Key messages

- Protective behaviours helps children develop an understanding of unsafe situations and how to keep themselves safe
- It is important that teachers understand how to respond to disclosures to support the student and follow WA legislation for mandatory reporting.

Protective behaviours education focuses on developing the skills of empowerment, communication, self-esteem, resilience, social skills and other life skills to prevent abuse, reduce violence and promote life-enriching rather than life-depleting experiences.

It encourages students to:

- assert their right to feel safe
- listen to what their body tells them
- follow up by taking action to either solve problems on their own or to seek assistance from other trusted people.

The vast majority of abused children (96%) are abused by someone known and trusted by them[1]. Research suggests that in Australia, 1 in 4 girls and somewhere between 1 in 7 boys and 1 in 12 boys are sexually abused before they reach the age of 18[2], but only a small proportion will ever tell of their abuse[3].

Teaching protective behaviours

Safe learning environment

Protective behaviours education is likely to generate strong feelings so it is important that the classroom environment reflects trust and confidence and that the teacher has the strategies and skills to reinforce student strengths, develop trust and build communication.

Establishing a group agreement is critical to help provide a safe environment for students to express opinions.

Appropriate language

Age-appropriate education starts with teaching children the correct names for, and functions of, their body parts and how to care for, respect and protect their bodies[4]. Students need to know and be able to name external parts of the body including the names for external sexual parts such as the penis, vulva, breast, testicles and bottom.

In teaching about body parts (including the names for genitals) use the correct terminology from the outset. This helps set the tone for discussion to follow about reproductive body parts and functions and allows students to

develop comfort to use these words and to be able to confidently talk about their body. It is also helpful to describe the reproductive body parts as ‘private’ parts rather than ‘rude’ parts. Using anatomical language, such as penis and vulva, also improves a child's confidence to be able to report inappropriate touching, for example, and prevents confusion that can arise from the use of nicknames.

Protective behaviours education and personal safety education programs are a part of any good sexuality education program. Protective behaviours education focuses on teaching students how to identify and avoid a range of potentially unsafe situations, including sexual abuse[5].

Key messages

1. We all have the right to feel safe at all times.
2. We can talk with someone about anything no matter what it is.

Key concepts

1. Early warning signs (recognising specific internal physical and emotional sensations)
2. Safety (recognising safety and knowing rights)
3. Networks (knowing how to ask for help and who to ask)

Early warning signs

Early warning signs incorporate physical responses of the body (e.g. goosebumps), emotional responses (e.g. feeling scared) and external indicators (e.g. time, location) at the outset of inappropriate or harmful events, including potentially abusive situations. When discussing early warning signs with students, it’s important to know that not all children experience them and that some may have become desensitised through previous or current traumatic experiences or have sensory disorders.

Safety messages

- Encourage children to know they can decide who touches them.
- Teach children they have a right to say "no" to unwanted touch.
- Teach about privacy and help them identify the private parts of the body.
- Talk about the difference between 'safe' and 'unsafe' secrets or use the word 'surprise' instead of 'safe secrets'.
- Encourage them to tell someone if they are confused or upset or if they have concerns or questions.
- Reinforce using the buddy system on outings.
- Try to always know where your children are and have them check in with you.
- Maintain an environment in which children feel safe talking about their feelings and problems.

Language of safety

The language of safety includes verbal and non-verbal messages that create a safe environment. Teachers should model positive language that is free from bias, is respectful and promotes confidence.

Teach, practise and encourage students to use the statements below:

- "STOP - I don't like that"
- "I don't feel safe when you do that"
- "No, I don't want to"
- "When you do that, I don't feel safe"

Use the following steps to ensure students feel comfortable using the language of safety:

- Practise saying in your head.

- Practise saying out aloud.
- Practise saying to a friend.

Responding to disclosures

In the course of delivering sexuality education, a teacher may become concerned about the safety and wellbeing of a particular student.

In Western Australia, teachers are required by law to report a belief, formed on reasonable grounds in the course of their work, that a child or young person has been the subject of sexual abuse to the WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support. See the WA Department of Education's Child Protection website for further details.

Use of protective interruption

Programs focusing on issues of relationships and sexuality inherently have the possibility of students disclosing personal issues. A useful strategy to prevent students saying something inappropriate is ‘protective interruption’. This means interrupting students before they disclose and at the same time advising they can talk privately with the teacher after class.

See the essential tools on Managing disclosures and protective interrupting for more information.

Teaching tips

- It’s not necessary to obtain parent/carer consent to conduct protective behaviours education. It is recommended that **parents/carers are informed and involved in the education and support process**. Send a letter home to parents and carers providing an overview of the learning sequence along with the free WA Department of Health booklet *Talk Soon. Talk Often. A Guide for Parents Talking to Their Kids About Sex*. Sample letters can be found in Home Partnerships.
- The first reproductive body parts to introduce in the Kindergarten – Pre-Primary band are the external body parts that are different for males and females and can be described as the ones that all humans have whether they are a baby, child or adult - i.e. the penis for a male and vulva for a female.
- Use the ‘one step removed’ strategy to provide opportunities for students to practise skills in a non-threatening situation without disclosing personal or family information. The key is to use the general or ‘third person’ approach. For example, “What can a young person do, to keep safe?” Puppets, songs and scenarios can also be used to support the one step removed strategy.
- Praise students who are ‘brave’ enough to volunteer the names of sexual body parts, whether they are the proper and correct, scientific or ‘science-type’ names, or informal ‘home names’. If the students volunteer ‘home names' for the sexual body part, provide them with the proper name as well.
- Students may giggle, but there is no need to reprimand them. Giggling is an expected response and demonstrates the child understands there is something different and private about these body parts. Teachers could respond by saying “sometimes we giggle when we feel embarrassed especially when we are talking about parts of our bodies that are private. We are going to learn the correct names for these parts and find out about our whole body (not just the bits outside our clothes).”
- If a child uses an inappropriate term, you can reframe it by saying something like, “thank you for your answer and we should know that the proper word for ‘dick’ is penis". Keep in mind, students may not be intending to be naughty or rude; rather it could be that it is the only word they know for the sexual body part.
- Teachers often describe moments of finding students playing ‘peek under the toilet door’ or showing parts of their body to each other. Whilst this is a perfectly natural, it is helpful for students to learn that it is not okay to play these games at school, and it is against school rules. This sort of advice helps reinforce

students respect for one another's privacy.

Relevant resources

Professional development

WA Department of Education - Child Protection and Abuse Prevention online professional learning

An interactive online course for WA Department of Education employees. Includes a unit on teaching Protective Behaviours. The Protective Behaviours web page can be accessed by DoE employees by logging in.

Safe 4 Kids

For teachers, parents, childcare educators, or agency staff. Tailor-made to suit your requirements, can include in-class modelling of protective behaviours lessons.

eSafeKids Protective Behaviours

Resources, books and prevention education workshops to educate, equip and empower children and young people, and to help support parents, carers, educators and other professionals.

WA Child Safety Services

Protective behaviours workshops are available for teachers and other professionals working with children.

Other resources

Everyone's Got a Bottom

This book can be purchased from True (formally Family Planning Queensland) and is a useful resource for teaching young children about body parts, physical gender differences, respect for privacy and protective behaviours.

References

1. New South Wales Child Protection Council. *Child Sexual Assault: How to talk to children*. Parramatta, NSW, 2000.
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5. Carmody, T. F. & J.P. O'Sullivan. *Project AXIS Child Sexual Abuse in Queensland: The Nature and Extent*. Brisbane: Queensland Crime Commission Queensland Police Service, 2000.

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities

- Identifying feelings | GDHR
- Bodies - similarities and differences | GDHR
- Ready vs not ready (for sexual activity)
- Sexual consent and the law

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