

## STRENGTHENING THE CIRCLE OF TRUST

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Trust is the key concept for strengthening child protection mechanisms in our societies. Trust is based on close bondings, created by care and consciousness. And child sexual abuse prevention programmes are mainly based, besides of abuse of power, on the same concepts: care and consciousness. These concepts are universal, beyond the culture in which we are working. Different cultures give different meanings and elaborations to the experience of abuse, but it is essential that professionals understand that the elements that define the experience of child sexual abuse are universal. We have been working on this issue in Latin America, Spain, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, South-East Asia and South Asia and these keys are common.

First, children, families and professionals need to link love and care. It is necessary to work on strengthening this link in the whole society. Children need to recognize people who love them in a good way because they take care of them. A positive bonding is built when two people take care of each other. Families need to understand that positive attachment with their children is the result of a large amount of daily care. And of course, professionals (teachers, doctors, psychologists, social educators...) need to be aware of their obligation of taking care of the people with whom they are working.

Child sexual abuse break this link inside of the child: a person whom they love or expect to be cared damage them in a profound way. But if children are educated in this link between love and care, they will be able to recognize people who hurt them even when the aggressor is someone close and loved by them. A misunderstanding of affectivity makes abuse possible because it legitimises the abuse of power in affective relationships.

In that way, children will learn in a trustful world built by their families and communities. They will also learn that protection is based not on being strong or able to defend ourselves. It is based on learning to ask for help. And they will be able to break the silence created through manipulation and abuse of power. In prevention work is essential not to be focused in "self-protection abilities" because child protection is always an adult duty. Empowering them does not mean making them responsible of their own protection. So, the key protection message must always be "Go out, say it and ask for help."

But for children to ask for help, they need to trust that they will receive an answer. That is why we need to build the circle of trust. And this takes us to the second key concept: consciousness.

First, consciousness in children. We need to teach children to balance their thoughts, their emotions and their bodily sensations. The final balance of these three levels of brain processing will give them the ability to recognize the abuse. Child sexual abuse prevention must begin in early education giving children strategies to use their bodily sensations as a protection tool. Young children are not able to know at a rational level that they are being abused, but they can recognize

the panic, fear or disgust and their bodies experienced it. So, they need to give meaning to their bodily sensations in order to feel the danger and ask for help. This connection with their own inner experience is very important to prevent child sexual abuse inside families, education –or in sports, where children are taught to disconnect and control, because they are taught that suffering is good because it makes you stronger and a better athlete.

But not only children, families must be trained to be able to bring up children with this balance and this insight connection. And families will be able to do it if they build first their own connection with their inner experiences. Besides, families and professionals need to be conscious of the bodily indicators of child sexual abuse which appear long time before children are able to reveal the abuse.

Finally, States are the final duty bears in this child sexual abuse prevention work. They should create child protection community mechanisms and implement support programs for families in first years of the child. States need to recognize the magnitude of the problem and the failure of their responsibilities towards victims. And especially important for prevention work, States have to ensure that the training relevant on child sexual abuse is part of the university educational curricula of all those who will work directly with children and adolescents in education, health, social services, police and the justice system. Also, training should be interdisciplinary and it ought to be linked to the creation of local primary prevention circuits. These local networks acting as community based child protection mechanisms will create effective circles of trust.

In conclusion, let us continue exploring and developing how we strengthen the circles of trust in the lives of our children –and in our own lives. A culture of care and the consciousness of inner experiences can lead to an effective protection against child sexual abuse –and to a healthier and safer world.