

Promoting Change through Affect Regulation: Applying Research to Practice

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The purpose of this presentation is to show how applying vital research on affect regulation for youth and families can effectively stop sexual harm.

Affect regulation is at the core of all violence prevention. It is a person's ability to manage emotions without causing harm (Schore, 2003). When young people are not taught pro-social ways to manage upsetting emotions they are at risk of behaving in harmful ways. Dysregulation occurs when emotions, or feelings, are managed in ways that cause harm to self or others.

Affect regulation and dysregulation are not user-friendly terms. It can be hard to remember both the terms and what they mean. Information for practical application and user-friendly ways to both teach young people affect regulation and support competency development in such important behavior are vital to stopping sexual harm by youth.

The presentation will summarize pertinent research in handouts and PowerPoint slides. It will illustrate how to apply the findings in a broad range of settings such as community and residential services, schools, and juvenile justice activities. Experiential activities will be used as examples of how to successfully introduce affect regulation to youth and families and support their practice.

Vulnerabilities

Developmental vulnerabilities may influence dysregulation and impede affect regulation. The *Center For Disease Control* (Thornton, et. al., 2002) identifies vulnerabilities that place children at risk of behaving violently. These include: poor interaction between parents and children as early as the first year of life; emotionally distressed parents involved in anti-social behaviors; marital conflict and poor communication; parental criminal and violent behavior; alcohol and substance abuse; child abuse and neglect; harsh inconsistent discipline; poor parental supervision; violent neighborhoods; witnessing violence; learning problems; school absenteeism; bullying, or being the target of bullying; and being arrested before age 14. Any of these factors can contribute to difficulties with self-regulation that may influence sexual behavior problems.

These are critical factors in understanding how to eliminate sexual harm. Knowing such important information can inform all elements of prevention. For primary prevention, these are experiences we want to prevent from happening in the lives of all children. From a secondary, and tertiary prevention perspective these are issues to be addressed as soon as possible in order to prevent vulnerable youth from developing sexual behavior problems, and preventing recidivism with those youth who have already misbehaved sexually.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NTCSN) identifies seven primary domains of impairment. They are: attachment, biology, affect regulation, dissociation, behavioral regulation, cognition and self-concept (Cook, Blaustein, Spinazzola, & van der Kolk, 2003). This same research indicates that complex trauma results in a variety of problems, including: self-regulatory, attachment, anxiety, affective disorders in infancy and childhood, addictions, aggression, social helplessness, eating disorders, dissociative, cardiovascular, metabolic, and immunological disorders, sexual disorders, and revictimization.

Many children with sexual behavior problems and youth committing acts of sexual harm exhibit a range of these symptoms. Learning how to practice affect regulation is critical for sexual health and well-being.

Solutions

Many sources identify research-based factors recommended for intervention with youth who have caused sexual harm. Key components consistently include **affect regulation** (Schore, 2003; Groves, 2002; Schladale & Langan, 2012; Stien & Kindall, 2004; Torbet & Thomas, 2005; Van der Kolk; 2004); **social skills development** (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Thornton et al., 2002; Torbet & Thomas, 2005); **social problem solving, including resolving interpersonal disputes** (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001; Thornton et al., 2002; Torbet & Thomas, 2005); and **social perspective taking to enhance empathy for and sensitivity to the impact of harm on victims, families and communities** (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). These are all directly related to affect regulation and are known to influence successful outcomes. All address affect regulation, competency development, and youth violence prevention, which will be the highlights of this presentation.

Participants who attend this presentation will be able to:

- Describe empirical evidence that guides interventions to stop sexual harm by youth
- Identify core components of evidence-based practices for prevention
- Apply cost effective strategies for engaging and motivating youth and families to stop sexual harm.

Abbreviated References

Cook, A., Balustein, M., Spinazzola, J. and van der Kilk, B. (2003). Complex trauma in children and adolescents. White Paper for the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Complex Trauma Task Force. Nctsn.org

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