

THE STAY SAFE PROGRAMME AT ST. JOHN'S SCHOOL.

“Children with Special Needs are up to seven times more likely to experience sexual abuse than children without Special Needs.”

After consultation with parents, teachers and childcare workers the Child Abuse Prevention Programme has adapted the “Stay Safe Programme” for use in Special Education. The staff at this school has had the benefit of In-service courses and we are committed to teaching the programme on an on-going basis.

The Stay Safe Programme is an attempt to give children the knowledge, skills and confidence to protect themselves from harm, especially from physical injury, severe neglect and sexual or emotional abuse. We use the programme throughout the school.

It is very important that parents/guardians know about the programme so that they may support us; they should reinforce our teaching by taking time/opportunities at home to discuss safety skills.

There are five main topics in the Stay Safe Programme: Feeling Safe and Unsafe, Bullying, Touches, Telling and Secrets, and Strangers. However, before we teach it we feel that we must first teach the pupils about:

1. Feelings ~ happy, confident, safe, unsafe, frightened, sad, angry, lonely
2. Self-esteem/self worth ~ this depends on unconditional love and affection; it also depends on well-defined limits, consistently enforces at home and at school. Respect is also important among children, among adults and in all adult/child relationships.

Some suggestions to improve self-esteem:

Let children be part of some decision-making; get them to express preferences; compliment them and teach them to accept a compliment graciously; discuss ideas/events and respect their opinions; give them responsibility; be positive~ emphasise their strengths.

ABOVE ALL be respectful when speaking to children; we find in school that our pupils respond well when we ask them to do something rather than tell them.

3. Assertiveness: Saying “No” without being aggressive.
4. Teach them social skills ~ to be clean, neatly dressed; importance of health, manners, good behaviour.
5. Give them an understanding of boundaries; “mine”, “private”, “personal”.
6. Language and vocabulary to describe their feelings, describe events.

Throughout the Stay Safe Programme it is important to teach our pupils that others must feel safe in their company. Special Needs pupils, especially those with limited intelligence may be open to suggestion; they may have reduced sense of responsibility, so as parents and teachers we must be particularly vigilant. They may be too trusting of adults; they may be under the impression that all conflicts are solved by physical means; they may lack the confidence/ability to speak up.

Bullying/Physical Injury: Children are taught that “nobody should hurt me by hitting me”, “nobody should frighten me by hitting me or hurting me”. They are also taught to know the difference between play and bullying, also that accidents occur in which they may be hurt unintentionally. Children are also taught about hurtful comments, mocking and teasing.

Role-play, stories etc. are used to get children to consider the possible instances at school, at play, on school buses, at home (and every other place used by children).

In all parts of the Stay Safe Programme children are taught that “I do not have to put up with this”, “I should not be afraid to speak up”. They are to be taught to speak to somebody they trust, in private if necessary, i.e. parent, teacher, aunt, older brother/sister etc. As they grow older they will learn, we hope, that there is a difference between “tell-taling”(or squealing), and informing a trusted adult about behaviour which is upsetting. They are taught to tell again and again, if necessary, until someone takes steps to put a stop to the worrying, upsetting behaviour.

Teachers are vigilant during school activities and will weigh up the seriousness of any instances of physical injury which come to their notice. If necessary they will report same to parents/guardians, or other relevant authority, e.g. H.S.E. Social Worker. Incidentally, much of the above has always been a feature of our school life.

Strangers: As teachers and parents we must accept the principle of keeping children safe; our pupils, who are more vulnerable due to their limited intellectual functioning should also be taught that if they are anywhere or in any situation where they feel lost, unsafe or threatened, they should tell someone; this someone should be someone who belongs, i.e. the lady in the sweetshop, the man in the Garda uniform, the lollipop lady etc.

Sexual Abuse: As part of the effort children are taught the proper names for their genital/private areas i.e. penis, bottom, breasts etc. This does not mean we discourage the use of other labels, but at least the children know the correct names. They are taught that in some cases the touching of genitals/private areas is acceptable; these cases should be specified i.e. at bath-time, for medical purposes by parent/guardian, doctor/nurse. Children are taught that other touching/fondling of genitals of children (or by children) is not acceptable.

Role-play, stories, discussion of situations etc. should be used to underline what we mean by inappropriate touches. Parents and teachers should agree about the age (generally) when children should attend to their toileting.

General guidelines are given to all children about keeping themselves covered, especially as they grow up. Girls are encouraged to sit in a way that their underwear is not on show. Boys are encouraged to keep their “fly” closed.

Regarding all parts of the adapted Stay Safe Programme, we aim for the same consistent approach from school staff, parents and other family members.

Teachers are always available to discuss aspects of this programme.