

Hill Learning Center Child Safeguarding Initiative: Improving Child Protection Practices within Youth Serving Organizations

How and why a youth serving organization overcame safeguarding challenges and improved its practices to aid in the prevention of child sexual abuse.

As youth-serving organization, Hill Learning Center's mission is to "transform students with learning differences into confident, independent learners." This mission has propelled the leadership team and staff at Hill to be committed to keeping their students safe. As a result, Darkness to Light and Hill Learning Center formed a partnership that allowed in Hill Learning Center to engage their community, enact prevention policies, and embed prevention-oriented safeguarding practices.

THE CHALLENGE

The majority of youth-serving organizations are doing everything they can to protect their children. Some are limited in capacity, time, money, and knowledge to better their organization's child safeguarding practices. Also, most organizations have extensive policies and procedures that provide guidance on how to react appropriately to instances of child sexual abuse but are missing vital knowledge on prevention practices that are available. Often when youth-serving organizations change their policies to strengthen prevention efforts, they may lack enforcement of these policies due to a minimal understanding of how to integrate them into their everyday routine. How can youth serving organizations prevent child sexual abuse? Who should prevention policies apply to and how often should they be regulated? How can an organization best minimize opportunities for instances of child sexual abuse?

It is obvious that policies, procedures, and training to for all staff, volunteers, and teachers is necessary, but how can we ensure that the organization has integrated prevention practices into their everyday routine? By using a Social Behavior Change approach, Darkness to Light applies integrated solutions to address the social norms, cultural practices, and environmental factors that drive behaviors to ensure for integration.

PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

Darkness to Light provided a team dedicated to providing support to Hill Learning Center through a year-long process to improving child safeguarding:

- 1. Determine the Problem:** Darkness to Light conducted a three-part needs assessment that included a survey, interviews with senior leadership, staff, and teachers, in addition to conducting environmental observations to determine the current practices, beliefs, attitude, and environmental at Hill Learning Center concerning child sexual abuse prevention.
- 2. Co-Create the Solution:** Using Darkness to Light's Safeguarding Standards, Darkness to Light was able to identify areas of opportunity that exist for establishing or enhancing policies and practices that are necessary to lower an organization's risk of having an incident of child sexual abuse. After considering the proposed areas of opportunities, Darkness to Light and Hill Learning Center worked together to develop a roadmap that reflects the cultural considerations, available resources, and strategic direction that were applicable to Hill Learning Center. The roadmap reflected capacity building considerations at both the individual and institutional levels.

- 3. Integrate and Evaluate:** Working with critical stakeholders in the organization, Darkness to Light provided Hill Learning Center leaders with tools and tactics to confidently engage staff and parents. Integration included mapping safeguarding solutions to existing events and identifiable institutional staples. Evaluation revealed that the organization's leaders were able to update/integrate safeguarding policies. According to post implementation interviews, staff believe they successfully provided activities, polices, and practices that enhance a culture of child protection.

THE RESULT

This initiative has been successful in the reduction of stigma around child sexual abuse, increased prevention policies and practices, and increased accountability among adults who believe child sexual abuse prevention is their shared responsibility. Even through a pandemic, Hill Learning Center has earned the Partner in Prevention recognition demonstrating their commitment to child sexual abuse prevention through training 90% of their staff in *Stewards of Children*®, conducting background checks on staff and volunteers who work with youth, and implementing a child protection policy. Hill Learning Center improved their safeguarding standards by 26% and are continuing to enact more policies and practices to ensure that children can live-learn-play in a safe environment.

“You all were professional and were able to turn a not so fun topic into an enjoyable process. You all moved us forward each week with gentle nudging. You held us accountable in an effective and non-punitive way,” says Bryan Brander, Head of School.

The senior leadership team has seen observable cultural shifts in the way their team approaches child protection. The team at Hill Learning Center has been equipped with looking at all activities within their organization through a child protection lens. Staff and volunteers within the organization are organically having conversations around child protection and how they can integrate what they've learned from the project in how they execute online learning procedures.

This transformative partnership better prepared the Hill Learning Center staff, teachers, and community to engage in prevention conversations, enact prevention policies, and enforce prevention practices. Darkness to Light and Hill Learning Center are an example of prevention-based partnerships that can create prevention-oriented communities that protect children's rights to a healthy and safe childhood.