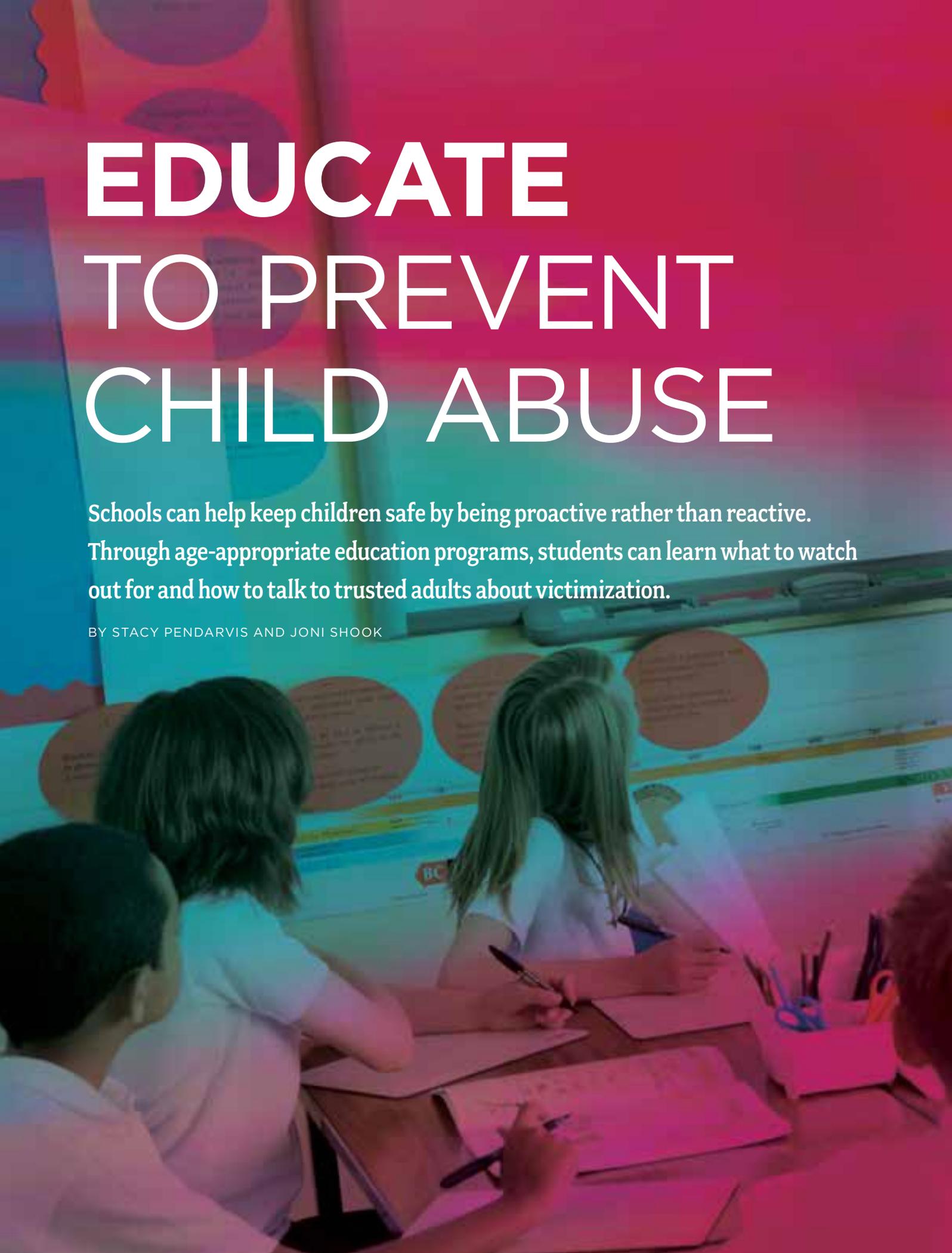
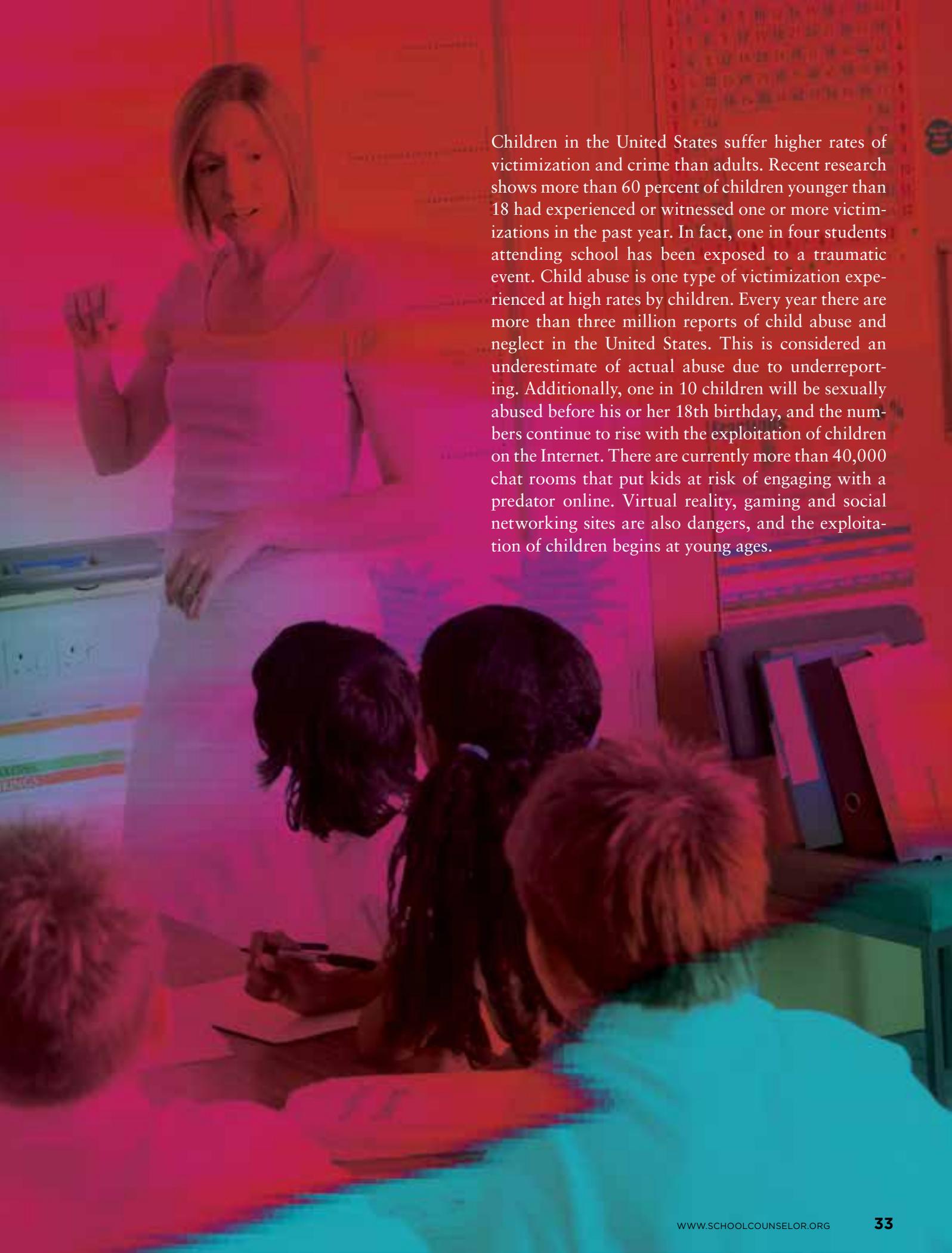


EDUCATE TO PREVENT CHILD ABUSE

Schools can help keep children safe by being proactive rather than reactive. Through age-appropriate education programs, students can learn what to watch out for and how to talk to trusted adults about victimization.

BY STACY PENDARVIS AND JONI SHOOK





Children in the United States suffer higher rates of victimization and crime than adults. Recent research shows more than 60 percent of children younger than 18 had experienced or witnessed one or more victimizations in the past year. In fact, one in four students attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event. Child abuse is one type of victimization experienced at high rates by children. Every year there are more than three million reports of child abuse and neglect in the United States. This is considered an underestimate of actual abuse due to underreporting. Additionally, one in 10 children will be sexually abused before his or her 18th birthday, and the numbers continue to rise with the exploitation of children on the Internet. There are currently more than 40,000 chat rooms that put kids at risk of engaging with a predator online. Virtual reality, gaming and social networking sites are also dangers, and the exploitation of children begins at young ages.

This widespread victimization of children is responsible for a variety of physical- and mental-health-related consequences affecting children well into their adult years. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study is one of the largest investigations ever conducted to assess associations between childhood maltreatment and later-life health and well-being. The study, a collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego, surveyed more than 17,000 HMO members undergoing a comprehensive physical examination to obtain detailed information about their childhood experience of the following:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Mental illness in household
- Parental separation or divorce
- Criminal household member
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect

Almost two-thirds of the study participants reported at least one ACE, and more than one in five reported at least three ACEs. The ACE Study findings suggest certain experiences are major risk factors for the leading causes of illness and death, as well as poor quality of life in the United States. The study explains how some of the worst health and social problems in our nation can arise as a consequence of adverse childhood experiences.

In addition to the emotional and physical consequences of child maltreatment to victims and their families, there is a substantial economic cost to society. The total annual direct and indirect cost in the United States is estimated at \$124 billion annually.

But there is hope.

According to the Child Molestation Research & Prevention Institute, 95 percent of child maltreatment is preventable through education. In years past, providing education programs to children has been questioned as an effective and reliable prevention method. However, this is no longer the case. "Arguments against prevention education for children



are unfounded, and the weight of currently available evidence shows it is worth providing children with high-quality prevention education programs," said David Finkelhor, Ph.D., director, Crimes Against Children Research Center. Additionally, research has shown that safety programs promote disclosure, and one study found lower rates of victimization for children who were exposed to these programs.

Schools, organizations and communities can help keep children safe by being proactive rather than reactive. When communities face child victimization, the usual outcome is heightened awareness, typically through media accounts and sometimes through action demanded of lawmakers, schools and service providers. After high-profile cases of bullying, cyberbullying, child abuse or digital abuse, the media often highlight the need for implementation of child safety programs.

Recent research on polyvictimization is now shaping new and improved prevention strategies and programs that are better able to protect children.

Polyvictimization is defined as a child's experience of multiple victimizations of different kinds, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying and exposure to family violence, rather than multiple episodes of the same kind of victimization. Research supports the effectiveness of child safety and prevention efforts that focus on the broad spectrum of victimizations children suffer, rather than those that are isolated toward one type of victimization over another.

Although many current efforts to help victimized and traumatized children are fragmented and typically focus on one type of trauma (for example, interventions and prevention programs focusing solely on bullying, dating violence, sexual abuse or Internet safety), this research now suggests it is time for these fragmented fields, services and programs to incorporate an integrated, holistic approach to child victimization. Prevention programs should focus on educating children with universal safety and prevention strategies that apply to all types of maltreatment, rather than having multiple programs addressing only one type of victimization.

Educate to Prevent

The goal of schools is to educate students, making this a natural place to implement a prevention program, especially in light of the fact that trauma directly affects students' academic achievement. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, one out of every four children attending school has been, or will be, exposed to a traumatic event. Trauma is the greatest cause of underachievement in schools, with students suffering from decreased reading ability and lower grade-point averages, as well as increased school absences, suspensions and dropout rates. However, not all schools and communities are currently implementing an effective, comprehensive prevention program. By focusing on polyvictimization, school counselors, teachers, child advocates and other professionals working with children can provide better interventions and prevention practices.

There are many programs available to schools and districts for prevention education, and it can be difficult to identify

a program that delivers what it promises and meets the school’s needs. For example, Erin’s Law, named for child sexual assault survivor and activist Erin Merryn, requires public schools in each of the 26 states where the law has passed to implement a prevention-oriented child sexual abuse program teaching students in grade K–12 age-appropriate techniques to recognize child sexual abuse and tell a trusted adult, as well as instructing teachers and parents/guardians about the warning signs and how to seek assistance. In addition, many states already have requirements for prevention instruction regarding child abuse, bullying and online safety. School personnel should conduct a thorough review of programs under consideration. See “Checklist of Prevention Best Practices and Guidelines” for additional guidance.

The school counselor’s role in collaborating with school administration to research, select and implement a prevention program is critical. School counselors are key personnel in identifying and communicating the importance of educating students about how to protect themselves from situations where victimization may occur. School counselors may need to make a case for the importance of this instruction and help other stakeholders understand how trauma affects academic achievement. As school counselors are planning their comprehensive school counseling program, they can incorporate this type of prevention education in their school counseling core curriculum plan as a tier 1 strategy.

Through the combination of education, the communication between children and the safe adults in their lives and the subsequent behavior changes that develop when children and adults are empowered to act, children will be better protected, enabling them to grow up happy, healthy, and safe.

One community, one school, one person can make a difference. 

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CHECKLIST OF PREVENTION BEST PRACTICES AND GUIDELINES*	
	Yes/No
Grounded in theory and prevention research/localizes curriculum	
Includes multiple lessons over a period of years with multiple reviews/homework	
Fosters parent, teacher and community involvement	
Includes comprehensive safety topics, starting with basic safety skills for young children	
Includes proper training for presenters and teachers, parents and community	
Includes age- and developmentally appropriate materials	
Is interactive and includes demonstration or behavior rehearsal opportunities	
Includes comprehensive evaluation	
Fosters communication between parent and child	
Teaches children the importance of safe adults and their responsibility for child safety	
Fosters responsibility in children for independence and safety; promotes self-esteem	
Fosters the right in children to control their bodies and protect themselves	
Teaches the proper reporting requirements of bullying and abuse/neglect	
Teaches children self-protective skills and strategies, such as saying “no”	
Teaches children appropriate/inappropriate touch of private body parts	
Teaches children about who may be potential offenders (children, adults, anyone)	
Teaches children and adults disclosure and reporting methods and options	
Teaches children abuse is never their fault	
Promotes social/emotional learning, bullying prevention strategies and upstander skills	
Includes appropriate content for special-needs children	
Teaches universal strategies to prevent multiple types of victimization (polyvictimization)	

SOURCE: GUIDELINES FOR PROGRAMS TO REDUCE CHILD VICTIMIZATION: A RESOURCE FOR COMMUNITIES WHEN CHOOSING A PROGRAM TO TEACH PERSONAL SAFETY TO CHILDREN. NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN. FIND THE FULL DOCUMENT AND MORE AT WWW.MBFCHILDSAFETYMATTERS.ORG.