

Class on preventing sexual abuse of children readied

by Yury Tarnavskiy
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Each Mercer County school district will have the opportunity next school year to offer a sexual abuse prevention program at one of its elementary schools.

Currently, Prevention Education Inc., which is under contract with the state Division of Youth and Family Services to conduct the pilot programs, is contacting the school districts to make arrangements for the fall.

The prevention program consists of one visit per class by a team of role players, who will play out several scenarios illustrating three victimization scenes. The scenes will be followed by replays showing a "successful" resolution of a "dangerous situation," said the director of Prevention Education.

Following the one-hour role playing, children will have an opportunity to talk with the players, who will be trained to answer questions or handle disclosures, said Evelyn Gill, the education corporation's director.

"We believe that the Child Assault Prevention (CAP) program (that will be offered) is an excellent program and is one that will give the children the skills to deal with potentially dangerous situations," she said.

The CAP program was put together by a Columbus, Ohio, organization Women Against Rape, said Mrs. Gill, and is considered a successful program at "reducing the vulnerability of children."

And that is the main aim of the effort, said Mrs. Gill, who spent the last seven years working as director of the Trenton YWCA's Woman's Center.

"We felt that to reduce long-term the incidence of child sexual abuse there had to be a concentrated effort in the area of prevention," she said.

"There's never really been a concentrated effort."

It was while working at the Trenton Y that she witnessed an increase in the number of children the center's rape

crisis program was handling. And she became more aware of the "enormity" of the problem.

"We can't just pretend that it (child sexual abuse) happens in isolated incidents," she said, adding youngsters came from throughout the county.

And she cited the national estimates commonly used: That by the time they reach their 18th birthday, one in four girls and one in seven boys will have been sexually assaulted. That can range from an inappropriate touch to a forcible rape.

In most cases the molester is a person well known to the child — a parent, family member, neighbor or family friend, she said.

"Some people will believe us, some will not," said Mrs. Gill. "It's very hard to believe those statistics."

Working with Mrs. Gill on her new project is a former co-worker from the Woman's Center, Michele Urbanik, who was coordinator of the rape crisis unit.

Ms. Urbanik said the CAP program is effective because the children develop ways to respond to threatening situations.

"They're invited to think it through," she said. "It's not an adult standing there giving a list of rules."

The role players will play out a scene to illustrate an incestuous relationship and an abduction by a stranger.

Then the children come up with ways to deal with the situation so as not to be victimized, she said.

"The important part there is that the children have the opportunity to develop strategies," said Mrs. Gill. They learn about options they have in given situations.

Kids learn they can say no, that they have rights, that they don't have to keep secrets. They are given infor-

mation on how to determine who is a "trusted adult," said Ms. Urbanik.

"Sexual abuse thrives on secrecy," said Mrs. Gill. "Don't tell mommy. Don't tell daddy."

"And because it's so scary, many times we don't talk about it. It's scary for adults, too," she added.

By offering a program in the school, the topic is brought out into the open.

"It makes it public to the children," said Ms. Urbanik. "It becomes an issue they can talk about."

Youngsters find out that it isn't a secret, but can be talked about.

"It opens up communication," said Mrs. Gill. "It gives the children the tools and permission to talk."

The youngsters won't be the only ones benefitting from the instruction program, said Mrs. Gill. She said special sessions will be held with parents and teachers.

"Every parent will have a chance to learn about the program before it goes into the school," she said.

And the teachers will receive special instruction as well.

Before the program is presented to the children, each school will have decided on a "mechanism" to handle disclosures by children which by law must be reported to DYFS.

Mrs. Gill said the program may well result in more disclosures and the schools must be prepared to handle them.

Child sexual abuse usually builds up, starting with a touch or fondling, said Mrs. Gill. Over time it can progress to oral sex or sexual intercourse.

"With CAP we're saying the abuse can be stopped before it gets too far," said Mrs. Gill.

Prevention Education is also under contract with DYFS to present preven-



EVELYN GILL (front) is the director of Prevention Education Inc. and Michele Urbanik was coordinator for Trenton YWCA's rape crisis unit. They will work together on the Child Assault Prevention program.

(Renee Carolla photo)

programs at 17 nursery schools statewide, including Princeton. This program is expected to begin by the end of the month. The instruction will be given for five consecutive days with a follow-up visit a week later. Prevention Education also has a program that deals with adult personality aiming to "decrease the vulnerability of adults to assault."

Mrs. Gill said school districts wishing to extend the CAP program to other schools can do so for a fee. "We're not trying to give the impression this program will eliminate child sexual abuse," said Mrs. Gill. "We're opening the door for skill development and strategies. We've also opened the topic and the lines of communication," she said. "This is a start."