

EVIDENCE GAP MAP OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO CHILD MALTREATMENT

Summary of individual study:

Hoefnagels (2021)

Skinny cell(s) in which this study appears:

Intervention = Disclosure; Outcome = Adult Institutional Care Provider

Summary: Disclosure-focussed intervention improves primary school students' recognition and talkability on child abuse and neglect, but study rated high risk of bias.

The summary is based on **Hoefnagels et al. (2021)**¹ 'Changing the classroom climate to lower the threshold for child abuse and neglect self-disclosure: a non-randomized cluster-controlled trial.'

Evidence status	High risk of bias	Child recognition and talkability on abuse and neglect and teacher reporting self-disclosure by students improves but study has high risk of bias
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The summary in brief

The intervention aimed to set the conditions for children to disclose abuse and encourage / enable other children to do so. It targeted primary school children (10-12 years) in the Netherlands and aimed to improve (a) children's recognition of child abuse and neglect (CAN) and (b) "talkability" on CAN (i.e., children's ability and willingness to talk about it). The idea was that encouraging students to talk about CAN would eventually lead to increased disclosure and hence reduced child maltreatment.

The intervention was delivered by the students' regular primary school teachers. It targeted schools where parental educational levels were low. Teachers were trained in the intervention, which consisted of four interactive lessons, along with video clips and TV content on CAN. The lessons focussed on various types of abuse: physical, emotional and neglect. The nine schools in the control group continued their usual practices.

The intervention significantly improved both students' recognition of CAN and talkability. Children from Dutch origin families were likely to do better at recognizing CAN than those from non-Western migrant backgrounds. Students of teachers that had experience talking to parents about CAN also were more likely to recognize CAN.

Talkability was more likely when children perceived it as a social norm and when they used social coping strategies to process their feelings.

¹ Hoefnagels, C., Onrust, S., van Rooijen, M., Jonkman, H., van Spanje-Hennes, A., & Breeman, L. D. (2021). Changing the classroom climate to lower the threshold for child abuse and neglect self-disclosure: a non-randomized cluster controlled trial. *Children and youth services review, 130*, 106196.

The study also recorded actual disclosures. Teachers in the intervention group reported more disclosures by children during the intervention month (five) compared to the control group (one).

Type of study: QED (non-randomised cluster-controlled trial, i.e., the 'unit' was schools (who either got the intervention or didn't) rather than individual classes or students). Peer-reviewed journal article.

The intervention

The intervention ran in 2013. An instructional program was delivered by the students' regular teacher. It featured a preliminary session and four CAN lessons, along with materials such as an informational flyer for parents, posters in classrooms, and curriculum information for teachers. Teachers were encouraged to be well prepared, due to the delicate subject matter, the potential responses from students, and their own emotional responses to CAN. They were also given access to resources for assistance within and outside their schools and on steps on how to act if any of their students disclose CAN. Teachers also had access to written materials on the topic to improve their knowledge and awareness.

The lessons for children included:

- A preparatory lesson on "personal moments of happiness" with their parents or caregivers
- Lesson one was on neglect
- Lesson two on physical abuse
- Lesson three on seeking help
- Lesson four involved the development of a logo on the theme "Child maltreatment: you can do something about it".

Lessons were interactive, with video clips and depicted child maltreatment situations (by actors). Teachers paused at multiple points to discuss with their students on how they felt.

How is the programme meant to work? The theory of change

The authors mention that based on social cognitive theory when disclosure about CAN is considered as positive from a social norms perspective this can contribute to lowering the threshold on 'talkability' of these delicate topics. Children are more likely to disclose when they feel they will be believed.

Has the intervention been implemented at scale?

No. Only 21 of nearly 7000 primary schools in the Netherlands were part of the study.

What does the intervention cost?

The study does not report any data on cost.

The study

Participants: Primary school students aged 10-12 years, across the Netherlands. The schools (a) were selected to have low educational levels of parents and (b) opted in. Recruitment was stopped when 35 schools agreed to participate. In the end, 21 schools were in the study.

Study design: The study had two groups:

- a) Nine schools were the control group and did not implement the intervention.
- b) The remaining schools ran the intervention.

Outcomes: The main outcomes measured were:

1. CAN recognition: Students were shown vignettes of children in a bad situation and asked “Do you recognize this as maltreatment?” with “Yes, No or Maybe” as the possible answers.
2. CAN talkability: Children were asked “Did you talk about child maltreatment after school in the last month?” with a “Yes or No” response solicited.

The study measured outcomes before the intervention began and immediately after it ended.

The number of actual disclosures during the period was also recorded. At the beginning of the study, nearly half of the children were not sure if other children were comfortable talking about CAN.

Did the intervention work?

The intervention improved both students’ recognition of CAN and talkability. It appears also to have increased disclosures.

✓ A: Recognition of CAN:

- The odds of children in the intervention group recognizing the vignettes as related to CAN were more than three times those for children in the control group.
- The intervention group children had a higher chance (2-3 times) of recognizing physical and emotional abuse compared to neglect.
- Children of Dutch origin were twice as likely to recognize CAN than were children from non-Western immigrant families.
- Many factors did not affect students’ recognition of CAN. They include:
 - Children’s views on whether the child was to blame, views on whether the teacher would believe their disclosure, whether another student had disclosed to them previously, whether the child would inform someone if they saw what was happening in the vignette happening to another child, perceived social norms, level of parental education, children’s sex, and ethnicity.

- The teacher’s beliefs on CAN, the teacher’s experience dealing with CAN allegations, or previous interaction with youth medical services regarding CAN.
- However, students of teachers who had more contact with parents regarding CAN were more likely to recognize CAN.

✓ **B: Talkability of CAN:**

- Similar to recognition, children who received the intervention were nearly three times more likely to talk about CAN than children in the control group.
- Children who perceived talkability as a social norm and used coping skills (measured using the ‘*Children’s Coping Strategies Checklist*’) to address their feelings, had a higher odds of talking about CAN. The other variables assessed were not significant.
- Only one teacher variable seemed to affect children’s talkability on CAN: “whether they (teachers) had contacts with youth medical services regarding CAN”. The authors also report “tentative evidence” that talkability promotes self-disclosure.
- On actual disclosures, five teachers in the intervention group reported children confiding in them on CAN during the study period compared to only one teacher in the control group.

Generalisability

No information is provided about this, and it is not discussed in the study report.

How reliable is the evidence?

The study is rated as having a high (serious) risk of bias, with concerns on multiple domains:

Overall risk of bias	Confounding	Selection bias	Intervention classification	Deviation in intervention	Missing data	Outcome measurement	Reporting bias
Serious	Low	Moderate	Serious	Low	Low	Low	Low

Cells in which this study appears:

The study relates to disclosure:

- Intervention = Disclosure; Outcome = Disclosure: Child Maltreatment Disclosure

- Intervention = Disclosure; Outcome = Child Knowledge and Awareness