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Introduction

Have you thought about the fact that sexual abuse of children by adults has a history all the way back to Biblical times? There has been no culture, race, religion, age, sex, or socio-economic group that has not been affected by child sexual abuse. In some ways missionary children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse because of some unique characteristics of missionary life. Therefore we need to educate ourselves to this area of care for our children and actively take wise and prudent steps to provide safety and care.

Jesus made it clear that children are special to him. He firmly corrected his disciples for not treating them with the consideration and care they deserved. He warned us about the seriousness of causing a child to stumble (Matthew 18). Dave Pollock, in an article on educator's protecting children from sexual abuse, states his belief that failing to protect vulnerable children from sexual and other kinds of abuse may be a major factor that causes them to stumble.

The sad fact is that sexual abuse is occurring on our mission fields, and we will never be able to prevent it 100%, but we can drastically reduce the chances of its occurrence, and we can provide excellent care when it does occur so that it doesn't affect the child long afterwards, or continue to happen to additional children.

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse occurs when children and youth are drawn into sexual activity which:

- they don't fully comprehend
- they can't get out of
- they don't have sufficient knowledge or experience to give informed consent to
- violates family roles and social taboos

Sexual abuse includes:

- intercourse, oral and anal sex, masturbation of the child, the child masturbating the abuser
- touching and looking at the child's genitals and touching or looking at the abuser's genitals
- watching pornographic movies or looking at pornographic photos with the child
- the abuser talking about what he or she would like to do with the child sexually
- having children pose, undress, or perform in a sexual fashion
- watching children in bathrooms or while they undress

These incidents may occur only once or be repeated numerous times over a period of weeks or even years. Victims can be boys and girls. Research worldwide shows 10-20% of all children will be sexually abused before reaching age 18.

Sexual Abuse affects everyone:

- THE VICTIM may suffer physical, psychological, and/or spiritual harm.
- FAMILY/FRIENDS may be angered or outraged - or they may be covering the problem up and feeling very guilty.
- ALL OF US share the burden of pain and loss, especially in a missions community that functions like a large extended family.

WHO SEXUALLY ABUSES CHILDREN?

Research shows that a sexual abuser can be anyone:

- Male or female
- Young or old
- Familiar or unfamiliar - The majority of all abuses are committed by someone the child knows and/or trusts - a family member, relative, baby-sitter or neighbor.
- A current or former victim themselves - Most offenders were themselves abused as a child and their victimization was unreported, not believed, and not treated.

- People who know the abuse is wrong, sinful, abhorrent behavior but are unable to control their impulses. Sexual abuse is addictive behavior that doesn't stop without civil involvement and effective treatment. Abuse most often occurs because the abuser has a lack of skills in healthy intimacy.
- Offenders are typically heterosexual married men or women who are successful in other areas of their lives.

WHERE DOES SEXUAL ABUSE OCCUR?

- In familiar areas - such as at home or school.
- In public places - such as at a park or playground.
- In unfamiliar places - such as deserted lots, wooded areas, hiking trails or campgrounds.
- During private moments during any activity.
- At the computer, playing a game, sitting on a lap, watching movies.
- On camp-outs, trips, at events, parties.
- During overnights at friends', relatives' homes.
- When a youth is alone with an adult or older youth.
- Outdoors and indoors.
- During the few moments a child is alone with an adult or older youth in the midst of other activities.

YOU CAN PREVENT SEXUAL ABUSE

By giving children warm, healthy family relationships where they know they are important, safe, and can talk about anything. Furthermore, it is crucial that children know they are more important than their parents' work or ministry, or they won't risk telling for fear the family would get sent home from the field.

- By teaching children a godly self-concept that helps them defend themselves from harm.
- By teaching children about sexuality as a part of how God made us. Parents can model a positive attitude and comfort level in teaching their children about this aspect of God's creation.

- By teaching children clear and easy to understand concepts of sexual boundaries. Studies show that one third of the children have already been abused by the time their parents tell them about the possibility of sexual abuse.
- By teaching children how to say no to sexual boundary violations.
- By respecting and modeling privacy and body boundaries, both your own and your children's, and teaching children to do the same.
- By teaching children limits to obedience rather than blind obedience to adults and those in authority over them.
- By teaching children that secrets about their private parts and secret touches are wrong.
- By maintaining active responsibility for your children's sexual safety, even in a missions community where you believe everyone would be trustworthy and thus be tempted to let others help supervise your children.
- By being a student of your child's personality and behavior, so you will pick up signals that something is wrong.
- By taking time to be an understanding listener.
- By encouraging children to tell you about any situations that they are troubled by.
- By being thorough in screening household helpers/babysitters, and after hiring them, train them thoroughly according to your values and standards of behavior.
- By being involved in your child's school.
- By actively learning the sexual values in the host culture as they relate to children, then determining how to protect your children in the midst of this culture.
- By learning the warning signs of abuse and paying attention to them if they occur.
- By reporting even suspected cases to the proper authorities.