

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month

By Caren Nemtzow, Director, Needham Community Council Child Assault Prevention Program, and the Needham Domestic Violence Action Committee

What is child abuse? The World Health Organization defines child abuse as “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.” More simply put, child abuse means children being hurt by those upon whom they are dependent for their care and well being. This is true whether the child is being hurt through neglect, or whether the abuse is physical, emotional or sexual in nature.

The Child Assault Prevention Project (CAP) is a nationally and internationally recognized program whose primary goal is to teach children and communities how to reduce children’s vulnerability to threatening and assaultive situations. During the month of April, which is Child Abuse Prevention Month, as well as throughout the year, the Needham Community Council’s CAP program provides workshops for Needham elementary school children and adults that focus on providing the skills and knowledge needed to recognize the signs of child abuse, how to react to it, and what steps can be taken towards its’ prevention.

Here are some of the things that adults and children learn about child abuse through CAP:

Adults learn that the statistics indicate that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually assaulted by the age of 18. They learn that approximately 90% of children are assaulted by a person whom they know and trust. In approximately 40% of cases, children are assaulted by a family member, 30% by a caretaker they know, and 20% by another child or peer. Child abusers are not readily distinguishable from the rest of the population. Child abuse in all forms occurs across all socioeconomic, racial, religious, and cultural lines.

Children learn that while most people they know would never want to do anything to hurt or frighten them, or make them feel unsafe, sometimes someone they know might try to touch them, or have them touch them, in a way that frightens them, or makes them feel uncomfortable or confused. In addition, someone they know might try to bribe them or trick them into keeping an “unsafe” secret. They learn that kisses, and touches and hugs don’t ever have to be kept secret.

Adults learn that talking about topics such as assault and abuse with children does not result in the children becoming more frightened or anxious. On the contrary, giving children the knowledge and tools that they need to stand up for themselves in an age appropriate manner and in a non-threatening environment, actually helps them feel safer and more empowered. One of the reasons that children are so vulnerable to assault is due to their lack of knowledge.

Children learn that they have the ability and the right to stand up for themselves in any situation in which they feel uncomfortable or unsafe. They learn to identify the adults to whom they can go for help, and simple strategies that they can use to protect themselves in threatening situations.

Adults learn that children are often fearful of telling the adults they love about abuse because they do not want to upset them. The children feel that whatever has occurred is their fault. They worry that if they tell that their parents or other trusted adults, they may not love them anymore. Even though it may be difficult information to hear, it is important for children to know that the adults will be able to manage their own feelings, and that the lines of communication are always open.

Children learn that it is never their fault when an adult does something that hurts, frightens or confuses them. It is always the adult's fault. The most important thing to do is to tell an adult to get help no matter how much time may have passed. If the first adult that they tell doesn't believe them, they should tell another adult, and keep on telling until someone listens to them. They learn to "tell, tell, tell!"

Adults learn that there are many resources available for those whom are trusted with the care of children as well as for victims of child abuse and their families. Some of these resources can be found in the CAP Adult Information Guide on the website listed below.

In CAP workshops and presentations, **everyone** learns that all children have the right to be "Safe, Strong and Free." It is through education and continued conversations that the entire community can work together to prevent the abuse of our most vulnerable and treasured members, our children.

If you would like more information about the CAP program or to learn more about becoming a CAP volunteer, please visit: www.needhamcommunitycouncil.org. and click on CAP or contact Caren Nemtzow, Director at 781-444-2415 ext. 2120, or cnemtow@needhamcommunitycouncil.org

For more information about the Needham Domestic Violence Action Committee, please call the Needham Public Health Department at 781-455-7500, ext. 511 or visit www.needhamma.gov/health/dvac