city’s school district also secured the expert assistance of the local Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) to help create a district-wide training on

¹ The Juvenile Protective Association (JPA) is a non-profit social service agency that provides independent consultation and support to the CAC on research, evaluation, and continuous quality improvement projects. This report incorporates information and feedback from CAC staff, but the findings and final product are JPA’s alone.

reporting sexual abuse. This training was then delivered to more than 45,000 staff by the CAC or principals that year, and updated with new policies and guidelines for the 2019-2020 school year.

The Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) is a hub of expertise in Chicago for efforts to identify, prevent, and investigate child sexual abuse, as well as to ameliorate the harm of trauma through providing essential mental health and support services for victimized children and their families. The organization’s approach is based upon a nation-wide model that centers coordinated, multidisciplinary collaboration aimed at responding to and reducing trauma. The CAC’s education, policy, and prevention (EPP) department has been providing training on recognizing, responding to and preventing child sexual abuse for over a decade.

[Erin’s Law](#) has been passed in 36 states. This legislation requires that schools provide child sexual abuse prevention training for children in pre-K through 12th grade, and information on child sexual abuse to school personnel, and information and assistance to parents and guardians. Primary prevention efforts in child sexual abuse are comprised of “approaches that take place before sexual violence has occurred to prevent initial perpetration or victimization,” while secondary and tertiary prevention strategies for child sexual abuse take place after the abuse has occurred, and include short-term and long-term responses to address the consequences of the abuse (CDC, 2014). School-based child sexual abuse prevention programs, such as Committee for Children’s Second Step Child Protection Unit, are aimed at reducing sexual abuse from occurring (primary prevention) and helping children report abuse and seek help when it does occur (secondary and tertiary prevention). Such programs also help promote body ownership and help children more broadly understand and assert their rights (Hawkins, 2013; Giardino et al., 2015). While more research is needed to determine the effectiveness of school-based child sexual abuse prevention programs in preventing abuse on all three prevention levels, existing research suggests mostly positive findings (e.g., students and teachers becoming knowledgeable about the topic; reduced victim self-blame if abuse does occur), which suggest that school-based child sexual abuse prevention programs to address the issue of the sexual abuse of children, like CPU, are better than having no program at all (Finkelhor, 2007).

Well before the Chicago Tribune revealed sexual abuse problems in Chicago schools, the Chicago CAC recognized the societal and cultural taboos about talking about sex and sexual abuse, the pivotal role educators can play in identifying and determining the nature of the response to suspected maltreatment, and the importance of reaching young children and the adults who care for and teach them. In 2015, the CAC developed a collaborative sexual abuse prevention pilot project with a local public school. Serving a predominately Latinx population, the school’s principal and staff showed remarkable leadership and sustained support for efforts to help the community--children, parents, and teachers—learn about sexual abuse and how they can prevent and respond to it.

In this document, we describe the goals, activities, results, and lessons learned from the CAC/elementary school sexual abuse prevention pilot project. We also consider how findings from this project can be useful in informing the ongoing efforts to better protect students.

II. The Children’s Advocacy Center Sexual Abuse Prevention Project with an Elementary School

In 2015, the Chicago CAC began researching student-focused sexual abuse prevention programs to pilot in a local public school. With the help and support of the local Neighborhood Council, the CAC created a partnership with an elementary school, which serves close to 500 students in grades PreK through 8th grade.

During three school years (2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19), the CAC worked with the elementary school to implement best practices with regards to sexual abuse prevention, maintaining safe spaces, and handling disclosures. The CAC also created a plan to implement the Committee for Children’s Second Step Child Protection Unit (CPU) curriculum for the school’s students in grades PreK through 5th grade. The CAC

supplemented the curriculum through training and support to the elementary school's staff and parent workshops. An overarching goal was to help teachers have the knowledge and capacity to deliver the CPU lessons on their own.

The goals of the CAC-Elementary School Project were:

- Increased understanding of child sexual abuse
- Increased understanding of reasons and process of reporting abuse
- Positive behavior and attitude change around prevention practices
- Positive interaction among children, youth and staff is reinforced
- Improved understanding and response to children's sexual behavior
- Concerning interaction among children, youth and staff is responded to effectively
- Proactive sexual abuse prevention policies and procedures are in place
- Decreased risk of sexual abuse of children in youth-serving organization
- Increase self-protection skills in students
- Increased comfort level in caregivers around talking to their children about safety
- Creation of a culture of prevention (prevention is routine within the entire organization)

1. Child Protection Unit curriculum

The Committee for Children's Second Step Child Protection Unit (CPU) was selected as the child sexual abuse prevention curriculum for the Project since the elementary school, along with other public schools in the large school district, have implemented other curriculum offered by Committee for Children, including social-emotional learning. There are many advantages to the CPU curriculum, including its availability in Spanish (a needed functionality given that the elementary school has several Spanish-speaking only classrooms in the younger grades and bilingual classrooms in older grades) and its thoroughness with presenting the potential types of situations in which students may find themselves receiving unsafe or unwanted² touches and the type of people that can perpetrate. According to the Committee for Children (2014), the goal of the CPU curriculum is "to develop staff, adult caregiver, and student knowledge and skills for protecting students from unsafe and abusive situations in and outside of school." Specifically, the CPU curriculum teaches students: to recognize situations (such as touches) that are unsafe or sexually abusive; to report these instances to adults; and to assert themselves and refuse those situations.

2. Implementation of the Sexual Abuse Prevention Project

The main activities and components of implementing the CAC and elementary school's Sexual Abuse Prevention Project (referred to as the "Project" throughout this review) are described below in Table 1. The CAC planned to deliver the lessons from the Child Protection Unit (CPU) curriculum in the first school year (SY1) of the Project, followed by teachers delivering the curriculum on their own in SY2. However, as will be described later on in this report, the teachers did not feel comfortable delivering the lessons on their own in SY2, prompting changes to how the Project was implemented in SY2 and SY3.

² The term "unwanted touches" is used here because it is used in the CPU in relation to helping children learn to say "no" when they are uncomfortable with how they are being touched. The CAC staff make a critically important additional point that whether touching is "unwanted" by the child is irrelevant to whether it is inappropriate or illegal.

Table 1. Project implementation activities over the three-year period

School Year 1 (SY1) 2016-2017 school year	School Year 2 (SY2) 2017-2018 school year	School Year 3 (SY3) 2018-2019 school year
<p>1.CAC worked with the elementary school to discuss best practices related to sexual abuse prevention and the roll-out of the CPU curriculum</p> <p>2.Teachers received the “Keeping Children Safe” training from the CAC and the post-training evaluation at two different time points in School Year 1 (SY1):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The start of the SY (T1, or Sep 2016) b. Near the end of the SY (T2, or Feb 2017) <p>3.The 6 CPU lessons were delivered by the CAC to Pre-K through 5th grade students monthly across the span of 6 months and children’s knowledge was assessed at the end of the lessons</p> <p>4.Two caregiver sessions were conducted by the CAC, including an internet safety training in collaboration with the local Police Department</p> <p>5.The Project partnered with Imagination Theater and Resilience (formerly called Rape Victim Advocates) to bring sexual abuse prevention-themed content to 6th through 8th grades since those grades weren’t partaking in the CPU lessons</p>	<p>1.CAC met with the principal and assistant principal to discuss plan for new school year</p> <p>2.Teachers received the “Keeping Children Safe” training from CAC and the post-training evaluation at two different time points in School Year 2 (SY2):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The start of the SY (T1, or Aug 2017) b. A few months later (T2, or Nov 2017) <p>3.The 6 CPU lessons were delivered by CAC to Pre-K through 5th grade students biweekly across the span of 12 weeks, reinforced by teachers in the off-weeks, and children’s knowledge was assessed at the end of the lessons</p> <p>4.One caregiver session was conducted by the CAC</p> <p>5.The Project partnered with Imagination Theater and Resilience to bring sexual abuse prevention-themed content to 6th through 8th grades since those grades weren’t partaking in the CPU lessons</p>	<p>1.CAC met with the principal and assistant principal to discuss plan for new school year</p> <p>2.Elementary school received an all-staff training about preventing and responding to sexual abuse the week before school started as part of the new district requirements, delivered by the principal with support from CAC</p> <p>3.Teachers received an abbreviated training from CAC in the late fall regarding implementation of CPU, but did not complete a post-training evaluation due to time limitations. The principal’s short-term absence for personal reasons understandably reduced the school’s ability to support the project, even with good intentions.</p> <p>4.The 6 CPU lessons were delivered weekly with CAC staff teaching 3 lessons (the "tougher" lessons) and elementary school staff teaching the other 3 lessons on their own with CAC staff available for support.</p> <p>5.One caregiver session was conducted by CAC</p> <p>6.The Project partnered with Imagination Theater and Resilience to bring sexual abuse prevention-themed content to 6th through 8th grades since those grades weren’t partaking in the CPU lessons</p>

It is also important to note that CPU provides online training for staff and parents. The CAC staff encouraged the elementary school staff and parent participation in the online training through emails and letters. However, we were unable to track participation in online CPU branded resources and trainings. Furthermore, the CAC believes that in-person adult education is more effective, so this was prioritized each year.

3. Questions examined

The Juvenile Protective Association (JPA) oversees evaluation and quality improvement efforts at the Chicago CAC. JPA staff met with the CAC during the 2016-2017 school year (SY1) and formulated a set of questions aimed at better understanding the implementation and usefulness of the Project, and at informing efforts to improve the program:

1. What did the school staff think of the following, and how did that change over the school years:
 - a. The “Keeping Children Safe” trainings given by the CAC?
 - b. The CPU curriculum as delivered by the CAC?
 - c. The expectation that elementary school teachers would be delivering the CPU curriculum?
 - d. Responding to children who disclose sexual abuse and reporting the abuse?
 - e. The support from the CAC throughout the Project and the partnership with them?
2. What did CAC therapists think of:
 - a. The expectation that elementary teachers would be delivering the CPU curriculum?
 - b. Teachers responding to and reporting child sexual abuse disclosures?
3. What did the students think of:
 - a. The CPU curriculum as delivered by the CAC?
4. How well did students retain information on how to discern abuse and report it?
5. What challenges arose during the Project and how were they addressed?
6. What can be learned from the Project for others interested in implementing school-based sexual abuse prevention programs?

III. Methods

To address the questions listed above, JPA gathered information from multiple sources across the three school years of the implementation of the Project; the information sources utilized for this review are detailed below in Table 2 and the specific methods are described here.

Focus groups and interviews: The topics posed during the focus group discussions with elementary teachers and in interviews with administrative staff (most prominently the principal, followed by the school counselor and the assistant principal) were related to review question 1 above. These groups and interviews were conducted after the lessons had been delivered in both school years. The topics posed during the focus group discussion with CAC therapists were related to review question 2 above, and the group was held after the lessons had been delivered in SY2. Notes were taken during the focus groups and interviews, and were reviewed by JPA’s evaluation team.

“Keeping Children Safe” training evaluations: The Chicago CAC delivered “Keeping Children Safe” trainings to the entire staff of the elementary school prior to the delivery of the lessons in all school years and at a later time point during SY1 and SY2. The trainings focused on the following: an overview of child sexual abuse; recognizing abuse; responding to disclosures; the mandated reporter role; creating safe spaces in school settings; responding to children’s sexual behaviors; and an overview of the CPU curriculum. In SY1 and SY2, CAC administered evaluations on the teachers’ views on the training and facilitator, as well as their overall satisfaction with the training. The self-reported measures were analyzed for trends over time.

CPU knowledge assessments: CPU developed “Student Summative Assessments of Knowledge” to be administered to students at one time point, after all of the CPU lessons have been delivered. These assessments were administered to the students during all three school years and are meant to gauge students’ retention of the content presented in the lessons. Averages of correct responses were analyzed by JPA for specific cohorts of students.

Observations: In the second year (SY2), JPA was invited to observe CPU lessons run by the CAC. These lessons occurred over two days and covered each grade level receiving the Child Protection Unit lessons. The observer sat separately from the students in the classroom and did not participate in the discussions, paying particular attention to the behaviors and words of the teachers, the students, and the CAC’s therapist. Notes were compiled from the observations and reviewed by JPA.

The information from these sources was reviewed by JPA staff for key findings, framed by the review questions above. Findings were discussed with the Education, Policy, and Prevention (EPP) Department at the CAC in order to better understand and contextualize their implications.

Table 2. Information sources for JPA’s review of the Project.

School Year 1 (SY1) 2016-2017	School Year 2 (SY2) 2017-2018	School Year 3 (SY3) 2018-2019
<p>A. Focus group discussion led by JPA after the CPU curriculum was completed with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i)Elementary school teachers <p>B. Interviews conducted by JPA after the CPU curriculum was completed with the following school admin staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i)Principal ii)Assistant principal iii)School counselor <p>C. Elementary school staff evaluations of “Keeping Children Safe” trainings conducted by the CAC at two time points (T1 and T2) during the SY</p> <p>D. Child Protection Unit knowledge assessments administered to students</p>	<p>A. Two separate focus group discussions led by JPA after the CPU curriculum was completed with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Elementary school teachers ii) CAC therapists delivering the lessons <p>B. Interview conducted by JPA after the CPU curriculum was completed with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) School Principal <p>C. School staff evaluations of “Keeping Children Safe” trainings conducted by CAC at two time points (T1 and T2) during the SY</p> <p>D. Child Protection Unit knowledge assessments administered to students</p> <p>E. Two-day observations by JPA of classrooms receiving CPU lessons delivered by CAC therapists with teachers present</p>	<p>A. Child Protection Unit knowledge assessments administered to students</p>

While not the focus of this report, it is important to note that teachers were implementing the curriculum on their own in SY4 (2019-2020). The CAC provided a training to new teachers and staff before the start of the school year.

IV. Key Findings and Lessons Learned

The information from these sources was synthesized into the key findings and lessons learned below. We present evidence for each finding and suggest how some of the findings may inform how other schools could implement related sexual abuse prevention curricula.

1. Implementing the CPU curriculum was challenging. The school principal was open to feedback and used that feedback to make important adjustments to improve implementation.

It was challenging to implement the CPU curriculum at the elementary school with high fidelity. This is a common concern that is described in the literature on implementing sexual abuse prevention programs (Lynas & Hawkins, 2017). Indeed, schools are complex systems in which administrators, teachers, and students are always coping with multiple pressures, challenges, and tasks. Starting a new program in this context is necessarily challenging. At the same time, it is important to highlight that the school principal displayed a high level of receptivity to feedback about the Project, and used that feedback to continuously adjust and improve implementation. Feedback was provided to the school's principal through meetings with the CAC, discussions of findings from focus groups led by JPA with the teachers, and through her own discussions with the staff. Feedback was bi-directional and collaborative--in her interview with JPA, the school principal praised the CAC for being reflective and responsive to the elementary school's needs. Some of the adjustments made to the implementation of the Project, and the feedback that prompted them, included the following:

- **Creating the Safety Card intervention to help children safely disclose:** In order to not overwhelm teachers with disclosures, to streamline the disclosure response process to the school counselor, and in order to create a sense of a safe space for children to disclose, the CAC created an intervention called "Safety Cards" which complemented the curriculum. Safety Cards, implemented starting in SY1, consisted of boxes situated in a special place in the classroom; students were made aware of their location, and had the option to write down their disclosures or other thoughts on cards to place in the boxes if any concerns came up for them after the lessons. The cards would then be reviewed and responded to by the counselor with support from the CAC, which provided the counselor with extra reassurance she was making the right call in reporting suspected sexual abuse. In the focus groups, teachers reported that they liked the Safety Cards; many of them were aware of the process of using them and recalled instances of their use. One teacher admitted she could do a better job reminding kids about the Cards. One of the therapists voiced concern that students might be teased if they were witnessed dropping a Safety Card in the box, and there was worry that teachers would defer to Safety Cards as opposed to responding to disclosures in person if and when they happened. Other school-based sexual abuse prevention programs might benefit from implementing a streamlined system of disclosure such as Safety Cards, which provides more privacy to students who want to disclose but who might not feel comfortable doing so directly to a teacher or other staff person. Oversight of such an intervention would be needed in order to continuously educate students on their use, ensure that the Cards are responded to consistently and effectively, and safeguard against teachers solely relying on the Cards if a student wanted or needed to disclose abuse to a teacher verbally.
- **Adjusting who delivered the lessons:** The Project planned to have the elementary school teachers deliver the curriculum on their own in SY2 after the CAC delivered every lesson in SY1. However, teachers expressed several reservations to doing so, including their discomfort with delivering the lessons and their feelings of "being spread so thin" with all their other work and requirements. In response to this, the Project was adjusted to continue having CAC therapists deliver CPU lessons in SY2 with teachers conducting the follow-up lessons in between; the Project was adjusted once more in SY3 to have CAC therapists deliver the more difficult lessons while the elementary school teachers delivered the rest. These adjustments were made in response to teachers' reservations with delivering

the CPU curriculum solo, and the adjustments were made to accommodate teachers. Moving forward in SY4 (2019-2020), the plan is for teachers to deliver every lesson themselves with training provided by the CAC for new teachers and staff.

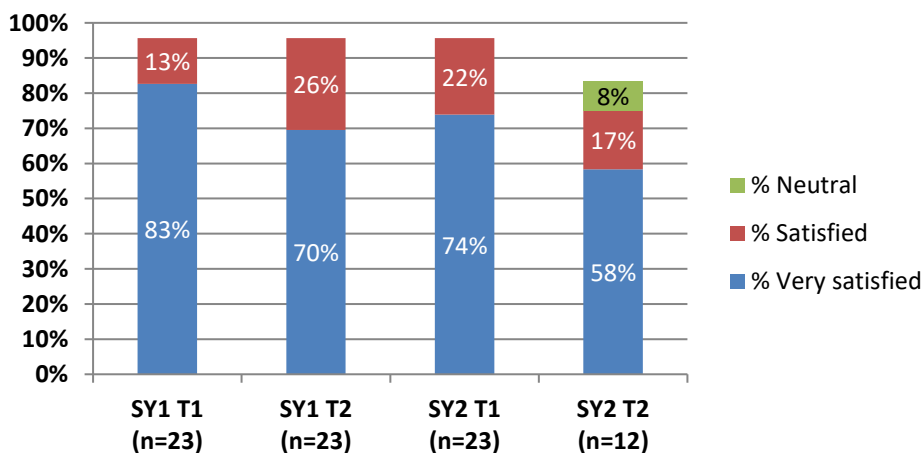
- **Changing the spacing of the lessons:** In SY1, the lessons were delivered once a month across the span of six months. Teachers expressed concern that these lessons were spaced too far apart, making it difficult for students to recall information discussed in previous lessons. In response to this, the Project planned to implement the lessons biweekly in SY2, with teachers engaging in follow-up lessons in the in-between weeks. In SY3, the Project was further adjusted so that lessons were delivered weekly.

These data-informed refinements helped enhance the quality of the delivery of the curriculum in the school. The examples highlight the importance of both upper-level administration and service providers being receptive to feedback and working together to adjust implementation when needed. Active support from and collaboration with principals and other administrators can help address or offset challenges that inevitably inhibit high fidelity implementation in school settings.

2. Overall, educators had very positive views of the project.

Multiple sources of data suggested that educators valued the project. The elementary school staff agreed that addressing sexual abuse is very important, a view that was shared even by those teachers who had concerns about the curriculum content and delivery. In focus group discussions, staff expressed that they valued the support and guidance of CAC therapists in the delivery of the curriculum and in follow-up lessons, and appreciated the effort of the CAC to contextualize the Project by providing neighborhood-specific statistics on the prevalence of abuse; many reported surprise at the high rates of child sexual abuse in the area. On surveys, a large majority of teachers reported that they were very satisfied by the CAC’s training delivered to them throughout the first two school years (SY1 and SY2) of the Project (see Figure 1), though results were somewhat less positive in the second survey in SY2, which was conducted in February. Thus, educators agreed about the importance of the Project, were largely satisfied with the CAC training, and had positive views about their relationships with CAC therapists. On the survey, some educators also asked for additional individual support, which the CAC attempted to provide through department meetings.

Figure 1. Teacher satisfaction with the CAC "Keeping Children Safe" training.



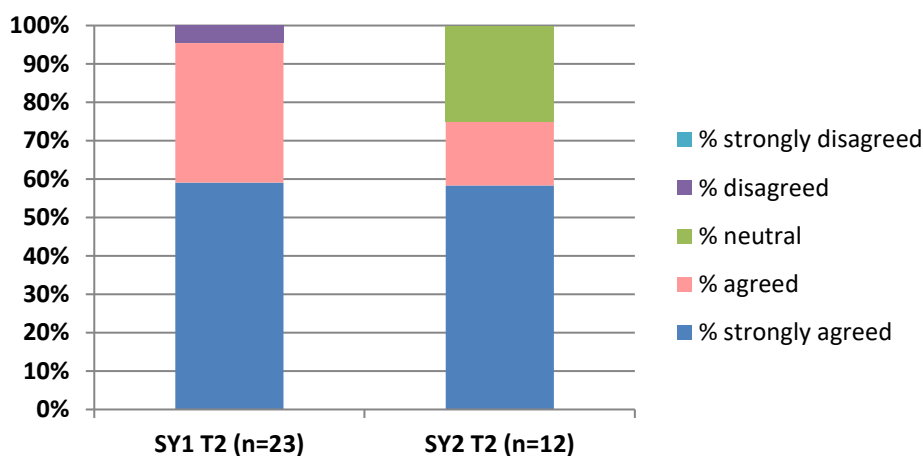
3. Teachers varied in their comfort and readiness to deliver the CPU curriculum on their own, and many preferred to have a therapist deliver it. Thus, if teachers are to (effectively) deliver sexual

abuse prevention lessons on their own, they will need considerable support from administrators and access to guidance from skilled professionals.

In SY1, teachers strongly agreed (except a teacher of young children) that they should not teach the CPU curriculum on their own. Some were uncomfortable with the content (for example, the lesson on body parts), while others expressed concern that they were being “spread so thin” with all that they had to do in a school day. The teachers also felt that CAC therapists were better equipped, given their social work background, to deliver the lessons and to respond to children’s anxiety and reactions; on top of that, teachers described how their students enjoyed having an outside facilitator deliver the lesson. During both focus groups conducted in SY1 and SY2, teachers described the excitement of the students when CAC therapists arrived at the classroom to teach a lesson. The elementary teachers admitted that students tire of their voices during the school year, and that it was a refreshing change for the students to have an outside voice. Having someone else teach the lesson “emphasized the importance of the subject,” the teachers said. In classroom observations by JPA during a CPU lesson, students appeared engaged in discussions with CAC therapists delivering the lessons and had positive views of their presence and teaching; the kindergarten students verbalized the following about CAC therapist delivering the lessons: “I like her,” “I don’t want her to leave,” and “I want her to be my teacher.”

When teachers were asked to rate their agreement to the training evaluation item that the “Keeping Children Safe” training they received from the CAC “increased my comfort with being able to provide second step child protection unit lessons to my classroom next year,” the percentage of teachers who strongly agreed with this item stayed about the same in both SYs (see Figure 2), although teachers expressed more neutrality with that item in SY2 compared to SY1. The percentage who strongly agreed that the training increased their comfort to teach the lessons is at odds with the reservations teachers expressed in focus groups at both school years about it. It is possible that some teachers were more likely to vocalize concerns about their comfort levels in the group setting provided by the focus group discussion than when asked about it on an evaluation survey.

Figure 2. Teacher rating on CAC training increasing their comfort providing CPU lessons to classroom.



Both CAC therapists and the school’s principal agreed that teachers had varied levels of readiness to teach the curriculum; the principal noted she couldn’t distinguish between teachers’ compliance to teach the lessons or shifts in their mindset. In SY2, teachers said they could deliver the lessons, guaranteed the following supports from administrators: professional development at the school so that they didn’t have to travel for it, good materials (such as DVDs that worked), time set aside in grade-level meetings to prep for the lessons, and having another adult in the classroom during lessons. Having another adult in the classroom was mentioned as a safeguard against students misinterpreting what teachers may say during the lesson and leading to

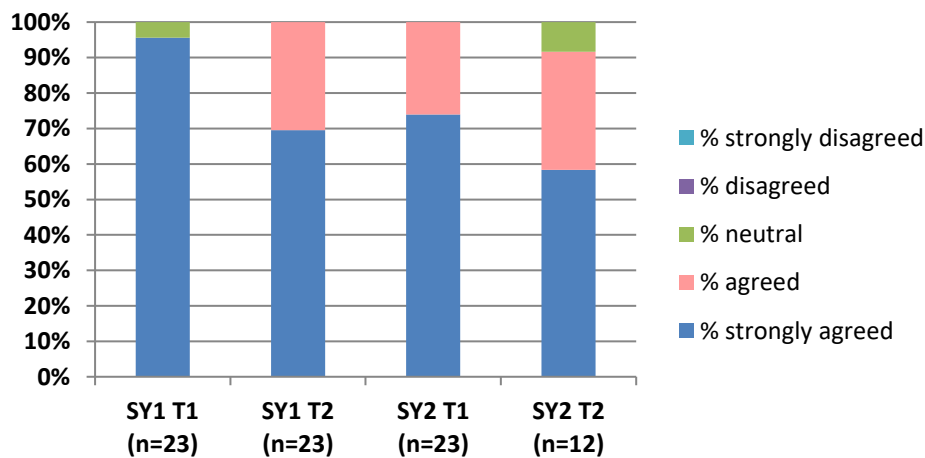
accusations of teachers saying something they didn't. These suggestions for supports and school-level changes may help inform decision-making for other school-based sexual abuse prevention programs which rely on teachers to deliver the lessons and reinforce the content.

Despite the principal's demonstrable commitment to quality improvement, implementation challenges and barriers still existed at the elementary school. In response to teachers expressing a lack of time to get everything they need to get done in a school day and their need to prepare for the lessons, the principal worked with the CAC to come up with a plan to set aside preparation time in grade-level meetings in SY2 for teachers to prep for the lessons. In the focus group discussion at the end of SY2, teachers said that they did not get the planning time for their CPU lessons in grade-level meetings, which are principal-directed with a packed agenda. The principal admitted that that prep time was not implemented fully in SY2, though conversations with the principal and CAC therapists suggests that there was discordance on how and when the prep time would happen; this discordance should be addressed if teachers are to be provided prep time moving forward in the Project. In SY3, the CPU curriculum was purchased by the school, but because it had not been received by the school, the CAC printed out the first two lessons and sent them to the principal and school counselor. However, some teachers reported that they still had to print out the lessons. It appeared that teachers still did not have time to prep for the lessons in SY3. Some of the implementation challenges in SY3 were likely influenced by the principal's leave of absence.

4. Some teachers remained confused about reporting abuse disclosures, highlighting the need for refreshers and reminders.

It appears that confusion still existed in SY2 among the elementary school staff on reporting disclosures of abuse, specifically around the mandated role of the teacher. When asked to rate their agreement to the training evaluation item that the "Keeping Children Safe" training they received from the CAC "helped me feel more confident in reporting abusive behavior when observed or suspected in an adult or youth" at two different time points in SY1 and SY2, all but one teacher reported strongly agreeing to feeling confident about reporting abuse at the first time point; that strong agreement dipped from there, with fewer teachers agreeing so strongly. By the end of SY2, there was a bit more neutrality and less strong agreement to feeling confident about reporting abuse. It is possible that some teachers who responded less positively already felt confident given participation in previous CAC training.

Figure 3. Teacher rating on CAC training increasing their confidence reporting abusive behavior when observed.



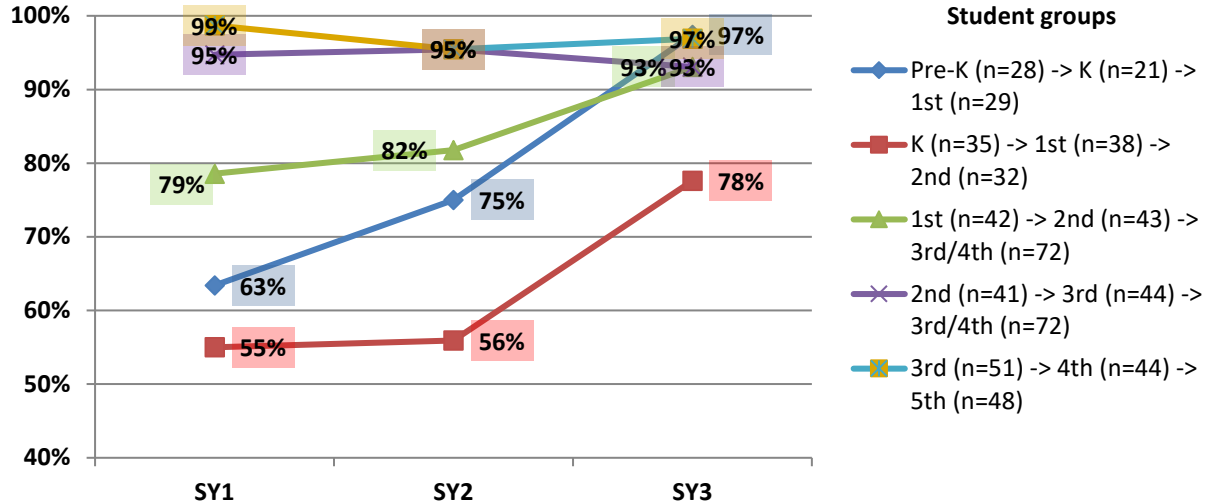
When teachers were asked in the SY2 focus group if they knew the process for reporting abuse, there was some laughter, indicating confusion. One teacher said that a student told a CAC therapist about abuse, who then told the teacher to report it; the fact that she had to report it and not the therapist confused the teacher. Separately, one of the therapists in the focus group said that a teacher (who might have been the same teacher just described) incorrectly thought that telling the therapist about a disclosure was all she had to do to report it. CAC therapists, in their focus group, expressed that this confusion is “a problem with mandated reporters across the board.” While the “Keeping Children Safe” trainings present the mandated reporter role and the reporting policy at the school, CAC therapists recommended that teachers should have a cheat sheet with them that outlines the reporting process. The CAC developed and provided a handout each year but there is still a need to supplement the handout with a refresher for staff on reporting abuse disclosures. Teachers’ hesitations in reporting abuse and their fears of making inaccurate reports are factors that need to be addressed in a child sexual abuse prevention school-based program. By SY3, the city’s large school district had opened the Office of Student Protections and Title IX and began referring cases of sexual abuse to that office and the Office of the Inspector General, and so training was focused on those reporting procedures in addition to one’s responsibility to call the state’s DCFS Child Abuse Hotline when sexual abuse is suspected. Additionally, in JPA’s experience training reporters, while procedural strategies are helpful, they are often insufficient. Most teachers simply have limited experience in making hotline calls and following the procedures, and they are understandably uncomfortable. It is helpful to provide educators with access to someone who can talk through the procedures with them in relation to the particular case at hand.

5. Students seemed to retain a lot of information about the lessons, though data and teacher feedback suggest that younger children’s’ retention needs to be assessed in a different manner.

Students in grades PreK through 1st should have a different method to gauge their retention of the CPU content than the current CPU assessment. Interestingly, a concern brought up by teachers (one teacher in particular) in focus group discussions with the elementary school teachers during both SY1 and SY2 was that the assessments for the younger children were not appropriate and were not conducive to the students’ developmental age.

These younger grade levels scored lower on these assessments compared to other grade levels. Figure 4 presents a longitudinal look at PreK, K, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades, following their assessment scores in SY1 through SY3. Note that the lowest average scores occurred in K (average score of 55% correct) followed by PreK (63% average) and 1st grade (79% average). CPU does not provide an assessment for PreK students, so the elementary school and CAC administered the Kindergarten version of the assessment to PreK students; interestingly, those students did better on that assessment than the Kindergarteners for which it was intended. Following those cohorts into a new grade in each new school year saw gradual improvement in average scores every school year thereafter with the exception of Kindergarten in SY2 (which was 56% in SY2, but then the average jumped up in SY3 to 78%, when the children were now in 2nd grade). Students in 2nd and 3rd grade started at higher averages (95% and 99%, respectively) and continued within the 90-100% range in the next two years.

Figure 4. Percentage of correct responses on CPU knowledge assessments by students, following groups of student over 3 school years.



Notes: 1) Student groups are not “cohorts,” since some students that started in a given grade in SY1 leave the school in subsequent years, and some new students enter the group in subsequent years. 2) CPU does not provide an assessment for PreK students, so this Project administered the Kindergarten assessment to PreK students. 3) In School Year 3, the school has switched to combine the 3rd and 4th grades in the same classroom, and this 3rd/4th grade classroom received the 4th grade level CPU curriculum (reflected in the 1st and 2nd grade cohorts).

These findings, and the feedback from the teachers, suggest that younger children should be assessed differently than older children on their retention of the content of the CPU curriculum. Having a better understanding of students at different ages process and retain curriculum content can help inform efforts to tailor the curriculum to the developmental needs and capacities of students.

6. It was important to engage students with special needs in the CPU lessons.

The elementary school’s administration and some teachers emphasized the importance of engaging children with special needs in CPU lessons. While not a major focus of implementation, the CAC made efforts to respond to special needs students. The CAC exchanged communication with the principal re: Diverse Learners and teachers were given the opportunity to identify students who might benefit from extra supports but did not think anyone needed accommodations. School-based sexual abuse prevention projects need to incorporate an awareness of the increased risk to students with special needs, an understanding of how these needs might vary for different groups of children (e.g., children with intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and serious mental health and behavioral symptoms), and for individual children within these subpopulations.

Focused attention on children with disabilities is essential given that they are more likely to be victimized by sexual abuse than children without disabilities (Stalker & McArthur, 2010). Increased vulnerability can stem from multiple sources related to their disability, including communication difficulties, increased contact with multiple caregivers, and hurdles when reporting sexual abuse (Brown, 2010). A number of studies have also found that sexual abuse rates may vary by type of disability (Davis, 2011; Stalker & McArthur, 2010; Turner, Vanderminden, Finkelhor, Hamby, & Shattuck, 2011), and prevention/education initiatives should be tailored to the needs of various populations. Some researchers recommend ecological models of child sexual abuse prevention and intervention that address the vulnerabilities of children with disabilities at different system levels (e.g., individual, family, school, community) could be beneficial (Skarbek, Hahm, & Parrish, 2009).

Tailored implementation of prevention curricula and working at multiple system levels is particularly relevant in light of reports from the Chicago Tribune of sexual abuse experienced and perpetrated by students with disabilities within Chicago Public Schools (Marx, Richards, Jackson, & Perez, 2018a).

7. Engaging parents in the CPU sexual abuse prevention content was challenging. Attention to parental discomfort and cultural issues can and should inform efforts to engage parents in doing the home exercises with students.

Two components of the intervention were aimed at helping parents/caregivers help their children—assignments that students were supposed to work on with parents and parent workshops. Parent engagement was challenging in both interventions. The CPU curriculum offers HomeLink assignments for student to complete alongside their parents in order to reinforce the sexual abuse prevention concepts taught at school. However, the HomeLinks weren't required and very few were returned back by the students to the teachers. While JPA was not able to gather systematic data on why so few HomeLink assignments were completed, parental discomfort was likely an important factor. One CAC therapist noted that in her experience with the elementary school, many parents feel comfortable with professionals, like teachers or therapists, having “tough” conversations (e.g., about sexuality, body awareness, sexual abuse) with kids but feel uncomfortable or unequipped to do it themselves. This finding echoes teachers' discomfort with the sexual abuse prevention content, which likely contributed to the lack of completed HomeLink assignments. Teachers reported discomfort within the Latinx community in discussing topics related to sex. In addition, teachers noted that some other topics in the CPU, especially equipping a student with the skill to assert their rights, were at odds with the views of some of the students' parents and the culture in which the students were raised.

While the CAC provided parent workshops during each school year, attendance was low. Nonetheless, one teacher was optimistic the parent workshops, noting that “20 [parents] doesn't sound like a lot, but it is more parents than other workgroups.” This suggests there is some interest among parents in talking about sexual abuse prevention and a potential cadre of parents who could network with other parents.

A thorough assessment of parents' views related to the CPU curriculum and its contents, such as the concept of asserting one's self, is warranted as the Project continues to expand. Attention to the cultural background of students and the contexts in which they live can potentially help inform how to tailor exercises intended to both reinforce CPU concepts and bring children and their caregivers together. While the CPU has been translated into Spanish, it is not clear if cultural issues have been considered in framing the content or approach to implementing various components of the intervention—both the classroom lessons for students and the HomeLink assignment. Lack of attention to engagement issues (e.g., parent participation) is a common problem in implementing a wide range of interventions.

8. Comprehensive programs are needed that address exposure to other forms of trauma and the social-emotional needs of students, as well as the concerns and questions of teachers who respond to students who disclose traumatic experiences.

While the CPU focuses on sexual abuse, many of the lessons are relevant to helping children identify and share a broader range of concerning experiences and feelings, which can include other common forms of trauma. Outside of the CPU sexual abuse prevention curriculum, there are some programs and community partnerships available to the elementary school's students to address various concerns, including social-emotional skills and bullying. Despite these existing resources, gaps remained in addressing other forms of trauma experienced by some students and staff. A CAC therapist noted that not enough was being done at the elementary school to address childhood exposure to physical violence, both in the community and at home.

With regard to supporting teachers, although the principal emphasized that teachers learned trauma-informed approaches to working with students, teachers described wanting more; for example, at least one teacher expressed the desire to have skills needed to respond in a trauma-informed way to a student that discloses to her, even though there are counselors and other resources available for children at the school when they disclose. Another teacher described “almost reliving” her own experiences of trauma when listening to a child’s disclosure, providing an important reminder that many teachers, probably close to 20 percent, have themselves experienced sexual abuse.

CAC staff were available to provide much more training and support to teachers. However, teachers had limited time for professional development. Thus, even with the principal’s strong support, time constraints inhibited the capacity of the elementary school to fully utilize the services and expertise of the CAC staff. Discussions are needed on what referrals and resources may be lacking to address other problems students may be experiencing and teachers struggling with their own trauma in responding to children who disclose.

V. Conclusions and implications

The Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center and an inner city elementary school developed and implemented child sexual abuse prevention services and supportive guidance to students, teachers, and parents over a three year period. This pilot project provided valuable lessons about the challenges and essential elements of implementing child sexual abuse prevention activities that can inform future efforts by the city’s school district to protect children and youth and live up to the ideals of Erin’s Law.

School settings provide an unparalleled opportunity for child sexual abuse prevention programs to reach children, youth, educators, and parents in a context in which children are most likely to disclose abuse to trusted adults. Educators have the opportunity, as well as the legal and ethical responsibility, to increase their understanding of child sexual abuse and their capacity to hear and respond to this trauma. At the same time, child sexual abuse prevention programs also face major challenges that must be recognized and addressed in order to effectively implement and sustain these programs. Most fundamentally, child sexual abuse and specific aspects of the CPU curriculum (e.g., body awareness) are still very sensitive topics for many adults. Educators and parents are often uncomfortable talking about these topics with each other and with children. Child sexual abuse prevention programs in schools must also compete for the time and interest of educators who face multiple and often conflicting priorities on a daily basis, especially the pressures of promoting academic growth.

Given these challenges, truly meaningful and effective implementation of child sexual abuse prevention training and education programs in school settings requires support from multiple sources and attention to critical issues, including:

- a) Committed and courageous leadership from principals and other administrators who believe child sexual abuse should be addressed in schools and who facilitate practical support (e.g., time and resources) to teachers and other frontline educators;
- b) Ongoing support for teachers and other frontline educators both during and following training through access to and guidance from professionals with expertise in child sexual abuse prevention and intervention;
- c) Understanding and responding to cultural specific attitudes;
- d) Greater emphasis on the developmental appropriateness of interventions, especially for young children;
- e) Tailoring interventions to address the needs of children with disabilities;
- f) Clear procedures how educators should report suspected child abuse or neglect that comes to their attention and access to support from (but not gatekeeping by) professionals who are knowledgeable and experienced with regard to reporting maltreatment;

- g) Continuous quality improvement efforts that are informed by systematic tracking of participation and outcomes, as well as qualitative feedback directly from teachers, parents, and students.

While we cannot directly compare the results of CPU lessons taught by CAC staff versus teachers, it was clear that expert support provided by the CAC was highly valued by both the administration and frontline teachers and staff. Future evaluation efforts should examine whether teachers are able to implement CPU curriculum lessons with a high level of competence and fidelity, and assess how expert support from the CAC and other experts can best be utilized to give educators the support that they need and deserve so that children will have the best possible opportunity to learn the child sexual abuse prevention lessons and have their cries for help heard by caring adults at school.

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