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MASS MEDIA AND DISCLOSURES OF CHILD ABUSE IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF SECONDARY PREVENTION: PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Objective: From a theoretical and practical point of view, it is worthwhile to utilize the full potential of prevention of child abuse. However, prevention strategies in the field of child abuse were generally limited to prevention by means of interpersonal communications. This paper seeks to address this lacuna.

Method: A case-study is presented by describing and analyzing the organization and program development of a Dutch mass-media intervention aimed at the enhancement of disclosure of abuse of 8- to 15-year-old children, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

Results: In the developmental process, several shortcomings are noticed, with respect to problem analysis, goal setting, and the assessment of unplanned effects. Critical comments are made on the intervention density, and the input and output of financial and human resources. Contrary to most preventive interventions, the described intervention could interrupt the dependency of the abused child on the perpetrator and communicate with children directly.

Conclusion: In a field which is in need of more effective prevention strategies, the program described may serve as an example of an ecological approach, which goes beyond the micro system, extending our potential in preventing ongoing abuse. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Key Words—Mass media, Secondary prevention, Disclosures of child abuse.

INTRODUCTION

MOST STRATEGIES INTENDED to lower the prevalence of child abuse are based on the exchange of information and communication within an interpersonal setting. These involve the instruction, education or training of professionals to earlier detect the occurrence of abuse or the direct personal support or education of the target population, such as high risk parents (Garbarino, 1986; Kleemeier, Webb, Hazzard, & Pohl, 1988; Wurtele & Schmitt, 1992). With regard to the prevention of child sexual abuse the overall strategy is in most cases based on direct work with children or abusers (Berrick & Barth, 1992; Finkelhor, 1986; Kaufman, Harbeck-Weber, & Rudy, 1994).

The reach of strategies based on interpersonal settings, however, is limited for two reasons. First,

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the chances of reaching a certain population at risk will be smaller when special conditions and settings are required, as is the case with interpersonal strategies. For example, only a minority of the children at risk is in contact with professionals. Secondly, in the case of child abuse the family has the tendency to close itself off (Jones, 1987; Wahler, 1980), implying that strategies that are intensive and include interpersonal contacts will mostly not appeal to those families and their members. To enhance the impact of interventions aimed at the secondary prevention of child abuse, supporting strategies within the scope of an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), for example through mass media, have been suggested by several authors, either explicitly or implicitly (Berrick & Barth, 1992; Daro, Migley, Wiese, & Salmon-Cox, 1996; Garbarino, 1981; Kitzinger, 1994).

However, examples of mass-media campaigns in the area of child abuse are rare in the literature. Moreover, in reports of campaigns the focus generally lies on the outcomes. Therefore, this article tries to provide insight into the developmental process of a mass-media campaign aimed at the enhancement of children's disclosure of abuse by describing the various phases in development and implementation, summarizing the different goals and means, and discussing the shortcomings of the process and campaign. As the quality of preparation is the core of success (Green & Kreuter, 1991; Mullen, Green, & Persinger, 1985) special attention is paid to the process leading up to the program. For this purpose, two developmental tracks, which took place simultaneously, may be distinguished: a program development track and an organization development track. These will be reported on in chronological order.

HISTORY AND PREPARATION

The confrontation of adults' stories of female child sexual abuse with the increasing awareness about the current abuse of children in the mid-1980s resulted in both indignation and appropriate action. This combination was as simple as it was powerful and continued over a period of 7 years. Committed to children's lives and driven to improve them, a number of Dutch professionals and volunteers in the field of child abuse and prevention met at a conference in late 1985. Their intention was to stop all kinds of child abuse (emotional, physical and sexual abuse) as well as diminish the negative consequences of abuse (children's strong feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation). It has taken almost 6 years to prepare a national awareness campaign in the Netherlands.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

In the initial phase of program development, the group of professionals and volunteers discussed and formulated definitions (e.g., Which types of abuse are to be addressed?), and the causes (e.g., Is child abuse a consequence of power or a consequence of powerlessness?). Next, through piloting the age limits of the target population were set at 8 to 15 years, and the main objective was defined more precisely, that is, to encourage abused children to disclose their physical, emotional or sexual abuse. To effectively communicate this objective to the abused children, the catchy slogan "Some secrets you have to talk about" was developed. (Although a number of programs have been developed in North America, from a cross-cultural perspective it is interesting to note that even within Western societies, simply translating the slogans from these prevention programs [Conte, Rosen, & Saperstein, 1986; Fryer, Kraizer, & Miyoshi, 1987; Hazzard, 1990; Wurtele, 1990] turned out to be inadequate.) Subsequently, the group of professionals and volunteers tried to persuade broadcasting companies to air the films that were planned. In addition, an inventory was made of existing and available materials that could be used. All planned parts of the program were listed, a time frame was drawn up, and costs were calculated.

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