

## **Enhancing Community Collaboration to Stop Sexual Harm by Youth**

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This presentation provides a structured framework for creating a comprehensive, community-based response to sexual harm by youth. The purpose is to illustrate how collaboration with youth, families, and all service providers can enhance integration of empirically based practices that influence successful outcomes.

Evidence-based studies are increasingly guiding treatment reform in youth violence prevention and sexual harm by youth (Thornton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2002; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Borduin & Schaeffer, 2001). These studies are influencing a paradigm shift in service provision. Research indicates that “most adolescent sex offenders pose a manageable level of risk to the community” (Chaffin, Bonner, & Pierce, 2003, p. 2) and professional literature consistently acknowledges the importance of a holistic, multidisciplinary approach for harm reduction (Schladale, 2006).

While many professionals are committed to collaboration, implementation can be quite challenging. Collaboration requires a shared commitment between agency personnel and family members to actively support a youth’s efforts to stop sexual harm. Such an approach sends a clear message that caring adults can work together in the youth’s best interest. Providing a range of services, and maintaining genuine commitment to a therapeutic process, can occur in a variety of creative and cost-effective ways.

American values and beliefs greatly impact community responses to sexual harm by youth. Historically, responses have swung like a pendulum between “boys will be boys” laissez-faire attitudes of doing nothing to gross overreaction in which young children are referred to as sexual predators. When normal youthful sexual experimentation is addressed in the same way as criminal sexual behavior, communities are at risk of causing greater harm and injustice. Community collaboration for addressing sexual harm by youth must address a range of vital issues in order to provide a reasoned approach for determining the existence and extent of sexual harm, enhancing sexual health and well being for everyone.

Personnel from juvenile justice, social services, and private agencies are challenged to provide a congruent approach to all youth, family and social support members in order to provide a cohesive message that reflects a research based philosophy of care. This philosophy embraces an assumption that many people working together have a greater opportunity for success than a few working in isolation.

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Collaborating with family members in the creation of treatment goals, and monitoring progress towards those goals, solidifies a working relationship based upon constructive interdependence. When staff from all facets of service delivery work together to provide such collaboration, everyone benefits. Children and families get needs met and staff experiences the satisfaction of a job well done.

This workshop integrates empirically driven, and evidence-based practices on youth violence prevention and competency development (Thornton, et.al., 2002; Torbet & Thomas, 2005). It emphasizes a youth's ecological foundation through inclusion of biological and extended family, as well as relevant neighbors, church, school and community members.

A number of considerations are discussed about how community collaboration can:

- Contribute to the reduction of sexual harm.
- Involve all relevant service providers in a way that enhances successful outcomes.
- Enhance disposition for determining least restrictive placement.
- Be woven into the fabric of services and guide continuous treatment planning and progress.
- Illuminate a framework for assessment, and transition planning across the full continuum of care.
- Be cost effective.

The format and handouts will provide a template for organizing the myriad array of information that multiple systems of care are challenged to integrate into a comprehensive response for these youth and families. This presentation can be extended in order to provide more comprehensive information.

#### References

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