

# SPREADING THE C.A.R.E. MESSAGE: CHALLENGE ABUSE THROUGH RESPECT EDUCATION

Sarah Smith & Linda Hunter | Canadian Red Cross

National incidence studies indicate that abuse and maltreatment of Canadian children is still an issue of serious concern. Educators are crucial supporters and role models in children's lives, spending many hours with children, sometimes more than their caregivers in these busy times. The Canadian Red Cross believes that supporting the education system through high quality resources and training on child safety is one of the best ways to create a world fit for children and youth.

The Canadian Red Cross has been a national leader in prevention education in Canada for 25 years through its RespectED: Violence & Abuse Prevention programs. The aim of RespectED is to break the cycle of abuse, neglect, harassment and interpersonal violence, and in so doing, to promote safe and supportive relationships between individuals, within the family and throughout our communities.

Built on decades of Red Cross experience in prevention education, community-based safety programming, and volunteer mobilization, this award-winning service has helped more than 3.4 million Canadian youth and adults understand what abuse, harassment and interpersonal violence is, why and how it occurs, and how to stop the cycle of harm. All programs engage learners in an interactive process, and encourage a proactive, comprehensive, community approach to prevention that incorporates education, assessment, policy development, training, evaluation, advocacy and monitoring. RespectED is engaged with the World Health Organization Violence Prevention Unit and has adopted the WHO model of interpersonal violence prevention (2002). And embedded into all RespectED material is the Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by Canada.

## Why do we need prevention programs?

- Young women who had not participated in a school abuse prevention program in childhood were about twice as likely to have experienced child sexual abuse as those who participated in a prevention program (Gibson & Leitenberg, 2000).
- 63% of substantiated cases of sexual abuse in Canada are females. However, males are more vulnerable between ages 4 and 7 (The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, Health Canada, 2003).
- Of substantiated cases, 9% involved children of Aboriginal heritage (The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, Health Canada, 2003).
- Children with disabilities are two to five times more likely to be abused than those without disabilities (retrieved from Canadian Red Cross [www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=6777&tid=081](http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=6777&tid=081)).

- School personnel account for approximately 19% of referrals to authorities in cases of child sexual abuse (The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, Health Canada, 2003).
- Every year, 1 in 5 children is sexually solicited online (Finkelhor et al, *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, Alexandria, Virginia: National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, 2000).



Child sexual abuse is one of the more difficult issues an educator will face in their classroom teaching experience. RespectED offers a comprehensive program that provides everything an educator needs in order to spread the *c.a.r.e.* (*Challenge Abuse through Respect Education*) message of personal safety for children. We believe the future can be different, and prevention education is the answer. Of particular help is the simple yet clear way that the *c.a.r.e.* kit addresses handling either known or suspected cases of abuse. We recognize that even for the most experienced school educators, handling a disclosure of abuse is concerning.

“EDUCATION IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON WHICH YOU CAN USE TO CHANGE THE WORLD.”

– Nelson Mandela

We know that for most victims, the impact of child sexual abuse can have lasting effects. It can take a victim an average of telling their story seven times before they are believed. This is something that adults can address directly through increasing their knowledge about the “duty to report”, which basically stipulates that anyone who is concerned about the safety of a child or youth must phone child protection or police and report it. It is important to note that you do not need “iron-clad” proof or evidence to make a report. The good news is that the sooner a child discloses, is believed and gets help, the better the outcome.

### **Prevention is the solution – Challenge Abuse through Respect Education**

We recognize that in order to keep children safe, one of the most important things we can do is equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to avoid risky situations, and to give them an understanding of their rights to their own body. Young people need to know what is inappropriate, and how to say “no” and get help. The *c.a.r.e.* (*Challenge Abuse through Respect Education*) program aims to help prevent the ongoing tragedy of abuse by equipping children with the knowledge and skills they need to help protect themselves from sexual abuse. This personal safety program for children aged 5 – 9 incorporates cultural and family diversity to deliver key messages. With a focus on body ownership, the program combines storytelling, lessons, and interactive activities to teach children basic personal safety rules in a positive, child friendly, and non-threatening way. The *c.a.r.e.* kit is designed with activities that make it possible to teach this subject using a lighter approach to help the children retain the information. And, the *c.a.r.e.* kit aids with the sensitive issue of handling direct and indirect disclosures. Trusty the Mascot emphasizes three simple personal safety rules throughout the program: **TALK** (say No!), **WALK** (get away from danger if you can), and **SQUAWK** (tell a helping person what happened).

Our research indicates that there are few comprehensive programs available across Canada that deal specifically with preventing child sexual abuse and include training for the professional. When surveyed, more than 90% of teachers, parents, and counsellors felt the *c.a.r.e.* program was effective in increasing the personal safety of students.

The 2007 edition of the *c.a.r.e.* kit provides educators with everything they need in order to deliver this important program. ([http://www.redcross.ca/cmslib/general/09\\_care\\_ekit\\_final.pdf](http://www.redcross.ca/cmslib/general/09_care_ekit_final.pdf))

Teachers and educators who have used *c.a.r.e.* before, and who are familiar with this program’s strengths in helping protect children, will find the latest edition (2007) significantly

Parents and caregivers are often concerned that they do not know what is normal healthy sexual development that is age appropriate as opposed to what might be an issue. While consulting with an expert is always the recommended approach with any concerns parents might have, the checklist below provides some basic information about what might be concerning.

### **Twenty red flags regarding children’s sexual behaviours:**

1. The children engaged in the sexual behaviours do not have an ongoing mutual play relationship
2. Sexual behaviours which are engaged in by children of different ages or developmental levels
3. Sexual behaviours which are out of balance with other aspects of the children’s life and interests
4. Children who seem to have too much knowledge about sexuality and behave in ways more consistent with adult sexual expression
5. Sexual behaviours which are significantly different than those of other same-age children
6. Sexual behaviours which continue in spite of consistent and clear requests to stop
7. Children who appear to be unable to stop themselves from engaging in sexual activities
8. Sexual behaviours which occur in public or other places where the child has been told they are not acceptable
9. Children’s sexual behaviours which are directed to adults who feel uncomfortable receiving them
10. Children (four years and older) who do not understand their rights or the rights of others in relation to sexual contact
11. Sexual behaviours which progress in frequency, intensity or intrusiveness over time
12. When fear, anxiety, deep shame or intense guilt is associated with the sexual behaviours
13. Children who engage in extensive, persistent, mutually agreed upon adult-type sexual behaviours with other children
14. Children who manually stimulate or have oral or genital contact with animals
15. Children who sexualize nonsexual things, or interactions with others, or relationships
16. Sexual behaviours which cause physical or emotional pain or discomfort to self or others
17. Children who use sex to hurt others
18. When verbal and/or physical expressions of anger precede, follow or accompany the sexual behaviour
19. Children who use distorted logic to justify their sexual actions, e.g. “She didn’t say no”
20. When coercion, force, bribery, manipulation or threats are associated with sexual behaviours

improved. Through formal and informal evaluations and in consultation with teachers and professionals in the field, the Canadian Red Cross identified and implemented several revisions. Among these is:

- a move away from feeling-based lessons to more concrete safety rules and a focus on appropriate and inappropriate behaviours.
- addition of more effective teaching strategies to strengthen the capacity of educators to meet the needs of children with diverse experiences.
- updated information and references that represent the growing knowledge of abuse prevention.
- identification of “teacher evaluated” activities in the Resource Guide.
- addition of a Teacher’s Tool Package of photocopy templates.
- the provision of training on CD ROM at no charge or training can be requested in person for an additional charge.
- new resources that address children with special needs, especially relevant because these children are particularly vulnerable to abuse.
- addition of a “UN Convention on the Rights of the Child” poster in child friendly language.
- availability of Online Training and Training Workshops.

For more information about RespectED: Violence & Abuse Prevention – visit [www.redcross.ca/respected](http://www.redcross.ca/respected).

### About the authors

Sarah Smith is the Western Canada Director for RespectED and the national *c.a.r.e.* manager. For the past 18 years, Sarah has worked within Canadian Red Cross and believes that building capacity within communities through prevention education is the only way to create safety for children and youth. She is married and is enjoying life with three teenagers and two international students.

Linda Hunter is a consultant with the RespectED *c.a.r.e.* team with a professional background in seminar and conference planning. Her passion for family and community service has included participation in a number of successful school and youth related endeavours. She is committed to building strong relationships and exceeding customer expectations through education.

“I strongly believe that this is the direction our communities need to take in order to address some of our most pressing social issues, and this program (*c.a.r.e.*) is the best solution I have seen to date.”

– Jill Taylor, Program Support Consultant, Sahtu Divisional Education Council, Norman Wells, NWT

“As a school teacher for the last 20 years, I have unfortunately experienced the emotional feelings as an adult attempting to support children who have been involved in abuse situations. As a classroom teacher, I know that through the *c.a.r.e.* program, I can offer awareness, compassion, and understanding to children that I may not even know need the support of a caring adult. Every opportunity you have to get this program into the hands of supporting adults needs to be explored. I feel very strongly about the value of this program.”

– Ellen Webb, Grade 1 / 2 teacher, Willow Road Public School, Guelph, Ontario

“We looked all over the country for sexual abuse prevention and reporting curriculum suitable to an early elementary school program, and kept coming up blank. When we found the *c.a.r.e.* kit and found out about the training that is available to support it, we were relieved. In this day and age, any material of this nature needs generous support to reduce the risk of harm to as many children as possible.”

– Robert W. Moore, M.Ed, Principal, John Calvin Christian School, Guelph, Ontario