

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ABUSE

Preventing child sexual abuse

■ Stop It Now! director offers advice

By **KATHRYN
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Staff Writer

HAMILTON - The most effective prevention of child sexual abuse takes place before there is a child victim to heal or an offender to punish.

Stop It Now! Director Jenny Coleman of Northampton, Mass., traveled to Hamilton in April for the 24th Breaking the Cycle of Abuse Conference on child abuse prevention and shared information from her organization.

Through its website at www.stopitnow.org, Stop It Now! offers prevention education, help services, technical assistance, prevention advocacy--all at no cost.

Prevention tools, warning signs, healthy sexual behaviors for children and extended help and guidance are also offered to parents, grandparents and caregivers.

Offering practical, hopeful and specialized assistance, Stop It Now! focuses on the prevention of child sexual abuse.

"By understanding what puts children at risk of sexual abuse, we can take actions to counter those risks," Coleman said. "We can create a community safety net with information and assistance to protect children from being sexually abused."

Coleman and Stop It Now! use the "moving upstream" analogy for preven-

tion.

"You can almost hear the water gushing," she said. "Instead of expending all of our resources and energy on rescuing people, why not stop the problem from even happening?"

"This is not to say that the problem can be totally eliminated--or at least not right now, but there may be fewer people to rescue downstream."

Two of the basic tenets of Stop It Now! are that children have a right to safety and well-being and that adults should protect children.

"We cannot depend on children to always know when to say no, when to tell someone about what is happening or how to know when they're being manipulated," Coleman said.

"They may be scared because they are being threatened. This is why we say that adults are responsible and adults need to be accountable for keeping children safe."

A few tips on prevention

Some tips on prevention that were shared by Coleman include:

- Be sure that no one in your family is isolated. Research shows that having someone to talk with and confide in plays a key role in how well a child will bounce back from stressful events. Having a safe, responsible and consistent adult for a child or an adolescent to turn to is critical.

- Promote healthy sexuality development and communication with youth. Teach them how to set boundaries.

"Boundaries are a tool to keep us all safe," she noted. "Formal boundaries or rules can be, 'Children and adults do not take off their clothes to play.'"

Appropriate and positive interactions between adults and children include praise, positive reinforcement, pats on the back or shoulder, high fives, and brief, youth-initiated hugs.

Inappropriate or harmful interactions include sexually provocative or degrading

comments, risqué jokes, patting the buttocks, corporal punishment, threatening or demeaning behavior or language, intrusive questions, comments or observations and unwanted staring or watching.

Know normal to recognize abnormal

"When we know what is appropriate, it becomes easier to identify behaviors that could mean a child is vulnerable to abuse or is being abused or is even at risk themselves for harming another child," Coleman said.

"To know if something is a warning sign, you need to know what normal, healthy and expected sexual development looks like.

"Understanding healthy sexuality helps set healthy and safe boundaries. When you let children know what the limits are, the rules and the boundaries are, you are then educating and supporting them."

Coleman encourages parents to learn how to recognize concerning situations and behaviors.

"Learn about sexual abuse, because it's important to know what you are talking about," she said. "All sexual activity between an adult and a child IS sexual abuse.

"Sexual abuse does not have to involve penetration, force, pain or even touching. If an adult engages in any sexual behavior (looking, showing or touching) with a child to meet the adult's interest or sexual needs, it is sexual abuse.

"Showing pornography to a child or photographing a child in sexual poses are included. Consent cannot be given."

Too good to be true

Coleman advises parents and caregivers to watch out for adults that seem "too good to be true," such as someone who frequently babysits children for free, takes children on special outings alone and buys children gifts or toys for no apparent reason.

"Too good to be true is a warning sign," she said.

She also advises persons to make plans for safety, with information on the website on safety plans.

"We can have safety plans in our homes and communities that are calm, rational and actually just a lot of good common sense," she said. "It doesn't have to keep people in a paranoid place, like 'don't touch anyone, don't hug anyone,' but rather helps state what is expected and safe behavior.

"Basic prevention strategies and skills are good not only for preventing child sexual abuse, but for building an overall culture among persons responsible for children's education, athletics and care."

Coleman noted that training and skills enhance self-confidence and empower persons to speak up with not only their concerns, but their suggestions, ideas and thoughts.

"It's basic," she said. "When you know what to do, you are more likely to do something."

Abuser is usually known to the child

She also explained that in 90 percent of disclosed cases of sexual abuse, the person abusing was known to the child.

"There is no such thing as a 'typical' offender," she said. "An offender can be any age, economic background, race or culture, any religious belief and any gender or sexual orientation.

"These persons are probably well-known and liked by parents and children--a nice guy offender. They can be a man or a woman, married or single. They can be an adult, adolescent or a child.

"They can be a coach, teacher, family friend, parent, step-parent, relative, clergyman, babysitter or anyone who comes in contact with children."

Coleman said child sexual offenders are likely to be stable and employed, as well as a respectable member of the community.

"You cannot tell who abuses children sexually by

the way they look," she said. "Instead, be on the lookout for their actions--the behaviors that reflect that they potentially have sexual interest in children or that they have inappropriate boundaries with children.

"Focus on behavior that is visible and not intent--which is not visible."

KATHRYN HIRSCHFELD/STAFF

Stop It Now!

Director

Jenny Coleman

moved these cuts from 'CUTS Breaking Cycle Summary' to here; but photos will be in that folder--already fixed...

KATHRYN HIRSCHFELD/STAFF

Annual conference aims to help 'break cycle' of abuse

The 24th Annual Breaking the Cycle of Abuse Conference on child abuse prevention was held at the Bevill Center in Hamilton on April 8, with multiple keynote addresses and breakout workshops for attendees.

(___ photo) Conference Coordinator and Founder Woodfin Gregg was applauded by attendees for all his efforts throughout the years. He dedicated the 24th annual event to the memory of his former boss, the late Ron Gilliam. "Ron talked to us, not at us," Gregg said. "You always knew

Ron was the boss, but he didn't demand respect, he earned your respect."

Use "Woodfin Gregg" (for above cut)

Woodfin and Birt

KATHRYN HIRSCHFELD/STAFF

'A grand friend to children'

Timothy Birt of Dadeville (right), the director of Counseling and Therapy Services, commended Breaking the Cycle of Abuse Conference founder Woodfin Gregg during the April 8 event. "For 24 years, he's put on one of the best conferences in the state," Birt said. "He's brought wonderful skills and knowledge to this community and he's been a grand friend to children in the whole state and country. This is a model conference and we are so grateful for him." Birt also noted that Gregg would soon be retiring from his job with Northwest Alabama Mental Health's Hamilton Children's Services, "but not retiring from the conference."

PIX: Breaking Cycle Stop It Now Director

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