

4 WAYS TO PREVENT SEXUAL ABUSE, 3 FEB 2011

THE recent allegation of sexual abuse in a children's home in Penang as highlighted in the press, has brought to the fore a problem in some children's homes which is not often spoken about. While recognising the efforts taken by individuals, as well as state authorities, in setting up and managing children's homes across the country, the Women's Centre for Change, Penang (WCC), remains deeply concerned over incidences and allegations of sexual abuse in children's homes.

We offer the following suggestions which may help manage and reduce the risk of sexual abuse to children in these homes.

-Screening of staff and volunteers

Sexual offenders in homes are often the children's caregivers who work with or spend a lot of time with them. To help minimise the risk to the child, it is crucial that adequate screening or vetting of potential staff /volunteers be carried out before they are hired. The management board of these homes should also ensure that there is constant supervision and monitoring of staff and volunteers in their interaction with children.

-Empowerment of children in homes

Children are often powerless against a sexual offender, who is usually in a position of authority over the child. Their lack of knowledge of and confidence over their rights, their fear of being blamed and their lack of access to help mean that children can be easily exploited and manipulated by the offender. If we are to protect children, it is imperative that children be taught about the differences between good and bad touch or contact and about not keeping secrets. They must also be encouraged and empowered to seek help immediately should abuse take place.

For this to happen, children's homes need to operate within a framework in which children's rights and empowerment are central. This includes creating avenues where children are encouraged and taught how to raise and discuss problems they face by having weekly children's meetings with a trusted staff member or board member. Keeping children docile or subservient only serves to allow abuse to continue once it starts.

-Working with young offenders

Many of the children who live in children's homes come from difficult backgrounds where they have been victims of physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. Sometimes, a child who has been sexually abused in the past becomes an offender and sexually abuses a younger child or other children in the home. It would serve state and privately-funded children's homes to have trained staff who can identify and work with such children through intervention or therapeutic

programmes, to help the child heal from such trauma and to ensure that a cycle of abuse is not perpetuated.

-Reporting the abuse

Very often, a lack of awareness, disbelief or inaction by caregivers and board members in a children's home means that a sexual offender continues to have access to children, enabling the abuse to continue, often over many years, with devastating long-term impact on the children. Staff and management of children's homes must not only be vigilant over the possible occurrence of sexual abuse in their homes but respond immediately and appropriately when it happens.

Child protection, including risk management and reduction, are not jobs done by a single agency. Sexual offenders live and operate among us in a variety of ways. There is a dire need for all of us to be constantly vigilant. Children depend on us for their safety and wellbeing. We simply cannot let them down.

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