

Breaking the cycle: building prevention capacity

Preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) requires proactive measures to stop harm before it occurs and promote a culture of transparency and responsibility. It is about setting clear standards for those working with children, equipping adults with training to recognize the warning signs and intervene and giving young people the tools to speak up if something feels wrong. Youth organizations should adopt robust policies for reporting, investigating and disciplining misconduct to ensure reports are taken seriously and offenders are prevented from committing future harm in the same or a different setting.

Why this matters

Prioritizing prevention not only has the potential to ensure more children grow up free from sexual violence, but also to shape smarter strategies. Research shows that people convicted of sex offenses are less likely to be rearrested or go back to prison compared with those convicted of other crimes,¹ with some estimates suggesting only about 5% of sex crimes are committed by those with prior sex convictions.² Therefore, while robust responses to abuse that has already occurred are essential, preventing first-time offenses must be elevated to a critical priority. Prevention is also a cost-effective approach to reducing the substantial economic burden linked to CSAE, including costs related to health care, child welfare services, lost productivity and suicide—estimated at billions of dollars each year.³

Boost prevention capacity by:

- Requiring schools and other youth-serving organizations to adopt clear policies outlining standards and expectations for pre-service screening, interactions with youth and responses to misconduct
- Mandating training on child sexual abuse and teen dating violence for educators and other key adults to help them recognize and respond to abuse
- Requiring age-appropriate and evidence-based child sexual abuse prevention education for students in grades K–12
- Engaging parents and caregivers on child sexual abuse prevention through school-led initiatives



Mapping the policy landscape

Promoting a culture of accountability

Institutionalized policies can play a critical role in preventing misconduct in youth-serving organizations. Rigorous screening standards can help ensure that individuals with histories of misconduct do not move unnoticed between institutions, while codes of conduct clarify acceptable boundaries and behaviors when interacting with children and teens. Detailed reporting and investigation policies help further clarify the channels for reporting abuse, outline responsibilities and specify the actions that must be taken in response to a report of sexual misconduct.

Yet only a third of states (17) have developed or adopted educator codes of conduct or ethics that set clear standards, guidance and examples for maintaining appropriate boundaries with students.¹ Meanwhile, just 18 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) have enacted laws to tackle educator sexual misconduct by setting standardized screening measures for new hires and stopping practices that can conceal abuse—such as allowing resignations or retirement in lieu of formal investigations or legal action.⁴

How states can do it: models to follow

Enough Abuse[®] has developed a range of resources to help schools and organizations strengthen safety and reduce organizational liabilities, including:

- [Model legislation](#) to help schools adopt stronger, more standardized screening practices for prospective employees and prohibit the use of confidentiality agreements to conceal sexual misconduct or enable offending employees to obtain new positions.
- [Code of Conduct Policy Guide](#) for schools and for youth-serving organizations that detail over 30 specific adult boundary-violating behaviors that should be prohibited to prevent employee-perpetrated child sexual abuse and sexual misconduct. Appropriate behaviors that should be encouraged and reinforced are also included.

¹ This reflects the number of states that have established a statewide Educator Code of Conduct or Ethics, or require all schools to maintain a policy on appropriate educator–student interactions, that includes specific guidance and examples of boundary violating behaviors. It does not include states with a Code of Conduct or Ethics if it only specifies that teachers should not engage in sexual conduct with students, but does not provide further information or examples of prohibited boundary violating behaviors.

Training professionals to spot the warning signs

Those working in schools and youth organizations are often well-positioned to spot signs that a child may be vulnerable to or experiencing grooming or abuse at school or at home.⁵ However, myths and misconceptions about sexual violence may obscure adults from recognizing signs of abuse, while others may delay acting on initial warning signs and only report abuse once the harm has occurred.⁶

Notably, recent research found that “grooming behaviors”—such as seemingly innocent touch or engaging in discretion while touching—were present in 100% of educator sexual abuse cases.⁷ This underscores the importance of training for adults who work with children that not only equips them to respond appropriately to disclosures of harm, but also to recognize red flags and question inappropriate conduct or behavior they may observe.

Despite the importance of such training, notable gaps remain. Less than half of states (24) and D.C. have laws requiring schools to provide specific training for school employees on child sexual abuse awareness and prevention, 18 of which mandate this instruction before they can start work or on an ongoing basis. A further 12 states encourage schools to provide this training, but do not require it. Training requirements for employees of other organizations providing educational or recreational services or activities to youth are less common. Vermont and Texas are the only states that mandate such training by law for employees of daycare centers, while another three states have laws encouraging this training in daycare settings. Texas is the only state that mandates training on child sexual abuse for all youth camp employees having direct contact with campers.

“If we wait until [child sexual abuse] cases are reported in schools or in youth organizations, we have already failed. There are so many red flags, so many grooming and boundary violating behaviors that we know about. If we educate professionals and parents about the signs to look for, it’s so much easier to prevent child sexual abuse before it ever occurs.”

Jetta Bernier, Executive Director, Enough Abuse

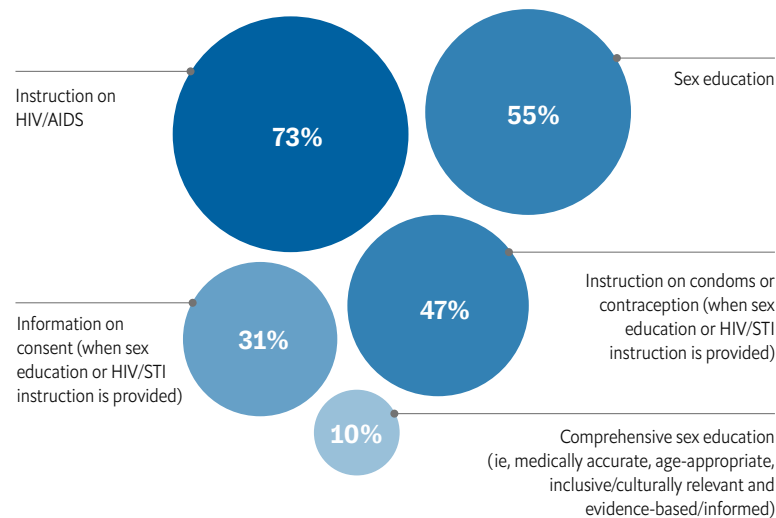


“Sex education is foundational to helping individuals learn how to navigate relationships with respect and integrity. This needs to happen from a young age to help kids understand that they have the right to give consent to somebody else touching their body, but also to withhold consent to somebody else touching their body. This is foundational to... the way they manage and navigate consent in friendships as kids and, later in life, in sexual and romantic relationships.”

Christine Soyong Harley, President & CEO, SIECUS

Figure 1: The state of sex education

U.S. states with laws requiring specific content and standards in sex education and HIV/STI instruction (%)



Source: SIECUS

Mind the sex education gap

The case for sex education is a strong one. Sex education is critical to giving children and adolescents the information they need to understand their bodies, sexual development and to make safer and healthier decisions.⁸ It also helps reduce the likelihood of sexual risk behaviors, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and teen pregnancy.⁹ Despite these benefits, 23 states do not require sex education.ⁱⁱ In these states, decisions on sex education and its content may be left to local school boards, advisory committees or even individual teachers.

Sex education: what is missing?

A 2024 survey by SIECUS revealed that 17% of Americans never had any kind of sex education in school, while 20% believe “their education (or lack thereof) led to dangerous sexual practices or health issues later in life.” The top four topics Americans felt were missing from sex education courses include information on body image and sexual self-esteem, healthy relationships and recognizing abuse, sexual consent and communication, and LGBTQ+ relationships and sexual health.¹⁰

Yet mandating sex education alone is not sufficient—its quality and relevance are also critical. Just five states require comprehensive sex education by law,ⁱⁱⁱ while 16 do not require instruction on sex education or HIV/STI to meet a range of core quality standards—such as being medically accurate. Required instruction on key topics is also lacking in many cases. For example, just 15 states and D.C. require sex education or HIV/STI instruction to include information on consent (Figure 1).¹¹

ⁱⁱ This reflects the number of states without laws mandating sex education, either explicitly in statute or by proxy via enforced state standards.

ⁱⁱⁱ California, Oregon and Washington require comprehensive sex education to be taught in all schools, while Colorado and Illinois require sex education curriculum to be comprehensive, if it is taught in school.

Knowledge is protection

Child sexual abuse prevention and awareness education is another approach that gained traction across the U.S. This instruction is provided in schools and teaches children about safe and unsafe touch, healthy boundaries and where to report inappropriate behavior or abuse. And this approach can be effective: for example, an evaluation of the *Safe Touches* program found it could significantly increase children’s short-term knowledge about sexual abuse.¹²

To date, 38 states and D.C. have enacted related legislation—often named in recognition of survivors, such as Jenna’s law (Texas), Bree’s law (Alaska) or Erin’s Law (Illinois and others). Of these, just over half (26 states and D.C.) explicitly mandate that schools provide related instruction or information to students, with 15 requiring curricula for these courses to be evidence-based or evidence-informed. The remaining 12 states merely encourage or permit such instruction without making it compulsory (Figure 2).

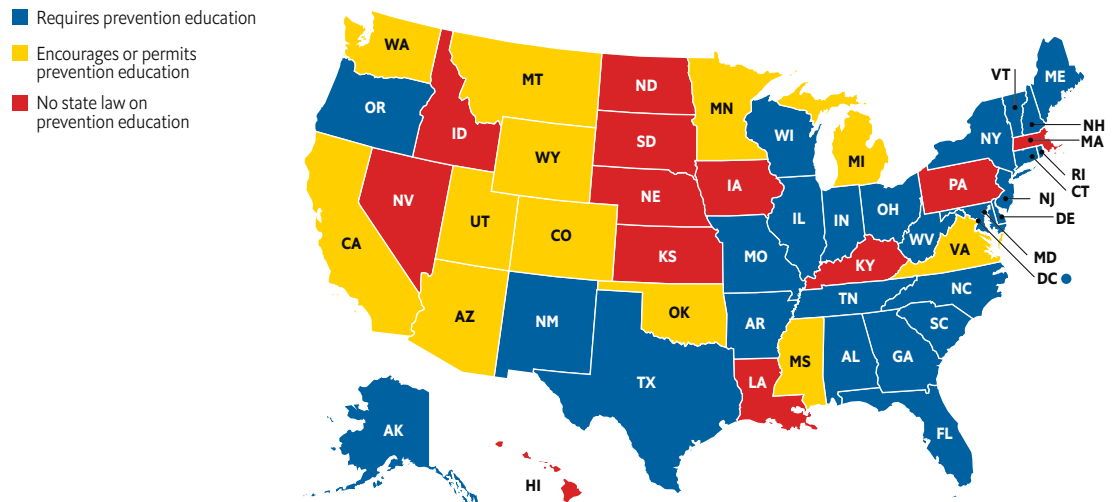
“The thing that we have the best evidence for is educational programs for young people, about safety, about interpersonal relationships, about help seeking and about how to avoid harming other kids. States should not only require that, but also help provide the kinds of programs that are effective. That would be my top priority for any state.”

David Finkelhor, Director, Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire

Amending laws to require this education—where it is currently encouraged or permitted—is one way states can help ensure children gain access to essential information about staying safe. However, mandates alone are not enough. Adequate funding, implementation guidance and oversight are also essential to ensure that education and training efforts are effective. Without these supports, these policies risk becoming little more than “a piece of paper.”

Figure 2: Mapping state action on child sexual abuse prevention education for students

States with laws requiring or encouraging/permitting child sexual abuse awareness and prevention education in schools



Source: Economist Impact

Education starts at home

It is often said that parents are their children's first teachers. This is also true when it comes to sexual health, safety and violence prevention: parents and caregivers who understand these issues may be more equipped to talk with their children about staying safe and reinforce what children learn in school.^{13,14} However, many families are not having these conversations. One survey found more than half (55%) of Americans never had "the talk" with their parents.¹⁵

Parents and caregivers may not engage their children in discussions about sex, relationships and abuse for many reasons. Some may find these topics embarrassing, feel that they do not know enough or think this information will be provided by schools.¹⁶ Others may think that related content taught in schools is

inappropriate or conflicts with their values. But these differing views highlight the importance of involving parents in abuse prevention efforts: doing so can help fill caregivers' own knowledge or confidence gaps, improve communication about safety topics at home and reinforce what children learn at school.^{17,18}

There are many ways schools can engage parents on child sexual abuse topics. These include inviting parents to attend workshops, sharing handouts or take-home activities or giving parents the chance to observe classes to see how sensitive content is taught to their children. Currently, just eight states and D.C. have laws that require schools to engage parents on child sexual abuse topics, while 14 more encourage this engagement.^{iv}

How states did it: good practices in parent engagement

Delaware requires each school's child sexual abuse program to engage parents of students enrolled in pre-Kindergarten through grade six via written materials, available online through the school district's or charter school's website or in hard copy upon a request by parents on an annual basis. Information may also be provided through live presentations.¹⁹

Oregon mandates school district boards adopt a child sexual abuse prevention instructional program. This program must include a parental involvement component to inform parents about child sexual abuse topics, including characteristics of offenders, "grooming" behaviors and how to discuss child sexual abuse prevention with children.²⁰



^{iv} This does not include states where the only requirement is to allow parents to review the curricula. They must be engaged in other ways to promote their own education, such as workshops or being provided with handouts.

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