

Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse: Texas Serves As a Model

By Lyndon Haviland | March 1, 2016



Jenna Quinn is a hero, and her courage is changing the lives of children in Texas.

Sexually abused by her basketball coach, Jenna remembers all too well the fear and shame that kept her silent. From age 12 to age 14, Jenna suffered through progressive violation of her trust and physical boundaries, followed by two more years of sexual abuse. The once outgoing, popular teenager became withdrawn and troubled, coping by overeating and experimenting with self-harm.

Luckily for Jenna, family helped her break her silence and her abuser was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

She overcame post-traumatic stress and depression, and now advocates for legal protection against child sexual abuse. Recently, Jenna partnered with our organization, focusing on child sexual abuse prevention, to raise awareness to help adults create safe environments for children.

Jenna's story of sexual abuse is not uncommon. **One in 10 children** in the United States will become a victim of sexual abuse before the age of 18. But **fewer than 40 percent** of them disclose the abuse. **Only 200,000 cases of child sexual abuse are substantiated** by child welfare agencies in the United States each year. So, we can only speculate on how many children are suffering in silence. There is a solution.

School personnel identify more child abuse cases than any other profession and yet, two-thirds of teachers do not receive specific training to prevent, recognize or react responsibly to child sexual abuse. Further, less than a quarter of school personnel are adequately prepared on mandated reporting.

Despite these staggering statistics, we are starting to build a movement to address child sexual abuse by training educators. Leading the way is Texas, with a law requiring all school employees to complete child sexual abuse recognition and intervention training. As part of this mandate and in accordance with Texas Education Agency guidelines, last August Darkness to Light provided child sexual abuse prevention training to nearly 115,000 Texas educators and other school personnel to help them **identify warning signs of abuse** and take action to protect children.

In October, the organization administered a follow-up survey to nearly 80,000 Texas educators who had taken the training. The purpose of this survey was to determine if educators increased their reports of child sexual abuse in the year following training.

Results showed that Texas educators did increase reports of child sexual abuse to the authorities by 283 percent. In the same period, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services data showed that reporting increased 11.2 percent. Knowing the majority of abuse cases are never identified or reported to the authorities, increased reports can mean that a larger percentage of children are being recognized and receive services as abuse victims. Additionally, more cases were substantiated, implying that more children received support services as a result of training.

Teachers who have received child sexual abuse prevention training better recognize signs of abuse and are more ready, willing and able to protect children. According to Junior High Texas Region Five Principal Debra Jordan, “Educators have a moral imperative to foster and promote an educational climate where students are physically and emotionally safe. Stewards of Children® provides educators with proactive tools that enable them to recognize the warning signs and to implement preventative best practices.”

“I share my story to help others understand how important it is to protect children from sexual abuse,” said Jenna. “Prevention training allows adults to provide children with the chance to grow up free of the trauma of sexual abuse. I never had that chance.”

Jenna’s story inspired Texas Rep. Tan Parker to lead an effort to enact “Jenna’s Law.” Passed unanimously by the Texas Senate in 2009, this legislation addresses training for students, school staff and parents.

In a nation sorely lacking in legislative mandates that safeguard children against sexual abuse, Texas can serve as a model of how to successfully protect children.

In December, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act, allowing states to use existing federal grant funding for sexual abuse prevention education. With no funds currently allocated by state governments for educator training in child sexual abuse prevention, this is a solid first step. The Darkness to Light study highlights the need to further dedicate resources to make educator training a national standard.

*Lyndon Haviland, MPH, DrPH, is CEO of **Darkness to Light**, a nonprofit committed to empowering people to prevent child sexual abuse, with an immediate focus to make child sexual abuse prevention a national priority.*



FILED UNDER: OPINION | CHILD ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH DATA