

Hunterdon, Warren group aims to protect children from sex abuse, bullying

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By [Teresa Fasanello/Hunterdon Democrat](#)



TEACHING CAUTION, CAP facilitator Walt Steele of Bethlehem Twp. urges these kindergartners at Tewksbury Elementary School to keep their distance from strangers. The kids are (from left) Vivian Vaz, Natalie Fry, Tori Sebastiano, CJ Gordon, Griffin Mills and Mathew Melick. (Photo by George Pacciello/staff photographer)

One in every four girls is sexually abused before age 14, and one in every six boys is sexually abused before age 16, according to the New Jersey Child Assault Prevention project.

"People, especially in Hunterdon County, do not realize that child abuse is happening here in our own backyard," said Bethlehem Township resident Deborah Wilson, who coordinates CAP in Hunterdon and Warren counties. It's hosted here by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Metuchen.

"For most parents and many teachers, talking with a child about potentially abusive situations is a difficult proposition," she said. "The good news is that there are ways to talk to children that will not increase their fear but actually will help them feel safer and more confident."

CAP instructors visit schools to talk to children about bullying, online sexual harassment and abuse. In each kindergarten through sixth grade classroom, CAP instructors role-play to teach children about their rights by acting out examples of bullying, assault by a stranger and abuse by an adult they know. They act out "unsuccessful" and "successful" attempts to avoid abuse, so that children learn defense strategies. Seventh- and eighth-graders are also taught how to avoid date rape and other forms of abuse. About 90% of the time, sexual assault is perpetrated by an adult that the child knows and may even trust, Wilson said.

Bethlehem Township resident Walt Steele has been involved in child abuse prevention efforts for eight years. "Children should be armed with the knowledge of how to keep themselves safe from harm," he said. "We teach them strategies on how to stay safe in bullying situations, in stranger attacks as well as assaults from a known adult. We encourage them to say 'no' to anyone, even an adult, if someone is hurting or frightening them."

Children are taught the "CAP safety yell," which Wilson describes as a deep noise that comes from the diaphragm. Unlike a high-pitched scream that could be mistaken for a noise a child might make while playing, the CAP yell is a distinctive way to sound an alarm and even scare an attacker, she said. She remembers meeting one kindergartner whose older brother had taught him the CAP yell. One day, a stranger tried to grab the kindergartner, but he sounded the CAP yell and got away, she said.

Linda Lubben, a former superintendent at Holland and Franklin township schools, has worked with CAP for six years. Sometimes, children tell CAP presenters that they have been abused, and the child's statement is immediately reported to the authorities. "We just hope that child is safer," she said.

Wilson offers advice for parents when talking to children:

Don't use scare tactics: Talking about a recent abuse or abduction story does not give children any strategies to protect themselves. Instead, it reduces their confidence. Talking about "how to stay safe" is better than talking about "stranger danger." Using phrases such as "safe and unsafe touches" is better than using phrases like "sexual abuse and molestation."

Teach about rights and boundaries: Children need to know that they possess "inalienable" rights, especially when it comes to their bodies. Adults should not be allowed to touch children in any way that makes the child uncomfortable. While some unwanted touches may not be abusive — like a pinch on the cheek by a well-meaning relative — the child always has the right to say "no" and ask the adult to stop. This promotes healthy self-respect and helps children stop inappropriate advances on their body boundaries, even as teens in a dating situation. At the same time, children should be taught not to hit, bully or touch peers or adults in ways which take their rights away.

Let them know they don't have to keep "unsafe" secrets: Surprise parties and celebration gifts are "safe secrets" — they don't make a child feel afraid. These secrets can be kept. But secrets that make a child feel scared, confused or ashamed need to be shared with a trusted adult. Be a "trusted adult" for your children: If children know they can talk to you about anything, they are less likely to keep secrets that may hurt them. Finally, be an example of someone who respects the rights of others.

For more information, see njcap.org or contact Wilson at hunterdoncountycap@yahoo.com.