

INOCULATING CHILDREN AGAINST ABUSE

BEFORE THEY CAN EVEN SPEAK...
BY LEONARD CARR



LAYING THE FOUNDATION THAT ALLOWS you to talk to children about abuse begins before the child can actually speak. Abuse can be defined as the violation of an

individual's personal boundaries. This can take place on the physical, psychological or spiritual level, as people's boundaries can be defined by their private space, where other people are only allowed to enter if

and when they're invited. When invited into the personal space of another, you may stay only as long as your presence is welcome. In order to protect your boundaries, you need to have a sense of what

those boundaries are and feel entitled to protect them.

In order to be able to take action to protect your boundaries, you need to own your authority and know how to stand in your authority through taking appropriate action. From the earliest age, a child's expression of a need for privacy must be respected. Forced kissing, tickling beyond what the child enjoys, ignoring requests for privacy in the bathroom are all examples of how adults give children the message that the child is not in charge of his/her personal boundaries or allowed to assert his/her right to protect his/her space.

Dismissing or ridiculing a child's protests, requests for what he or she needs, or his/her verbalising of emotional hurt, all disarm the child and gives the message that his/her needs and feelings will not be taken seriously. These practices disenfranchise the child, with the implication that the child is not allowed a voice or entitled to any power in the relationship.

All abusers take control by manipulating the victim to deny or mistrust their own experience, feelings and implicitly known truth. They also have a way of shifting the blame onto the victim and coercing the victim into secrecy. Any 'educational' or child rearing practices that do not support and encourage the child to own and trust their own experience, feelings and beliefs and to stand up for themselves, grooms and prepares the child for victimhood.

A culture that inoculates children against abuse is one in which people are treated in ways that show sensitivity and respect with regard to their autonomy over their bodies, minds, hearts and spirits. In order to foster a culture where people's boundaries are respected, their assertions of personal authority need to be welcomed, their needs, opinions, creativity, aspirations, ideals and feelings taken seriously and their voices heard. Establishing a culture that honours these human values for all people, without exception, has won most of the battle against abuse.

It is important to talk to children about the practical meaning of concepts like courtesy, modesty, privacy, tact, discretion and respect, and how these are the

qualities that respect people's boundaries and wellbeing. Children are often given the message that the subject of the body and sexuality is shameful and evil. Talking about these subjects is met with ridicule, punishment and rejection.

In these repressive cultures, children are inevitably also taught in the name of religion that telling the truth about your experience if it affects an authority figure is subversive and disloyal. They are taught that keeping secrets is necessary to keep themselves safe, and that they will be shamed and punished for exposing the wrongs of adults.

What you need to teach children is the value of privacy, modesty, discretion and sensitivity to your own and the integrity of other people's personal space. The discussion needs to be primarily about what values and practices show respect for

your ears by not listening to gossip or information that is not your business. You respect boundaries emotionally by not manipulating others by using displays of emotion strategically, for instance as a blackmail or bullying tactic. You respect boundaries with your body by not intruding into another person's physical space uninvited, or stay longer than you are welcome. It is important to relate these concepts to the child's own experience and to paint concrete scenarios of these issues.

In the culture described in this article, the discussion about difficult topics that children encounter and need to understand, like rape and sexual molestation, are easier to raise. If people have been treated in ways that implicitly hold these values dear, then they can use their own experience of boundaries to imagine what the violation of these boundaries and the

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boundaries and what attitudes and behaviour lead to dehumanisation of others. The discussion needs to extend to all areas of life.

The protection of boundaries begins in the mind, with what you choose to think about as well as how you choose to explain things to yourself through the attitudes, beliefs and assumptions to which you subscribe. What you consider to be your business to have in mind, and what you avoid thinking about to protect the privacy of others, protects or violates their privacy in secret.

Respecting boundaries through speech would mean, for example, not saying anything offensive, hurtful, ridiculing, gossiping, or worst of all, shaming another. You respect boundaries with your eyes by not looking at anything that someone would not like you to see. You can guard

dehumanisation of another really mean.

When a child understands these concepts using examples that they can relate to and identify with, then you can talk about how some people called abusers take these violations to greater extremes, by either manipulating or forcing other to do things that they would not do if they fully understood what was happening or felt empowered to stop it. The awareness of these issues is vital not only to prevent children being victimised, but also to prevent them from becoming perpetrators. ■

Leonard Carr credit

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