



PREVENT TOGETHER

The National Plan to Prevent
Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation



“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

– Nelson Mandela ”

“Imagine a disease that affects one in four girls and one in six boys before they reach 18... Imagine what we, as a society, would do if such a disease existed. We would spare no expense. We would invest heavily in basic and applied research. We would devise systems to identify those affected and provide services to treat them. We would develop and broadly implement prevention campaigns to protect our children. Would we? Such a disease does exist – it’s called child sexual abuse.”

– James A. Mercy, PhD
Director, Division of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ”



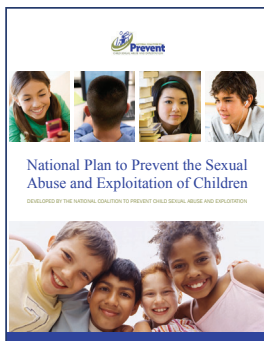
All children deserve childhoods free from sexual abuse and exploitation!



Prevent Together: The National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation is a collaborative membership organization composed of subject matter experts, researchers, and professionals from organizations in the field of abuse prevention with the mission to encourage, advocate and raise awareness in the United States through evidence-based research to promote prevention strategies to end child sexual abuse.



Learn more at www.PreventTogether.org



The National Plan was originally published in 2008 and updated in 2012. This updated Plan builds upon those previous versions and incorporates the collective expertise of Prevent Together members, including their knowledge, research, programs, and interventions focused on preventing child sexual abuse and online exploitation. View prior versions of the Plan at www.PreventTogether.org.

Reprints and Citations

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Introduction

About the National Plan

Prevent Together has developed this **National Plan to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation** (the Plan) to provide a framework – Six Pillars for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation – for effective, comprehensive, and holistic prevention interventions that are culturally sensitive, include survivor and marginalized voices, strengthen child-friendly environments for collective impact, and act as a catalyst for social change for protecting children from abuse.

The Critical Need for a National Plan

A National Plan is essential if individuals, organizations, communities, and society hope to achieve the goal of ensuring all children grow up free from sexual abuse and its devastating consequences.

The overarching goals of the Plan include:

- The widespread acknowledgment that child sexual abuse and exploitation is a public health epidemic that warrants the same level of response as other health crises.
- An increased level of attention on the importance and benefits of prevention.
- The establishment of a framework and a common language for prevention advocates to speak with a unified voice.
- The collective implementation of evidence-based strategies that engage adults, youth, organizations, and communities in both individual and collaborative change efforts that shift social movements from awareness to action.
- The reduction in the incidence, consequences, and costs of child sexual abuse and exploitation across all levels.

This plan is accessible to anyone interested in preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation. However, it was specifically developed to address the needs of Prevent Together members, youth serving organizations, prevention practitioners, legislators, funders, and key decision-makers. This updated Plan builds upon those previous versions and incorporates the collective expertise of members of Prevent Together, including their knowledge, research, programs, and interventions focused on preventing child sexual abuse and online exploitation.

The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Since the Plan was originally published, child sexual abuse continues to impact millions of children and adults in the United States. Nationally, reports to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) show that more than a quarter of a million children are sexually abused and exploited every year.¹ However, each state reports abuse differently, some states don't report at all, and none of the reports include child sexual exploitation or child sexual abuse materials online. Additionally, children often do not disclose abuse in childhood. Therefore, these numbers drastically underrepresent the actual rates of child sexual abuse and exploitation in the US.

Because there is no comprehensive national effort to document child sexual abuse and exploitation rates, there is a lot of variability in incidence and prevalence rates in various reports and publications. Regardless, those who work in child welfare and prevention know that the problem continues at an alarming rate and that much work remains to be done to prevent abuse before it happens. It is a sensitive and complex topic that individuals and communities often struggle to discuss and often lack access to adequate resources for effective response.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation is a public health epidemic shown to negatively impact personal, community, and societal well-being. The social-ecological model is a proven framework for violence prevention developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.² Within this model, child sexual abuse and exploitation has been shown to adversely impact individuals at the personal and relationship levels, including their physical, behavioral, and mental health, interpersonal relations, economic well-being, and more. Similarly, there are negative impacts to the well-being of communities and society. There is an increased burden across all systems in society: education, justice, medical, child welfare, and more. Additionally, there is an economic impact to society. Prior economic impact studies estimate the cost of child sexual abuse in the United States at \$9.3 billion annually.³ And historical trends have shown that the personal and societal costs continue to rise.

“...child sexual abuse survivors are overtly and covertly encouraged to remain silent. Family members and other caregivers will go to great lengths to deny, discredit, muzzle, medicate, or institutionalize the silence breakers. This must change. We need models of ‘love with accountability.’”

— Aishah Shahidah Simmons
Love WITH Accountability: Digging up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse

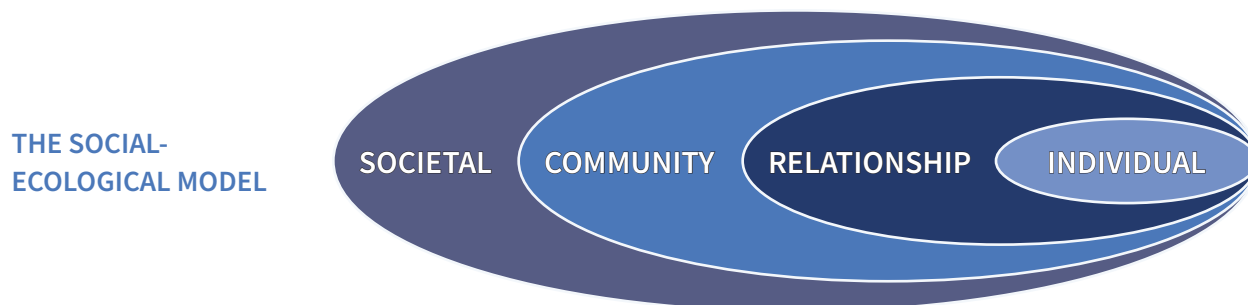
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¹ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/media/press/2020/2020/child-abuse-neglect-data-released>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/about/social-ecologicalmodel.html>

³ <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2018/one-years-losses-for-child-sexual-abuse-in-us-top-9-billion>

However, beyond the economic costs, even a single incident of child sexual abuse or exploitation can have extensive and prolonged consequences on an entire community and its citizens, relationships, and systems. Empirical evidence supports the positive impact child sexual abuse/exploitation prevention has on these same social-ecological domains. Thus, prevention efforts are critical and must include strategies at all levels: individual, relationship, community and societal.



The Focus of the National Plan

Many systems and resources focused on child sexual abuse and exploitation are short-term responses initiated after abuse has occurred, for example, victim services, investigation, prosecution, incarceration, mandated reporting, statutes of limitation, and registries. While these are valuable responses, the Plan focuses specifically on primary prevention—actions that take place before child sexual abuse or exploitation occurs.

It is tempting to try to identify one major policy or action to act as a catalyst for social change. However, primary prevention requires a broad, more inclusive strategy using knowledge from and action by multiple disciplines. Additionally, a problem as diverse and complex as child sexual abuse and exploitation requires multiple strategies and policies within different environments at a variety of levels. Given the complexity of preventing child sexual abuse, the Plan illustrates that every individual and organization has value and a role to play in contributing to the success of prevention, and it provides and promotes individual, community, and societal-level prevention strategies to accomplish that goal.

“Now, as a public, we need to mobilize the will to face this issue head on. When we don’t talk about it, abuse and injustice thrive. Removing taboos and starting an honest conversation around the realities of child sexual abuse will change the lives of thousands of children and defend millions more from exploitation.”

— Julie Cordua
CEO, Thorn ”



The Six Pillars for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Prevent Together’s **National Plan to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation** consists of *Six Pillars for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation* (the Six Pillars) that provide evidence-informed and culturally sensitive and competent strategies to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. They are the essential components of comprehensive, effective primary prevention efforts, and they are critical to develop effective preventative solutions, highlight where progress is needed, and promote factors that can drive change.

The Pillars are listed alphabetically, rather than in order of importance, as each Pillar is critical to effective prevention. While it is the totality of the Pillars that will have the most impact on preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation, it is also recognized that not everyone will or needs to be actively engaged with every Pillar. Collectively, with individuals, organizations, and coalitions focusing on these Six Pillars, we will stand the greatest chance of reaching the overall goal together.

Described under each Pillar are guiding principles and key objectives. The Pillars describe “What” we need to do to realize the overarching goal of preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation. The guiding principles explain “Why” the Pillar is essential. The key objectives identify “How” we accomplish this and describe how individuals, advocates, organizations, and legislators can work together to address and realize the Pillar. These are not exhaustive but offer a starting point for those working to implement the Pillars. Additional information and resources for specific target audiences across all social-ecological levels including strategies and actionable steps they can take, can be found on the Prevent Together website: www.PreventTogether.org.

“The single most important thing we need today is the courage to look this problem [of childhood trauma] in the face and say: ‘This is real. This is all of us.’”
— Nadine Burke Harris, MD, MPH, FAAP
Surgeon General, California”

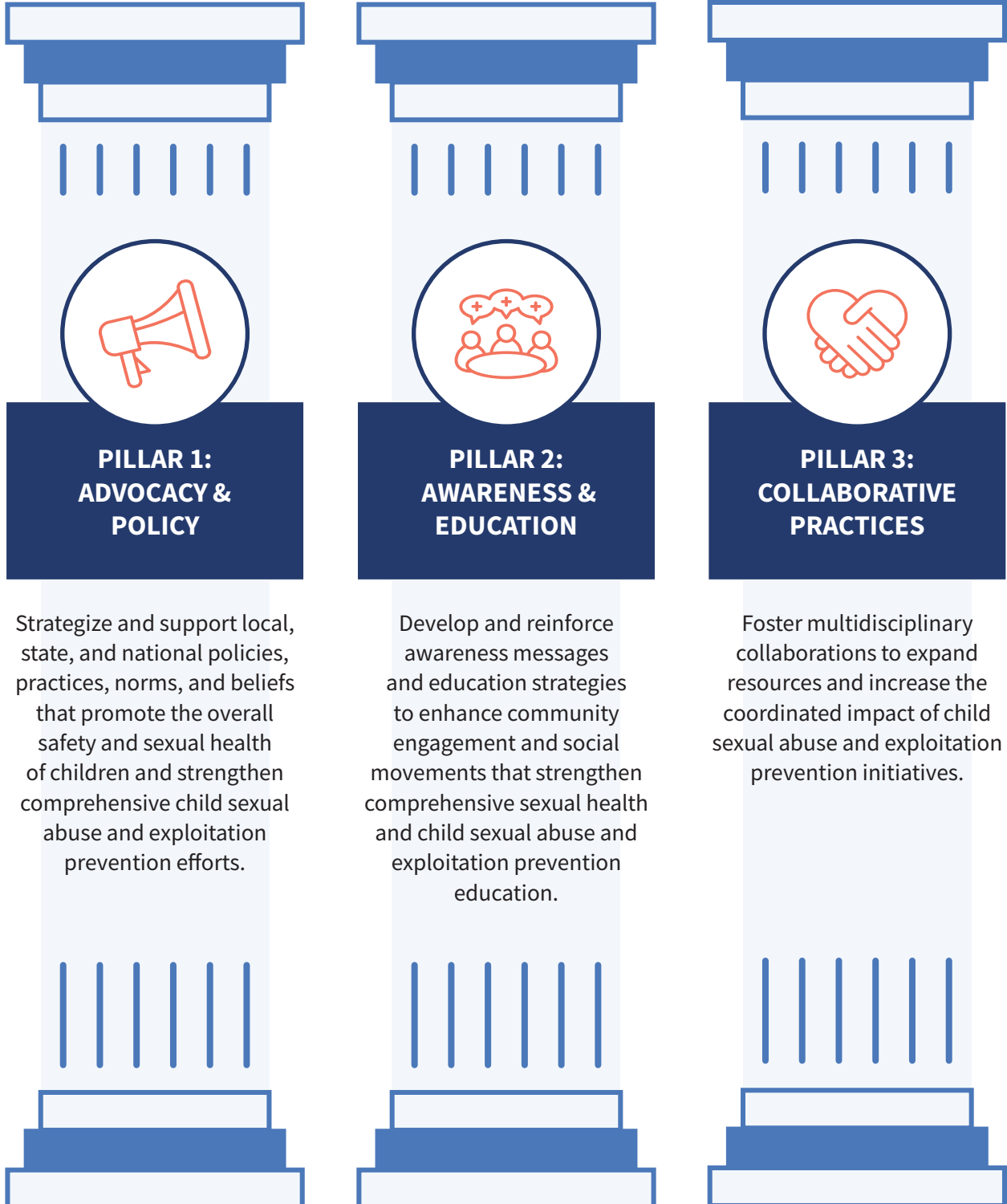
Prevent Together developed the Plan with the following foundational principles inherent throughout. We advocate that these principles inform and be integrated into all prevention efforts. Prevent Together believes that without these principles to guide the Plan, prevention will not be possible, leaving many vulnerable populations at risk.

- Prevent Together acknowledges that our call to end the silence towards child sexual abuse rings hollow if we do not also call to end the silence toward racial injustice. Diversity, equity, and inclusion must inform all focus areas of prevention strategy because it has been historically minimized.
- Prevention strategies should be inclusive, intersectional, and multi-disciplinary. Research must include marginalized and underrepresented groups using an intersectional lens that addresses cultural sensitivity (knowledge) and cultural competence (behavior).
- The voices of everyone, and specifically those with lived experiences of sexual abuse and those who have perpetrated sexual abuse and/or exploitation are critical to the success of prevention.
- Prevention strategies and research are constantly evolving and must be informed by those with lived experiences, advocates, practitioners, and subject matter experts.

The Six Pillars align with the goals and purpose of Prevent Together: The National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation.



Prevent Together's Six Pillars for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation



Prevent Together's Six Pillars for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation



**PILLAR 4:
FUNDING &
CAPACITY**

Advocate for and provide sufficient, committed, and sustainable funding to build organizational capacity and advance accessible and successful child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention measures.



**PILLAR 5:
ORGANIZATIONAL
POLICIES & PRACTICES**

Develop and reinforce comprehensive organizational policies, practices, norms, and beliefs that emphasize youth protection and the primary prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation.



**PILLAR 6:
RESEARCH**

Support, conduct, and disseminate high quality research that will inform child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention practices and amplify impact and outcomes.



Pillar 1: Advocacy & Policy

Strategize and support local, state, and national policies, practices, norms, and beliefs that promote the overall safety and sexual health of children and strengthen comprehensive child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention efforts.

Guiding Principles

Policies and practices that prioritize the protection of children and the prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation are essential to child health, safety, and well-being.

Policies and practices at all levels of the socio-ecological model must elevate the value of children and focus on ending the demand of children as sexual commodities, must address abuse/exploitation online and off, and must address harmful sexual behaviors by and between youth and by adults.

Policies and practices are most impactful when they are centered on child safety and primary prevention, directed to both adults and institutions, as well as children, evidence-informed, culturally sensitive, trauma-informed, and created with an intersectional lens to adapt and address the needs of marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Key Objectives

Identify and advance policies and practices that promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships for children in their homes and within broader environments to decrease risk of sexual abuse.

Advocate for policies that support efforts to prevent the initial perpetration of child sexual abuse and exploitation, to end the demand for children as sexual commodities, and that provide intervention and treatment for individuals at risk to perpetrate sexual abuse, including children and youth with problematic sexual behaviors.

Support policies for sustainable funding and standardized requirements for evidence-informed, quality prevention education that includes strategies that reinforce healthy development, behaviors, images, messages, relationships, and sexuality, and that are adaptable to the needs of local communities.

Promote policies that require schools and all types of youth-serving organizations to actively implement quality, comprehensive, evidence-informed policies, practices, and child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention initiatives.



Pillar 2: Awareness & Education

Develop and reinforce awareness messages and education strategies to enhance community engagement and social movements that strengthen comprehensive sexual health and child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention education.

Guiding Principles

Public awareness is most effective when paired with accessible and appropriate education and resources.

Holistic awareness messages that are positive, proactive, and include lived experiences shift perception, motivate individuals to action, and better impact change.

Widespread prevention education initiatives within fully engaged communities that are evidence-informed, culturally competent, and include evaluation strategies will have the most impact on changing societal norms and moving awareness to action.

Key Objectives

Promote awareness messages and prevention efforts that are inclusive, framed positively, and that can be personalized/customized for various stakeholders, including youth, experts, organizations, researchers, policymakers, and those with direct life experience.

Provide targeted messaging to the public and professionals in the field about the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, the effective impact of prevention on countering demand, and strategies to decrease the normalization of sexual harm.

Engage a variety of stakeholders in developing and distributing prevention education and communication strategies, including boys and men, youth, and survivors.

Develop, utilize, and promote prevention education that supports positive social norms and teaches strategies that foster protective factors and reinforce healthy development.

Support expansive community-based, and collaborative primary prevention initiatives to increase impact.



Pillar 3: Collaborative Practices

Foster multidisciplinary collaborations to expand resources and increase the coordinated impact of child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention initiatives.

Guiding Principles

Collective efforts that include knowledge from a variety of sources, multidisciplinary approaches and diverse perspectives, experiences, and cultural contexts add value, strengthen outcomes, and lead to expanded reach.

Collaboration exponentially shifts the norms associated with the sexual harm of children and maximizes the impact of prevention efforts.

Grassroots and innovative collaborations are important for aligning missions, strengthening the impact of advocacy and prevention efforts, and for building capacity.

Key Objectives

Standardize evidence-based/evidence-informed prevention practices and create common prevention language and goals.

Align and expand resources to foster successful prevention initiatives and improve collective impact.

Promote and engage in local, state, and national coordination to avoid duplication of services, strengthen outcomes, and expand reach.

Engage all sectors within a community and include a wide variety of stakeholders and industries as potential partners, including local business and community leaders, education, media, faith-based groups, and include survivors as leaders.

“You don’t have many police officers who are going to speak up and say, I was a victim of child sexual abuse, I am a survivor. I had a desire to be a police officer because all I wanted to do was put abusers in jail. I have since learned how important education is, prevention is and my goal is to reach as many people as I can by sharing my own story.”

— Lakesha Burton
Survivor

Assistant Chief, Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office”



Pillar 4: Funding & Capacity

Advocate for and provide sufficient, committed, and sustainable funding to build organizational capacity and advance accessible and successful child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention measures.

Guiding Principles

Adequate funding along the entire continuum of prevention (research, policy, programs, awareness, evaluation) is essential to the success of evidence-based, scalable, and replicable efforts to prevent and end sexual harm to children.

Prevention is amplified when funders invest in organizations demonstrating their commitment to child protection as well as those who participate in innovative and collaborative projects.

Capacity building supports the sustainable growth of organizations - operationally, programmatically, and financially, to effectively advance prevention.

Key Objectives

Advocate for sustainable public and private funding at local, state, and national levels that strategically focuses on primary prevention.

Demonstrate and communicate the economic cost of abuse/exploitation and the investment in prevention as a benefit to communities and society.

Adequately fund across all prevention efforts including evidence-informed policies, advocacy, awareness, research, programs, and practices to minimize scarcity and ensure equitable distribution of resources.

Expand capacity for prevention-focused efforts by prioritizing adequate resources that are adaptable to current needs.

“Child sexual abuse and exploitation are huge factors in children’s health and in the broader public health. A culture that values its children invests in its children. It’s time to invest in the prevention of such abuse.”

— Sharon Cooper, M.D.
Chief Executive Officer, Developmental and Forensic Pediatrics”



Pillar 5: Organizational Policies & Practices

Develop and reinforce comprehensive organizational policies, practices, norms, and beliefs that emphasize youth protection and the primary prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Guiding Principles

Organizational policies and practices that prioritize the healthy sexual development of children and the prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation create safer environments for children.

Policies and practices that inform and address all levels of the social-ecological model are more effective.

Organizations have greater impact on youth protection when they create a culture of support and accountability.

Key Objectives

Establish and enforce organizational policies and practices regarding child safety that are standardized, evidence based, and child centered.

Ensure policies and practices extend to organizational attitudes, behaviors, norms, and beliefs by establishing an overall culture that prioritizes child safety.

Provide meaningful, effective, and ongoing training to all relevant stakeholders on policies and practices, as well as topics related to child safety.

Commit to regular and transparent reviews and updates of policies and practices.

Ensure policies and practices are communicated to staff and other professional caregivers, as well as parents and guardians.

Build collaborative, community, and family partnerships that elevate the value of children and promote comprehensive prevention education, practices, and support.

Ensure resources and strategies address harmful sexual behaviors by adults and between youth.



Pillar 6: Research

Support, conduct, and disseminate high quality research that will inform child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention practices and amplify impact and outcomes.

Guiding Principles

Empirical evidence informs effective prevention strategies and must be a priority in abuse/exploitation prevention efforts.

Effective prevention practices are best informed by quality research that is current, rigorous, ethical, and transparent.

Collective understanding of victimization and perpetration (i.e., causes, risk factors, protective factors) depends on quality research.

Key Objectives

Conduct research to better understand the scope, trends, risk factors, and consequences of sexual abuse/exploitation and advance the effectiveness and implementation of primary prevention.

Adequately fund new and ongoing research to build and expand upon relevant evidence.

Share and communicate current, quality research and promote dialogue about how research informs current practices and strategies in development.

Translate, disseminate and utilize research to inform and support all types of programmatic policy, advocacy, awareness, prevention, and practice efforts.

“In the U.S., child sexual abuse ranks twelfth among preventable risk factors that account substantively for the U.S. burden of disease, but there has been little research looking specifically at the economic burden of child sexual abuse.”

— Elizabeth J. Letourneau, PhD
Professor, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Director, Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse”

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