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# Helping Children Stay Safe: What Parents and Educators Can Learn From Child Victimization Research

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Parents and educators have so much to worry about and certainly very high on that list is keeping children safe from harm. Even though research tells us that children are actually much safer than they have ever been before,<sup>1</sup> it is little comfort when dangers seem to be everywhere. Stories of child victims of bullying, sexual abuse, physical abuse and sexual harassment regularly fill the headlines.

The fact that we are so aware of these risks for children today is actually good news. We understand more than we ever have how damaging abuse is to children.<sup>2</sup> Victimization obviously hurts children when it happens, but it can continue to hurt them for



years, into adulthood, and in ways that might have seemed invisible in the past. We now know that victimization can affect children's attention, learning, mental health and even physical health. It can affect their relationships with peers, their romantic relationships and eventually the relationships they have with their own children. Understanding this has helped us take victimization seriously and work even harder to stop it.

But it can be complicated for parents and caregivers to know where to start in trying to protect children. Children must get out and experience life, including its risks, and must do so with increasing independence as they get older. So what can parents do? Luckily, there has been substantial research on child victimization and below are two important "take-homes" from this body of research for parents.

1. It is important to remember that the biggest risks to children are not always the ones in the headlines. Media stories on child victimization don't necessarily reflect those that are most damaging or that hurt the most children. Even though it is in the headlines a lot, research consistently shows that cyberbullying is less common than in-person bullying and harassment for youth.<sup>3</sup> And while worries about children being abducted by strangers is often high on a parent's list of fears, these are extremely rare events.<sup>4</sup> We still need to focus protection efforts on the more common victimization experiences. About 15-25% of youth report bullying by peers in the previous year,<sup>5</sup> and 20% of girls and 10% of boys report sexual abuse or

assault by the time they are 18, typically by other youth or adults that they know.<sup>6</sup> This means that the harms to children we should be worrying about most happen in homes, neighborhoods and schools and by people who may be important to the child or the family in some way.

2. Keep lines of communication open. So how can we best protect against these risks? We are still learning the answers to this, but research in this area is accumulating. One thing we have learned from evaluations of school-based prevention is that lecturing and scare-tactics don't typically work very well with children. While it is a natural impulse to try and protect children by telling them not do things (e.g., don't talk to strangers, don't hang out with the wrong kids, don't post personal information online), these kinds of rules can be hard for children to follow, and sometimes they just tune out the lectures. What appears to work better instead is: 1. letting children know they have a right to be safe, 2. helping them build skills related to stopping or getting away from harmful behavior (and giving them permission to do so) and 3. encouraging them to talk to someone and get help when there are problems.

These sound simple enough, but it does require adults to have difficult conversations with children. And it is not just one or two conversations that are necessary, but having conversations regularly as children grow up that match their developmental stage. Emphasize consistently that no one should physically, emotionally or sexually hurt them. Parents sometimes struggle with the right words, but there are an increasing number of online resources to help with those conversations.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, the conversations must be two-way. For example, parents need to ask questions and get their child's thoughts and ideas on the situations, find out what they think they would do in different situations and listen to them. Research suggests that there are a lot of complex reasons why youth don't tell adults about victimizations. Sometimes it is because of fears that they will get in trouble or be blamed, because they are embarrassed, or because they worry adults won't take it seriously. To help, you can let your children know ahead of time that if they come to you about a problem with abuse or harassment, you will take it seriously and listen. And let your responses to other problems show them that this is true. There are many opportunities to demonstrate you can be trusted. When they have any kind of problem, let them talk, reflect back what they are feeling and tell them that you are glad they talked to you.

And take heart that there are many other people looking out for the children in your care as well. Schools are implementing better protection policies. And prevention education is increasingly focusing on bystanders-both youth and adults-giving everyone better skills at intervening when victimization is suspected or witnessed. Research suggests that children are feeling more comfortable telling parents and teachers when victimization does occur.<sup>8</sup> One of the very best prevention tools we have as a society is increased openness, discussion and awareness about the risks of victimization our children face.

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