



## Child Protection in Schools: A Four-Part Solution

According to recent U.S. statistics, over 770,000 children are victims of child abuse and neglect each year.<sup>1</sup> Experiencing child abuse and neglect (maltreatment) is frequently associated with negative effects on children.<sup>2,3</sup> Many educational staff agree that schools are at capacity in terms of taking on new initiatives, so determining how to protect children and keep them safe may seem like an additional daunting task.

When the bottom line appears set on achievement test scores, it can be hard for schools to justify any change in focus. At the same time, keeping students

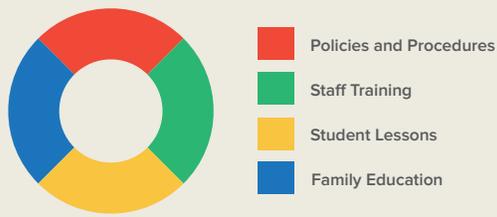
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*When a good portion of a student's day is spent in school, it becomes the job of schools to make child protection a top priority.*

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safe and protected is a primary concern. When a good portion of a student's day is spent in school, it becomes the job of schools to make child protection a top priority.

#### Four Components of School-Based Child Protection



Research indicates the most effective way to do this is by training adults—all school staff and caregivers—and teaching students skills.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup> This can be accomplished by creating and implementing a comprehensive child protection strategy that addresses these research recommendations:

- 1 **Policies and Procedures**
- 2 **Staff Training**
- 3 **Student Lessons**
- 4 **Family Education**

### 1. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Unfortunately, some child sexual abuse actually occurs in school and other learning environments. Reviews on this topic reveal that for the most part, educator sexual abuse has not been systematically addressed in research studies.<sup>7</sup> Although a national incidence study on educator sexual misconduct does not exist yet, data collected by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation indicate that just under 10% of students report educator sexual abuse sometime during their school career.<sup>8</sup> Further, these data suggest that approximately 290,000 students were victims of either physical or sexual abuse by a public school employee between 1991 and 2000.<sup>9</sup>

Effective implementation of policies and procedures within school settings has been shown to prevent maltreatment within schools.<sup>10</sup> In addition, leadership is important to the success and sustainability of school-based prevention programs.<sup>11, 12</sup> School administrators can send a clear message that child protection is a

priority and motivate staff to implement skills learned in training. Research by Yanowitz and colleagues<sup>6</sup> underscores the importance of emphasizing policies and procedures in child abuse training within the school setting.

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***Administrators must assess their current child protection policies, procedures and practices to develop a comprehensive child protection strategy for their school.***

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A robust training for school administrators that can help them assess their current child protection policies, procedures, and practices is necessary. This helps them develop a comprehensive child protection strategy that aligns with current research and best practice. A strategy based on research and best practice includes policies and procedures designed to protect children from abuse in a school or youth program setting, establishing a staff code of conduct, creating procedures for screening and hiring staff and volunteers, and reporting staff violations of protection policies.

### 2. STAFF TRAINING

Teachers have more access to children than almost any other professional—so much so that their opportunity to help protect the health and safety of their students through interventions is great.<sup>4</sup> Teachers and school administrators are often largely responsible for reporting abuse.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, research indicates numerous barriers exist that may prevent teachers and administrators from being fully effective in this role. For instance, evidence indicates that staff are often ill-prepared to recognize signs and symptoms of abuse.<sup>17</sup> In addition, under-reporting of child abuse by teachers is common.<sup>14</sup>

Research findings reveal that under-reporting among teachers is often associated with a lack of knowledge about the signs and symptoms of abuse,<sup>14, 15</sup> lack of knowledge of reporting procedures or unclear reporting procedures,<sup>14, 16</sup> and fear of making inaccurate reports.<sup>15</sup> Given this, it is not surprising to learn that many teachers would benefit from increased training on the signs and symptoms associated with maltreatment and on reporting procedures,<sup>14</sup> particularly because teachers have received little training on this topic.<sup>15, 17</sup>

**Factors Contributing to Under-Reporting of Child Abuse by Teachers**

How can I tell if a kid is being abused?	<b>Lack of Knowledge About the Signs and Symptoms</b>
What do I do now?	<b>Lack of Knowledge of Reporting Procedures</b>
Who do I report this to?	<b>Unclear Reporting Procedures</b>
What if I'm wrong?	<b>Fear of Making Inaccurate Reports</b>

Teacher and staff education is a fundamental component for implementing effective child protection programs.<sup>5</sup> Training on how to recognize common indicators of abuse and neglect prepares staff to recognize possible abuse and report according to their school or program's reporting procedures when they have "reasonable cause to suspect" a child is being abused and/or neglected.

### 3. STUDENT LESSONS

The most commonly used method to prevent child sexual abuse is teaching children lessons in school-based programs.<sup>18</sup> Research suggests that children are capable of learning many personal safety skills related to abuse prevention and sexual abuse prevention in particular.<sup>19-22</sup> For example, a comprehensive review of 27 studies indicated that prevention program participants had statistically significant gains in their knowledge of personal safety skills compared to the control group children.<sup>23</sup> Research suggests programs utilizing more active modes of teaching (modeling, rehearsal, and reinforcement) result in greater gains in knowledge and skills than those employing a didactic approach.<sup>23-25</sup>

### 4. FAMILY EDUCATION

It is important to engage families and caregivers in prevention and protection efforts. Families play a fundamental role in child protection, and caregivers are often best able to protect their children from maltreatment. Research findings suggest schools can help families fulfill their role by engaging them in prevention and protection efforts and education about child abuse and neglect.<sup>26, 27</sup>

**Educating all key players in a student's life helps wrap children in protection.**

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Family
Educators

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## THE *SECOND STEP* CHILD PROTECTION UNIT

Committee for Children's *Second Step* Child Protection Unit features research-based prevention and intervention components, including training and resources for school staff, classroom lessons and activities, and materials for families. Its goal is to develop staff, adult caregiver, and student knowledge and skills for protecting students from unsafe and abusive situations in and outside of school. Specific skills for recognizing and reporting abusive situations and responding in a supportive way to students who disclose abuse are also targeted.

The first module of the Online Staff Training helps school leaders assess their current child protection policies, procedures, and practices and begin to develop a comprehensive child protection strategy aligned with current research and best practices. The second module prepares all staff to recognize common indicators of child abuse and neglect seen in children and staff violations of child protection policies. Staff are also shown how to respond supportively to students who may be experiencing abuse or who disclose maltreatment. The third module prepares teachers to teach the Child Protection Unit lessons to students.

The Child Protection Unit student lessons encourage help-seeking behavior and positive student norms by teaching students to recognize, refuse, and report unsafe or abusive situations. The Child Protection Unit includes an array of teaching modes and gives students multiple opportunities to practice skills. Specifically, the lessons aim to help children protect themselves by teaching them skills in three areas: (a) recognizing unsafe and sexually abusive situations and touches, (b) immediately reporting these situations to adults, and (c) assertively refusing these situations whenever possible. Each lesson also includes an activity children can do with a parent or caregiver at home to practice the skills.



Online Staff Training Module 2:  
Recognizing, Responding to,  
and Reporting Abuse



Grades EL–5  
Lesson Posters

The Child Protection Unit also includes materials to support school leaders and staff in engaging and educating families. Some materials relate directly to the student lessons, and an online series of short, compelling media pieces teaches caregivers about child sexual abuse. The videos aim to reduce their anxiety about discussing this subject with their children and give them realistic recommendations for conversations with kids. The media pieces are supplemented with online content explaining how parents can reinforce safety skills, recognize maltreatment, and report abuse.

## Conclusion

The *Second Step* Child Protection Unit is one way to address the multiple factors involved in preventing and intervening in child abuse and/or neglect. In particular, when a comprehensive child protection strategy is developed and implemented, students are more likely to have a safe and supportive learning environment backed by:

- 1 Policies and Procedures
- 2 Staff Training
- 3 Student Lessons
- 4 Family Education

The Child Protection Unit lays the groundwork to meet the needs of children who have experienced or are at risk for experiencing maltreatment in an educational setting. Implementation of this unit can help schools strengthen the layers of protection, safety, and support for all students.

To learn more about the *Second Step* Suite of programs, visit [SecondStep.org](http://SecondStep.org).

To discuss how your students may benefit from the Child Protection Unit, contact the *Second Step* team at Committee for Children:

**800-634-4449**

[support@secondstep.org](mailto:support@secondstep.org)



Family Video:  
Sexual Abuse Should Not Happen  
to Our Children



Grades EL-5:  
Child Protection Unit

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