

Prevention of Poly-victimization: Comprehensive and Connected Approaches

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Exposure to many different types of trauma across various settings in a child's life—a phenomenon known as poly-victimization—highlights both the critical need for prevention strategies and the complexity of what such efforts will need to look like. Poly-victimization is an important new concept not only for child abuse intervention but also for abuse prevention. It is defined as experiencing several different types of victimization regardless of the duration or frequency of each.¹ Poly-victims have many more mental health symptoms than other victimized children and often it is the poly-victimization, rather than any one individual type of trauma, that gives the most clinically relevant information about the client's current psychological well-being.² Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) professionals are well positioned to take a leading role in preventing poly-victimization given their strong collaborations across many settings (schools, families, communities and youth development organizations) and their ability to see the intersections among children's victimization experiences. The purpose of this paper is to describe a framework and example strategies for poly-victimization prevention to encourage CACs and other mental health professionals to see their role in prevention efforts.

Prevention Conceptualization

Prevention is usually described by three categories based on the scope of the target audience and/or when in the cycle of violence the program or tool is implemented.

- Primary or universal prevention is usually implemented before any risk factors or symptoms of problems occur. These tools are typically provided to an entire population, such as all students in a school or all newborn children in a community.
- Secondary or targeted prevention narrows its focus to individuals and groups who have been exposed to key risk factors or who have begun to show some symptoms of difficulty. Examples can include children born to low-income families or children who are having difficulty interacting with their peers.
- Tertiary prevention is what we typically think of as intervention and involves working with specific, targeted individuals who already have the problem, in efforts to reduce its duration or prevent reoccurrence. For the purposes of this White Paper, we focus on the first two levels of prevention. Readers are referred to another paper in this series³ for a more specific discussion of intervention models for poly-victimized children and adolescents.

We know that there are a number of fundamental best practices for prevention.⁴ These include methods that are comprehensive in scope, use active learning methods, and are grounded in theory about the cause of the problem and mechanisms for its solution. Further, prevention needs to draw upon trained facilitators and needs to consider cultural variations and cultural relevance of curricula. Finally, well-designed prevention tools pay attention to development. They teach skills and provide education that is appropriate for each stage of the lifespan and address reducing risk and increasing protective factors before the age when children are most at risk for the problem. We also know that violence prevention programs are working to use these standards and that research finds a number of violence prevention programs to be promising in addressing specific forms of violence.⁵

“Foshee’s Safe Dates” teaches dating violence prevention to middle and high school students and has been associated with lower rates of dating violence.^{6,7} A program for high school athletes, “Coaching Boys to Men,” teaches coaches to train students in prevention skills and is associated with greater helpful actions by bystanders (those who witness violence and have the opportunity to step in and help as defenders of victims or to do nothing or to support perpetration behavior) to interpersonal violence, a similar finding to college campus bystander programs.^{8,9} Some bullying prevention programs also reduce victimization and increase bystander action.¹⁰ Early childhood intervention programs and relationship building mentoring programs also decrease risk for maltreatment and build up protective factors (see Hamby et al., 2014 for a review).⁵ These studies show us that reducing victimization is possible.

Limitations

There are also a number of limitations to these approaches. They almost exclusively focus on individual change via classroom curricula in school settings, and they are highly separated by topic. Just as treatment models tend to focus on one type of victimization at a time, so do many prevention tools.³ For example, Finkelhor et al (in press) finds that child sexual abuse prevention programs are now less common while many youth report having participated in bullying prevention efforts in schools.¹¹ However, bullying prevention programs do not address dating violence or child maltreatment although poly-victimization research shows us that these issues are interconnected. We need prevention tools that put prevention of poly-victimization at the center of the messaging. Further, prevention efforts are largely segregated by age. While it is important to design developmentally appropriate prevention messages, it is also important to connect the different developmental pieces of these messages.¹² Finkelhor et al (in press) document that many youth in the United States are exposed to prevention programs.¹¹ However,

few experience high quality prevention which are particularly important as their data suggest that prevention affects both rates of victimization and also rates of reporting victimization to authorities, but only for children who go through high quality programs. The new National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) data also show that it might be most important to provide prevention programs to younger, elementary school-aged children. Older students seem to benefit more from prevention that mobilizes bystanders.¹⁰

Steps for Practitioners

There are a number of efforts that child maltreatment professionals can take toward the prevention of poly-victimization.

- Connect parents and children to prevention resources as part of intervention services for families who have experienced or are at risk for poly-victimization. Two promising prevention approaches, supported by research are home visiting, early intervention programs for young children¹³ and “Big Brothers Big Sisters” for older children (See¹⁴ for a review). Children who are participating in intervention services could also benefit from participating in prevention programs like these.

- Include prevention activities in intervention efforts.
 - Hamby and Grych show us what poly-victimization prevention can look like.¹⁴ They describe the ways that prevention of many different forms of violence have important points of overlap and connection. Most prevention efforts need to attend to conflict management, self-esteem and efficacy building, empathy development, and bystander action. There are also topics that are unique to different forms of victimization (power and control in relationships with regard to dating violence, issues of consent in relation to sexual violence). Prevention

efforts are needed that avoid duplication of messages by emphasizing a core curriculum of topics but that also include key unique topics across forms of victimization. Because poly-victimization involves so many different types of violence exposure, true prevention of poly-victimization will require the integration of maltreatment prevention with bullying prevention, dating violence prevention, and sexual assault prevention. All of these rest on foundations of social-emotional learning and skills including empathy, conflict management and emotion regulation.¹⁵ Child abuse professionals, like those working in CACs and within Multidisciplinary Teams, can teach these prevention skills as part of their intervention activities.

- A promising new prevention approach that has been used across multiple types of violence is encouraging bystanders to take action to defend and support victims and reduce opportunities for perpetration.
 - Efforts to decrease bullying in schools and sexual assault and relationship violence on college campuses have started focusing on training bystanders who witness acts of or risk factors for different forms of violence. Bystanders are trained to find safe ways to take action to interrupt victimization (by telling a teacher, calling police, getting a victim out of a situation, or refusing to support the community attitudes that can often give perpetrators the idea that their behavior will be tolerated). The success of bystander intervention across different age groups and different forms of violence suggest that it may be a promising form of prevention for poly-victimization. Several projects are working on bystander training for child maltreatment. For example, “Stop it Now!” has a

training for community members to help them identify and intervene to prevent child sexual abuse (<http://www.stopitnow.org/>). Other organizations such as “Enough Abuse in Massachusetts” are working to train youth development professionals to create new organizational policies and trainings to prevent child abuse (<http://enoughabuse.org/index.php/the-campaign/training-tools>). A variety of very helpful bystander prevention tools are available at the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (<http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications/engaging-bystanders-sexual-violence-prevention>).

- Use the professional networks and opportunities that child maltreatment professionals have to work across settings (in schools and with community members) to be a voice for the importance of preventing victimization.
 - Work beyond the individual level. We know from analyses of different forms of prevention that more comprehensive programs have greater effect than ones that are limited in scope.¹⁶ Research shows, for example, that prevention efforts that go beyond just in-school, in-class curricula to engage parents and coaches work better than those that provide only a short-term classroom curriculum, because they build community resources, change school policies, and increase adult supervision.^{6,7,17} Because poly-victims are vulnerable in many places where they live their lives (family, school, community), we need prevention efforts that increase awareness and skills among people in all of these settings. Child maltreatment professionals, especially those in CACs often work directly with all of these key people in a child’s life. The professionals are in a unique position to start conversations to raise awareness about the importance of prevention with

these audiences, and even to help clients, like parents, learn key information and skills about prevention, such as how to talk with their children about bullying.

Even when school prevention programs exist, the programs will be more effective if parents and others are involved. Often schools may not have the resources to work with parents and others. Child maltreatment professionals, already working with parents, can take on that role.

Professionals working in CACs may not traditionally define child maltreatment prevention as part of their work. Yet, with the collaborative work they do with professionals across settings and across types of victimization, they bring a unique and important perspective to prevention work. CAC professionals have important roles to play in helping to teach prevention messages, advocating for new, more comprehensive and interconnected prevention efforts, helping prevention professionals understand the impact of prevention efforts on poly-victimized children, and connecting families and children to key prevention resources. We need more attention to prevention and more resources devoted to high quality programs. Practitioners who work daily on clinical interventions with children and adolescents who have been poly-victimized are in a unique and important position to also be advocates for prevention. They witness firsthand the widespread and damaging effects of poly-victimization and can speak most eloquently about how urgent it is to keep further victimization from happening.

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