

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

These resources have been produced as part of the work carried out under the auspices of C.A.W.T. The project, "Protecting Children with Disabilities from Abuse", was a two-year project which began in June 1998 and ran until December 2000.

The letters C.A.W.T. stand for Co-operation and Working Together. C.A.W.T. is an alliance, formed in July 1992, by the four Health Boards, Southern, North Eastern, Western and North Western, in whose areas lie the border regions of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The overall primary objective of C.A.W.T. is the improvement of the health and social well-being of the population of one million who reside within the designated area. The C.A.W.T. organisational profile includes eight sub-groups, one of these being "Child & Family Care".

This group secured funding from the European Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and had management responsibility for the project.

While some work had been done in the area of abuse prevention in relation to children with disabilities, the need for resources specifically for use with adolescents was initially identified by the C.A.P.R staff in the North Eastern Health Board who had been involved in the production of the adapted Stay-Safe Pack - a personal safety skills programme for young people with disabilities up to the age of 12 years. The Development Officer, having been engaged in similar work in the Southern Health Board, had also identified this need.

Staff from both the N.E.H.B. and the S.H.S.S.B. have been involved in the compilation of these resources and include representatives from teaching, both mainstream and Special Schools, social work, psychology, disability services, health promotion and child abuse prevention services.

Consultations have also taken place with speech and language services, parents and carers and voluntary organisations who are involved with children with a disability. The materials have been piloted and evaluated by selected teachers in three Special Schools and the comments have been positive and encouraging.

"Easy to use".

"Messages are clear and very relevant".

"Pictures helped greatly to check learning and promote discussion".

It would appear that perhaps the most difficult part of this work is actually taking the first step - "Once I had started it wasn't nearly as difficult as I had imagined it would be".

While the main target group was young people with learning disabilities these materials can also be used with those who have physical or sensory impairments.

Current research would suggest that 1 in 10 children, before the age of 16 years will have experienced some type of sexual abuse. Examples of this may be obscene phone calls, sexually explicit discussions, exposure to pornographic materials, inappropriate touching or rape.

Children with a disability have been found to be more vulnerable to abuse than non-disabled children. The reasons for this are varied.

- Children with a physical disability or visual impairment may be at greater risk due to their lack of mobility.
- Some children with speech and hearing impairments can be more vulnerable because they may not be able to tell of abuse, or their attempts at telling may be misunderstood.
- Children with challenging behaviour may be at increased risk of physical abuse.
- Children with "special needs" may be over-protected. This can result in passivity and compliance and an over-reliance on adults for all their needs.
- Attitudes in society to disability may confirm a disabled child's feeling of being different or inferior. This can increase the child's desire to be accepted, therefore leading to greater vulnerability.

As a society we have difficulty facing the reality of child abuse and even more so Child Sexual Abuse. For many people, the abuse of a child with a disability is too difficult to contemplate, these difficulties can result in a failure to recognise abuse and respond appropriately.

If we are to attempt to deal with the problem we must acknowledge its existence and try to overcome our personal difficulties so that we can play an active part in helping young people to lead safer and happier lives.

Abuse prevention for adolescents with learning difficulties is made more complex by the need to ensure that these young people are enabled to develop an awareness of their own sexuality. This will be to differing degrees for each individual but it is an essential element of adolescent development which cannot be ignored.

Much good work is already being done through the R.S.E, Stay-Safe, S.P.H.E. and P.S.H.E. Programmes, but it is important to build on this to ensure that young people with a learning disability have equal opportunities to learn personal safety skills. When working with such students it is necessary to be specific and concrete, to provide frequent reinforcement of the concepts and to check that messages have been clearly and correctly understood.

Advice from professionals working in the field of learning disability has resulted in the content of these materials being specifically designed to suit the particular needs of the young people in terms of their ability to understand, to retain or to put into practice the skills being taught in the lessons.

The provision of these resources is an acknowledgement of the need in this area but it is only a beginning and in no way does it suggest that sole responsibility for abuse prevention rests with teachers.

Society as well as parents must also share responsibility for the task of protecting children and young people from abuse. Teachers deserve and require support from within the school system and the statutory child care agencies if they are to be encouraged to fulfil their protective role in relation to children.

Such work is demanding, both personally and professionally, but those who face the challenge can gain satisfaction from the knowledge that they have played a vital part in securing a safer and happier future for children and young people in their care.