

Position Paper on Declining Rates of Child Sexual Abuse

For many years, many child sexual abuse professionals including those within Children's Advocacy Centers have held to a similar mantra – one in four girls and one in seven boys are victims of sexual abuse or assault before the age of 18. These alarming statistics have been a rallying point for communicating the prevalence of child sexual abuse in the United States. While these statistics were absolutely true many years ago, we must ask ourselves two primary questions -- Are they still accurate? If not, what should we do?

Is it time for us to consider whether we should update this message to reflect the positive impact we have made?

The repeated child abuse statistic of "one in four girls and one in seven boys" proved to be very effective in bringing attention to the crisis of child sexual abuse. No one could hear those numbers and not be shocked by the crisis. The resulting sense of urgency demanded attention and proved to be a stimulant for allocating resources to address the issue. Countless programs and initiatives related to sexual abuse were created and implemented all over the country and made significant progress in addressing the issue of child sexual

abuse. Overall, those affected by abuse now receive much better care and the prevalence of child sexual abuse is inarguably lower.

Since the 1990s, we have seen almost a 50% decline in the occurrence of child sexual abuse as reported by numerous sources (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009; 2010). Recent analysis of the change in prevalence of child sexual abuse by *Darkness 2 Light* suggests that one in ten children will be affected by child sexual abuse (Townsend & Rheingold, 2013). With such success, it is definitely time for us to reframe our message. Instead of always leading with a reference to the statistics, "one in four girls and one in seven boys," we should be moving from this message of crisis to one of progress and hope.

We have the data to support that two decades of coordinated efforts and resources are making a difference, so now we must adopt appropriate new messaging. *"There are solutions that work, we are making incredible progress, and everyone has a role to play in efforts to end child abuse."*

The reduction of child sexual abuse in our country should be applauded, and we should lead the charge. Instead of worrying about whether this will negatively affect any support for future efforts, it will strengthen our case for continued support. We need to tout that many programs have made a huge impact, and we must continue to invest in these efforts now and for the future. A far more positive approach will inspire everyone to join an already-successful initiative. We will be showing our past and current "investors" that there has been a solid return on their investment to address child sexual abuse,

and this will become the new course to engage the broader society. The message of crisis must move to a message of success and hope. It's time.

References

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