



# Parent Education in Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs

## Çocuk Cinsel İstismarını Önleme Programlarında Ebeveyn Eğitimi

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### ABSTRACT

It is the responsibility of adults to protect children from sexual abuse. Thus, raising parents' awareness is particularly important since they are the ones who take care of the child and support his/her development in every field. Parents need to acquire information from authentic sources in terms of sexual education of children and protection of them from sexual abuse. That parents have limited knowledge on this subject, feel anxious, or do not know how to talk may prevent them from talking to their kids about sexual abuse. Thus, children's awareness about protection is postponed until they enter an educational institute. It may also become difficult for children to talk to their parents in case of possible sexual abuse. Therefore, it is crucial for parents to increase their awareness through training prepared by experts. In these training programs, awareness of parents can be raised about topics like what sexual abuse is, how to approach a child who experienced sexual abuse, creating an intrafamilial safety plan, and intrafamilial open communication. This review study includes issues of what sexual abuse is, the importance of parents in prevention studies, and sexual abuse prevention programs in which parents take part. As a conclusion, it is thought that awareness can be raised about the importance of parents to prevent sexual abuse and what can be included in programs designed for them.

**Keywords:** Child sexual abuse, parent education, prevention programs

### ÖZ

Çocukları cinsel istismardan korumak yetişkinlerin sorumluluğundadır. Bu nedenle çocukların ilk bakımını sağlayan ve her alanda gelişiminin destekleyen kişiler olan ebeveynlerin bilinçlenmesi ayrıca önemlidir. Ebeveynlerin çocuklarına cinsel eğitim verme ve cinsel istismardan koruma noktasında doğru kaynaklardan bilgi edinmesi gerekmektedir. Ebeveynlerin bu konuda bilgilerinin kısıtlı olması, endişe hissetmeleri, nasıl konuşabileceklerini bilmemeleri çocuklarıyla cinsel istismar konusunda konuşmalarını engelleyebilir. Böylece çocukların korunmaya yönelik farkındalık kazanmaları bir kurumda eğitime başlayana kadar ötelenmiş olacaktır. Ayrıca çocuğun olası bir cinsel istismar durumunda ebeveynleriyle konuşması zor bir hale gelebilir. Dolayısıyla ebeveynlerin uzmanlar tarafından hazırlanan eğitimlerle farkındalık kazanmaları oldukça önemlidir. Bu programlarda cinsel istismarın ne olduğu, cinsel istismara maruz kalan çocuğa nasıl yaklaşacakları, aile güvenlik planının oluşturulması, aile içi açık iletişimin kurulması gibi konulara yer verilerek ebeveynler bilinçlendirilebilir. Bu derleme çalışmasında cinsel istismarın ne olduğundan, ebeveynlerin önleme çalışmalarındaki öneminden ve ebeveynlerin dâhil olduğu cinsel istismarı önleme programlarından bahsedilmiştir. Böylece ebeveynlerin cinsel istismarı önlemedeki önemi ve onlara yönelik programlarda neler yer alabileceğine ilişkin farkındalık oluşabileceği düşünülmektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Çocuk cinsel istismarı, ebeveyn eğitimi, önleme programları

## Introduction

Although it is important to raise children's awareness about sexual abuse, adults have the main responsibility to protect children. It is critical to increase the sensitivity of adults, especially parents by raising their awareness and informing them about sexual abuse. However, it is observed in a study conducted in Turkey that more than a quarter of the participants are not informed about this subject while those who got information acquired it through newspaper/TV (Özer 2014). Babatsikos (2012) also states that

parents exchange information with their partners, friends, and relatives. In addition to these, parents may avoid talking because they think that their children are not old enough to talk about this topic or they do not know how to explain this (Deblinger et al. 2010). Therefore, parents can both give incomplete information to their children and convey their concerns because they do not know about sexual abuse or are worried about it (Elrod and Rubin 1993). At this point, it seems important to present informative programs by various official institutions to prevent information pollution on the prevention of sexual abuse, to enable parents to

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obtain more detailed information, and to encourage them to talk to their children about this issue.

This review aims to raise awareness about the role of parents in preventing sexual abuse and what can be included in the programs for parents by giving information about the importance of parents in prevention studies and some sexual abuse prevention programs that parents are involved in.

## Child Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is the involvement of children in sexual activities through coercion/deception, which they cannot fully comprehend, cannot consciously give consent for, include the age/maturity difference with the perpetrator, and violate social taboos (Finkelhor 1994, Hobbs 2007). In this respect, child sexual abuse includes the use of force (Duffy et al. 2006). Sexual abuse can take place in different ways. Child sexual abuse can be with or without physical touch. It may include touching the private parts of the child or involve penetration or it may occur without penetration in the form of sexually kissing the child, etc. No-touch sexual abuse, on the other hand, includes exhibitionism, voyeurism, and sexual words to the child (Finkelhor 1994). The fact that it includes various types of behavior in this way is one of the factors that make it difficult to perceive the true dimensions of child sexual abuse. In addition, the fact that the abuse takes place secretly and does not leave a physical mark, that children experience difficulties in explaining the situation due to their cognitive and language development, and that it is difficult to talk in public as it includes sexuality makes it difficult to understand the real extent (Wurtele 2009). Also, cases of sexual abuse can be kept a secret within the family (Hobbs 2007).

It is found that children and teenagers who experienced sexual abuse exhibit psychological health problems and risky behavior like acute stress reaction, adjustment disorder, and suicide attempt with a sudden decision (Çıkkılı Uytun and Öztop 2016), post-traumatic stress disorder (Ayraller Taner et al. 2015, Uytun and Öztop 2016, Hébert et al. 2019), depression (Ayraller Taner et al. 2015, Çıkkılı Uytun and Öztop 2016), general anxiety disorder (Ayraller Taner et al. 2015), behavioral disorder (Ayraller Taner et al. 2015), drug use (Hébert et al. 2019, Fletcher 2021), alcohol use (Hébert et al. 2019), feeling of guilt (Hébert et al. 2019), suicidal ideas (Hébert et al. 2019, Liu et al. 2021), suicide attempt (Liu et al. 2021), harming oneself without suicide attempt (Liu et al. 2021), and low self-esteem (Hébert et al. 2019). Also, it is found that children with a history of sexual abuse experience problems in concentration, attention, and memory and that these problems affect their cognitive performative functions (Marques et al. 2020). In addition to all these, this type of abuse can cause behavioral indicators such as regression in development, behavior or academic success, acute traumatic reactions such as irritability, sleep disorders, problems in school and social relations, and inappropriate sexual behaviors (WHO 2003). In the long-term, adults who experienced sexual abuse when they were kids may exhibit psychological health problems such as depression (Bifulco et al. 1991, Boudewyn and Liem 1995, Chou

2012, Lindert et al. 2019, Li et al. 2020), dissociation (Mulder et al. 1998, Newman 2000, Şar et al. 2000, Şar et al. 2004), anxiety disorder (Stein et al. 1996, Chou 2012, Lindert et al. 2019) risk of being a sexual victim once again (Arata 2000, Messman-Moore and Long 2003), eating disorders (Wonderlich et al. 1997, Chou 2012), post-traumatic stress disorder (Chou 2012), suicidal ideas (Chou 2012), psychosis (Bebbington et al. 2011), self-harming (Boudewyn and Liem 1995), extreme alcohol use and drug addiction (Tonmyr and Shields 2017). Therefore, sexual abuse cases are experiences that damage the psychological integrity of children and negatively affect their personality development in terms of emotional, social, and sexual development. Considering the traces of these experiences in adulthood, the importance of prevention studies is clearly understood (Page 2004).

## Importance of Parents in Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

Studies to prevent child sexual abuse began to be developed with the increase in awareness in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Judith Herman and Florence Rush who have a feminist perspective have had a huge impact on this issue (Bolen 2003). Three levels of prevention can be mentioned for child sexual abuse from the perspective of public health. The first level indicates that studies aim for establishing a safe and healthy environment and behaviors before sexual abuse happens. The second level denotes that prevention studies aim to eliminate factors that increase vulnerability, by reinforcing flexibility in contexts and groups under risk before child sexual abuse happens or during the early phases of the incident. Lastly, it is suggested that third-level studies intend to decrease the damages and prevent the re-victimization (Dahlberg and Krug 2002 McKillop 2019). When the literature is reviewed, it is observed that there are many child-centered sexual abuse prevention programs and that they are effective (Conte et al. 1985, Tutty 1997, Hébert et al. 2001, Barron and Toppin 2012, Çeçen Eroğul and Kaf Hasırcı 2013, Seydoğulları 2018, Çıtak Tunç et al. 2018, Eslek 2018, Yılmaz Irmak et al. 2018, Akgül et al. 2021).

It is observed that child-centered sexual abuse prevention programs enable children to differentiate between touches that include abuse and the ones that do not include abuse, increase their knowledge about sexual abuse, and improve their safety skills and apply this knowledge (Wurtele 2009). Therefore, the aim is to make children vigilant against, aware of, and prepared for sexual abuse through this training starting from early in their lives (Çeçen 2007). Parallel to this, child-oriented prevention studies can facilitate for children to say no and to talk about it if they are exposed to abuse (Akdoğan 2005). Although it is observed that these programs have a critical role in preventing victimhood, they may fall short as they are solely focused on children (Wurtele 2009). Programs that are directed to prevent child sexual abuse should be prepared and applied by professionals to raise awareness of society and the family as well as children (Akdoğan 2005). In school-based programs, it is seen that parental training is administered within programs for children (Kenny et al. 2008). Programs targeting only parents or children are less effective than

those targeting both groups together (MacIntyre and Carr 2000). Kenny and colleagues (2008) stated that programs targeting three-year-olds can be effective in improving self-defense skills, hence programs aiming to prevent sexual abuse can begin from the age of three. However, it is considered that there is a need to raise awareness of parents whose children do not attend schools yet and that these parents should be in focus, too. When the literature is reviewed, reasons to plan and execute programs that include parents to prevent child sexual abuse are addressed:

- Children ask questions about their bodies to their parents from very early on in their lives. Thus, parents have a crucial role in their kids' sexual development and sexual health (Klika 2020).
- Parents occupy an important place as a reliable source in children's sexual socialization about issues such as sexes, sexuality, sexual abuse, and relationships (Martin and Luke 2010).
- Parents can dissolve the mysteries about sexuality that perpetrators take advantage of, by sharing with their children age-appropriate information about sexuality and their bodies (Klika 2020).
- Parents have a unique role in preventing child abuse and creating a protective environment (Guastafarro et al. 2019).
- Parents can prevent abuse through direct and indirect ways. Parents can help their children become a target less often, give proper responses, and report victimization, directly via strong external obstacles that are enabled by parental supervision, monitoring, and participation; and indirectly by helping children improve their self-sufficiency, subjective well-being, and self-esteem (Rudolph et al. 2017).
- Clarification of concepts at home by fortifying the information that is provided to children at school help children to apply this knowledge in daily life (Wurtele and Miller-Perrin 1992).
- Parents' conversations with their children about this issue before the schooling period can be particularly preventative for children who have not attended any prevention program (Wurtele and Miller-Perrin 1992).
- Parents' conversations with their children about sexual abuse would facilitate for children to open up about possible victimhood in the past or the future (Wurtele et al. 1992a, 1992b).

Even though there are reasons for the need to create programs targeting parents, there is a fairly limited number of child sexual abuse prevention programs that include parents (Guastafarro et al. 2019). In the next section, five prevention programs will be mentioned that are developed under different projects, specifically address sexual abuse, and include parents.

### **Parent Programs to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse**

In this section firstly programs outside the country, then parent-focused programs that are developed and applied within the country are discussed.

### **Parents Protect Program**

This program that is accessed via the internet help parents understand potential risks, identify possible abuse signs, identify inappropriate behaviors of adults, create an intrafamilial safety plan, and know where to consult when they have concerns and want to talk about this issue. Further examination shows that this program also discusses what sexual abuse is, possible signs, its impact on the child, why the child may not talk about it, what to do when the child talks about it, and reporting an incident of abuse as well as safety measures towards online sites. As for the safety plan, it focuses on risk factors including elements that protect the child. Among these safety measures are good intrafamilial communication, supportive relationships, and proper rules and limits. There is also a detailed pamphlet for this. It is suggested that these factors will provide a solid base to develop a family safety plan. It is emphasized that the most important step to prevent concealment of abuse is open communication based on trust. Parents' age-appropriate conversation with their children about sexuality, appropriateness of saying no, and talking about disturbing cases when they could not say no is also indicated. The need to respect privacy rights is expressed (Lucy Faithfull Foundation 2018). Furthermore, SMART rules are addressed to initiate a conversation about this difficult topic:

- "Secrets: These can be good fun, but if they make us sad or confused it's best to check them out with Mum or Dad or someone else you trust.
- Mates: Take someone with you when you are going somewhere and stay together.
- Always: tell your parents, carer, or someone else you trust where you are going, who you are with, and when you will be back.
- Respect: your body and remember it is private. No one has the right to touch you in your private areas (those covered by your swimsuit).
- Tell: your parents, carer, or someone else you trust if someone or something makes you feel uncomfortable or frightened."

### **Stewards of Children Program**

This two-hour program includes teachings related to identification, and prevention of child sexual abuse, and reacting to it responsibly. The program gathers sexual abuse survivors, experts, and other relevant individuals. The training is structured based on Five Steps to Protect the Child. These steps provide a framework to prevent child sexual abuse. Thus, it helps parents understand child sexual abuse, prevent the abuse, and intervene in it. The training has both face-to-face and online options (Darkness to Light 2019). The aforementioned five steps are as follows:

- "Learn the Facts: If we don't understand child sexual abuse, we can't end it. You likely know a child who has been or is being abused. Experts estimate that 1 in 10 children are sexually abused before their 18th birthday.

- Minimize Opportunity: Safe environments can help reduce the risk for abuse. More than 80% of sexual abuse cases occur in isolated, one-on-one situations. Make sure interactions with children can be observed and interrupted.
- Talk About It: Talking openly breaks down barriers and reduces stigma. Children usually keep abuse a secret but by talking openly about our bodies, sex, and boundaries we can encourage children to share and to feel secure.
- Recognize the Signs: Signs of abuse aren't always obvious, but they are often there. Emotional or behavioral changes are often the most common signs more than physical signs. Trauma could typically be the stem of the behavior that is labeled as 'bad' or 'difficult'.
- React Responsibly: It's our responsibility to react appropriately to suspicion, disclosure, or discovery of abuse. Only 4% to 8% of reports of all sexual abuse are false. Understand how to react to risky behaviors and suspicions or abuse reports."

### **The Second Step Child Protection Unit Program**

his program aims to identify, properly react, and report child sexual abuse. The program is for children from preschool to fifth grade, school personnel, and parents. Materials for parents contain a handbook explaining what children learn, decreasing their anxiety about this issue, and how parents can talk to their children about safe and unsafe touch. Also, letters are sent informing parents about the program and their role in protecting children. By preparing exercises to be done at home, the ground is set for parents to talk about this issue as well as reinforce their skills. Training for parents includes facts about child sexual abuse, videos about what to tell to converse openly with the child, possible reactions to the child, how to report it, the necessity for the child to get psychological help, and what information resources can be utilized. In the program, while it is stated that this type of conversation may be unsettling for the parent, the necessity to remind themselves that this is about safety is highlighted (Committee for Children 2014a). The program suggests a few ways to talk about body safety in daily life (Committee for Children 2014b):

- Include issues related to body safety while you discuss daily safety issues. Such as, do not cross the street without checking, do not ride a bicycle without a cask, and do not let anyone touch private parts of your body.
- Take advantage of daily moments to talk to your child about this issue. This issue can be discussed before sleep, during reading a book, or during bath time.
- Pay attention to what the child says and asks, and turn them into an opportunity to talk about body safety. Let your child ask questions during the conversation. For example, you can take advantage of your child's question about his/her private body parts during taking a bath or changing clothes. What to do at this point is to teach the child the correct names of these parts.

- Create rules for your children. Clear rules set the limits for children and guide them. You can talk to your child about the rules below:

"Rule 1, The Touching Rule: A person should never touch your private body parts except to keep you healthy.

Rule 2, Never Keep Secrets Rule: Never keep secrets about touching.

Rule 3, Always Ask First Rule: Always ask me or the person in charge of you first when someone wants you to do something or go somewhere or wants to give you something.

Rule 4, The Bathing Suit Rule: Your private body parts are the parts covered by a bathing suit. They are private because they're not to be seen or touched by others."

When there is someone who violates the touching rules, the child should be told definitely to report this to an adult and insist until they believe him/her. It should also be emphasized that this violation of the rule is not their fault, and it is never too late to tell.

- Pay attention to making the rules simpler and more memorable and using anatomically appropriate words for children under five. Frequently remind the rules. For older children, on the other hand, be more specific about the rules. For instance, children over nine can be told not to send photos of their private parts to anyone, and that it is not appropriate for anyone to send photos of their private body parts.

### **One in Five Project**

This project is initiated by the Council of Europe (2014). It suggests that one in every five children undergo violence including sexual abuse. Therefore, it aims to teach parents underwear rules via the book "Kiko and the Hand". While this program, which is applied in Turkey, explains to children through materials for 3-7 year-old children that their bodies belong to themselves alone, it also addresses issues related to good touch-bad touch and good secret-bad secret. It also explains where children should not be touched by others, how to react, and where to get help. The book "Kiko and Manymes" is produced against online dangers. In these materials, it is highlighted that it is the responsibility of adults to protect the child from sexual abuse. In addition, it was mentioned what parents can do if the child is exposed to sexual abuse. Parents are advised not to get angry at the child, make them feel guilty, and interrogate them about this subject. They are urged especially to avoid why question. Furthermore, parents are advised to hide their grief so that the child does not feel guilty and withhold relevant information, and to immediately get in contact with experts and institutes that can help (Council of Europe 2014).

### **Psychosocial Support Programs Project**

These programs are developed by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF and have been implemented since 2001. They were updated in 2017. The project comprises six subjects: immigration,



terrorism, sexual abuse, suicide, death-grief, and natural disaster. In the program for the prevention of child sexual abuse, all the students from preschool to high school, teachers, and parents are targeted. Titles of the sessions for parents are “I know my child, I stand with my child” and “Would it happen to me?”. Learning outcomes for the session “I know my child, I stand with my child” are knowledge of sexual development of preschoolers and school-age children, grasping the importance of providing correct information to the child, identifying sexual abuse, knowledge of where to seek help in case of sexual abuse, and knowledge of training for the children. Learning outcomes of the “Would it happen to me?” session includes recognition of signs for sexual abuse, and what to do when the signs are noticed (Ministry of Education and UNICEF 2017).

As seen in Table 1, providing information on what parents can do and where to apply it when abuse occurs is discussed as a common topic in all programs. The Second Step Child Protection Unit Program includes more topics than other programs. The Parents Protect Program gives information about the family safety plan and inappropriate adult behavior; the Psychosocial Support Programs deal with issues related to sexual development and

sexual education; the Stewards of Children Program tries to raise awareness about the safe environment. These points are deemed to make each program unique. However, it is seen that the contents of the programs either remain at the level of written material or are delivered to parents only in the form of presentations. At this point, it is believed that enriching the Second Step Child Protection Unit Program, which includes activities to be carried out at home as well as being more comprehensive in terms of content, by integrating the original aspects of other programs and using various techniques to present the content will increase the effectiveness of the program.

According to Babatsikos (2012), the prevention strategies for parents include enhancing communication skills with the child, normalizing sexuality, utilizing teaching moments (like giving a bath, changing clothes) and tools, establishing family safety rules, providing age-appropriate information to the child, answering child’s questions accurately and explicitly, protective behavior, talking to the child about secrets and the internet security, etc. Some important factors for the effectiveness of such programs are addressed below (Lape-Brinkman 2000, Brown and Saied-Tessier 2015):

**Table 1. Topics Covered by Child Sexual Abuse Programs for Parents in Turkey and Abroad, and Methods/Techniques for Sharing Content**

	Parents Protect Program	Stewards of Children Program	The Second Step Child Protection Unit Program	One in Five Project	Psychosocial Support Programs Project
Content					
Information on sexual development and sex education					✓
Information about sexual abuse			✓		✓
Information on facts about abuse		✓	✓		
Information on potential risks	✓				
Information on potential signs of abuse	✓	✓			
Information on inappropriate adult behaviors	✓				
Information on creating awareness of safe space		✓			
Information on creating a family safety plan	✓				
Information on how to talk to the child about abuse (the underwear rule, safe/unsafe touch)		✓	✓	✓	
Information on what to do after sexual abuse	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Information on the necessity of seeking psychological help after abuse			✓		
Information on (how to utilize) resources			✓		
Information on training program			✓		
Methods/ Practices					
Preparation of informative materials	✓		✓		
Online/face to face presentations		✓			✓
Creating home activities			✓		
Preparing books for children				✓	

- Providing information about abusers (such as that they may be familiar or not easily identifiable), the prevalence of child sexual abuse, and that all children are at risk.
- Signs of possible child abuse
- How to detect if a child/adolescent is engaging in harmful sexual behaviors
- How to talk to children about sexuality and personal boundaries
- How to increase resilience and trust in children
- How to meet child's need for attachment
- How to make home a safe place for children
- How children keep themselves safe in society and at the other people's homes
- How to talk to children about domestic abuse
- What should be done at the times of possible abuse and how to treat the child
- How to respond to disclosure by taking into consideration that the child's disclosure of abuse is a process
- To increase the accessibility, various methods like printed materials, online platforms, and community safety programs at child centers should be provided (Brown and Saie Tessier 2015).

## Conclusion

Parents are the primary resources to support a child's sexual development as well as psychological, social, and physical development. It is crucial that parents have an adequate level of knowledge on sexual development, sexuality, and abuse and are able to explain these in an appropriate way for the child's age. It is planned that the program consists of issues such as talking to the child about body parts and boundaries, how to give privacy education, creating family safety program (such as not keeping a disturbing secret), what sexual abuse is and its signs, appropriate reaction to child's disclosure of abuse, and which authorities can be contacted. Moreover, these programs highlight that the parents, not the children themselves, are responsible to protect children from abuse. Family safety plans and open communication should be underlined in programs. It is observed that most of the programs mentioned in the review are either designed for a very short time, for one hour or a few hours, or include only presentation of materials. However, it is thought that topics covered in prevention programs should be explained in more detail and supported through various methods/techniques such as role-playing, and discussions. For programs to be accessible to all, it seems important to conduct them both online and face-to-face, to deliver the printed resources to the parents, and if necessary, broadcast the sessions from television channels in line with distant learning framework. In addition to the limitations of the programs discussed, this review study also

has limitations. It is limited to five programs: the Parents Protect Program, Stewards of Children Program, the Second Step Child Protection Unit Program, One in Five Project, and Psychosocial Support Programs Project. These programs targeted parents and aim specifically at preventing sexual abuse, and are developed within the scope of a project. Additionally, no information is given about the effectiveness of the programs mentioned, only brief introductions of the programs are presented. In future studies, more sexual abuse programs for parents can be discussed and information on their effectiveness can be given.

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