

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

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 and 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 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 in their overall development.

Teaching young people personal safety skills is only one aspect of abuse prevention. It is important to note that those who are involved with children with disabilities need to be aware of other 'prevention' strategies that can be effective, e.g., attitudes within society must change because if the reality of the existence of abuse is not acknowledged there is no impetus to seriously address the problem through the provision of adequate resources. Work can also be done by providing training in "disability awareness" for all staff who work with disabled children and by helping to raise awareness as to the existence of abuse.

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.

In order for the work in school to be most effective it is essential that teachers know that they have the support of parents. Parents who recognise the need for their children to have personal safety skills should communicate their support directly to their teacher who is undertaking this very important work with their child. This support is a pre-requisite to the teacher beginning the lessons in class.

For the messages to be reinforced through discussion you are encouraged to use the illustrations which accompany the stories.

You will be able to outline situations which are specific to your family, and you can adapt and develop the illustrations using examples relevant to your child. In this way you can reinforce the messages which are contained in the stories and check that these are understood and retained.

To acknowledge the need for this work to be done and to be willing to be actively involved in undertaking it may be difficult for both you and your teachers, but such efforts are undoubtedly repaid in terms of reducing the vulnerability of children to abuse.