

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Toolkit

MAY 2024

**FRAME
WORKS**



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BLOOMBERG SCHOOL
of PUBLIC HEALTH

Moore
Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

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Produced in collaboration with MOORE | Preventing Child Sexual Abuse at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Supported by Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development of the National Institutes of Health.

Introduction to the Toolkit Materials

Those of us who work as public health researchers and practitioners know that child sexual abuse (CSA) is preventable. And while there is growing evidence that programs focused on preventing abuse before it happens are effective, communicating about these programs can pose myriad challenges. For one thing, the public can be highly fatalistic about this issue, believing that nothing can be done to prevent CSA. Further, the widespread belief that holds that people who commit CSA are irredeemable contributes to a lack of vision about the possibility of creating interventions that might prevent abuse before it happens. The materials in this toolkit are designed to build support for prevention programs that work, by cultivating understanding about how they work.

We focus on a handful of communications tools and strategies comprising a new narrative about CSA prevention. The “Help Provided” narrative focuses on people who are at risk of committing CSA who *don’t* commit abuse due to the systemic supports they receive.¹ This communications approach may seem counterintuitive at first, due to people’s existing fatalistic mindsets about the possibility of preventing abuse before it occurs. However, the framing research that supports these recommendations shows that a narrative that centers the role prevention programs can play in the lives of people who are at risk of committing CSA is highly effective at overcoming the public’s fatalism about the issue. Leading by *first* talking about people who are at risk of committing CSA effectively builds understanding among the public that prevention is possible. This new narrative reduces public support for extremely punitive solutions and helps build support for systemic change to prevent CSA.

The materials in this toolkit support anyone doing this work to be better equipped to talk about CSA in ways that invite greater support and understanding for prevention. These materials can, and should, be used to build both internal and external communications. Use these guides as reference pieces to cross-check and prepare for day-to-day written material and verbal communication; as a guide when developing written materials for internal communication and outward-facing campaigns; when briefing creative agencies, copy writers, and content producers on overall strategy and content; and when providing feedback.

Remember: Repetition and consistency across messaging is key to changing the conversation as you build and reinforce a shared understanding and vision of child sexual abuse as preventable, not inevitable.

Getting Started

This toolkit is divided into five sections. You can read the toolkit from beginning to end or use the table of contents to skip to the section most relevant to your immediate communications questions or goals:

1. **“Avoiding Common Communications Traps”** offers strategies to ensure that the message *you say* is the message people *hear*.
2. **“Using the ‘Help Provided’ narrative”**: These three pieces describe the essential components of the narrative, demonstrating how it can be used in various communications contexts to support your communications goals.
 - a. Characters and point of view—how to generate empathy and engagement
 - b. Plot and setting—creating narrative momentum
 - c. Narrative checklist—a reference guide to remind you of the key elements as you write
3. **“Sample Legislative Testimony”** shows how to incorporate various frame elements in a long speech that makes a case for prevention.
4. **“Annotated Social Media Posts”** shows how you can deploy the framing recommendations even in small spaces, like social media posts, to help you take advantage of every opportunity to frame.
5. **“Grab-and-Go Starter Language”** offers phrases and key ideas that can be used to get started on communications pieces, such as blogs, reports, flyers, websites, invitations to meetings, and emails. Use them as is or as inspirational jumping-off points to craft communications for your stakeholders in your own voice.

Framing research speaks to the power of foregrounding people who are at risk of committing CSA and who do not—but we recognize that not everyone working in CSA prevention necessarily works on prevention from the angle of people who are at risk of committing CSA. If you don't think your work will fit in the “Help Provided” narrative, we encourage you to look at our **“Quick-Start Guide to Framing CSA Prevention,”** a guide designed to give a broad range of communicators support in strategically framing their CSA prevention efforts.

Avoiding Common Communications Traps

Avoid framing CSA prevention as a public health issue

Members of the public don't have a firm grasp of what "public health" means and are largely unaware of the connection between a "public health approach" and a preventive one. By using the language of prevention rather than the language of public health, you can make your communication more understandable and compelling.

What this looks like:

Shift from "public health" framing ...	→	... to "prevention" framing
Child sexual abuse is a public health issue that requires a public health response.	→	Child sexual abuse is a serious issue that can be prevented.

Avoid front-loading your communication with stark statistics

To make sure your audience engages with your communication, be sure not to spark fatalism and turn people away by opening with bleak facts. Instead, start with an affirmation of the efficacy of prevention and save statistics about prevalence and scope for later in your message.

What this looks like:

Shift from starting with prevalence statistics ...	→	... to supporting your narrative with statistics
Child sexual abuse has devastating lifelong impacts and harms an estimated 3.7 million children every year.	→	Child sexual abuse can be prevented before children get hurt.
By investing in CSA prevention, we can stop more children from getting hurt...	→	Investing in CSA prevention has the potential to make a huge impact: An estimated 3.7 million children are harmed by CSA each year...

Avoid unframed data

Presenting data without explanation leads to two potential pitfalls: First, audiences might not know what a number “means.” Is it big or small? How much bigger or smaller is one number than another? Second, without context, an audience fills in the story about data for themselves. Remember, you are not your audience. Make sure to add cues to help your audience reach the conclusion you want them to reach (for example, that we need to be spending more money on CSA prevention research).

What this looks like:

Shift from using numbers on their own to putting numbers in context
<p>In 2021, the United States spent approximately \$5.4 billion on incarcerating adults convicted of sex crimes against children, and \$2 million on funding child sexual abuse prevention research.</p>	<p>With the right investment, we can stop child sexual abuse before it happens. But right now, the U.S. invests only \$1 in prevention research for every \$3,125 we spend in punishment after the fact.</p>

Avoid “yes, but” statements that reinforce the Law and Punishment narrative

Use your limited “communications real estate” to make your case for prevention, and don’t reinforce people’s existing belief that punishment is the only solution to child sexual abuse.

What this looks like:

Shift from “yes, but” to making the affirmative case
<p>Of course punishment is important, but it can’t be our only approach. Preventing child sexual abuse is crucial.</p>	<p>Preventing child abuse before it happens is crucial. We need to do more than only focusing on punishment after abuse has happened.</p>

Using the “Help Provided” Narrative

Crafting Your Characters and Point of View: How to Generate Empathy and Engagement

Narratives that have relatable and authentic characters enable audiences to develop empathy for those who are different from them. The main characters in the help provided narrative are people who are at risk of committing CSA—a storytelling choice that adds nuance and complexity to the public’s preconceived notions about this group of people. To make sure the character(s) in your communication generate empathy and engagement, follow the guidelines below.

Take the point of view of someone at risk of committing CSA

Whether using first-person or third-person omniscient narration, make sure audiences understand the perspective of someone who is at risk of committing child sexual abuse. Make the point of view of your story the position that people who are at risk of committing CSA have within a functioning system—a system that works well to prevent CSA before it happens.

Make the character relatable so that the audience empathizes with their story

Highlight their activities, interests, and healthy relationships.

Allow audiences to understand the complexity of the character

Don’t shy away from discussing risk factors for abuse, including unwanted attraction to children. Giving your audience a full, complex picture of the character is more persuasive than offering a simplistic portrait of a hero or villain.

Situate individual stories in context

Highlight the character’s participation in a perpetration prevention program. When appropriate, affirm the individual character’s choice to participate in the program. Look for opportunities to contrast the positive outcome that did occur with the potential loss scenario: A positive outcome did occur, but if the program had not existed, undesirable outcomes might have occurred. This helps to build support for increased investment in prevention.

What if specific characters aren’t appropriate in my communications context?

It might not always be appropriate or possible to center your communication on a specific character. However, you can (and should) still use characters and point of view in your communication. See below for an example.

Character (specific):

Take the example of a former participant in one of these programs, Josh. When Josh realized he had an unwanted sexual attraction to children, he joined [*insert name of perpetration prevention program*]. [*Program name*] provided him with access to [*insert description of program services*] which gave him strategies to cope with his unwanted feelings. After completing the program, Josh reported feeling more confident that he will never abuse a child.

Character (abstract):

Some people who are at high risk of committing child sexual abuse have an unwanted sexual attraction to children. People with unwanted sexual attraction to children often seek support from [*insert name of perpetration program*], which provides them with access to [*insert description of program services*]. After completion of the program, participants report feeling confident that they will never abuse a child.

Crafting Your Plot and Setting: How to Create Momentum

Narratives that have momentum are able to pull people in and get them to stay for the whole story, allowing the narrative to be received. Without momentum, a narrative cannot be effective because it will not keep the audience engaged and generate a sense of investment. To make sure your communication’s narrative generates momentum, develop an engaging plot and setting by following the steps below.

Lead with affirmation: CSA *can* be prevented

Consistently open messages with positive affirmations about the efficacy of prevention, rather than using the scope or severity of the problem to engage people. Especially at the beginning of a communication, bleak facts about the prevalence of CSA can spark fatalistic attitudes and turn audiences away.

What this looks like:

<p>Shift from leading with bleak facts ...</p>	<p>... to leading with affirmation and efficacy</p>
<p>Child sexual abuse has devastating lifelong impacts and harms an estimated 3.7 million children every year.</p>	<p>→ Child sexual abuse is a serious issue that can be prevented.</p>

Take the time to give a robust explanation of *how* a factor or factors lead to specific outcomes

Always connect the dots for your audience rather than simply listing risk factors or describing the scope of outcomes. When you have limited communications space, it is generally more effective to give a full explanation of how one factor leads to a particular outcome, rather than giving a comprehensive list of factors without context. Keep in mind that you are not your audience: Think about what context and explanation they need to understand this issue in the same way that you do and use step-by-step explanations to link cause and effect.

What this looks like:

Shift from listing risk factorsto connecting the dots
<p>Somewhere between one-third and three-quarters of sexual offenses against children under age 18 are caused by other children under age 18. In addition to age, other risk factors for perpetration of CSA include being male, experiencing family conflict and hostility, substance use, a history of anxiety or depression, exposure to pornography, loneliness, early sexual initiation, high impulsivity, and exposure to CSA in childhood.</p>	<p>Many of the sexual offenses against children under age 18 are caused by other children under age 18. One reason adolescents may engage in harmful sexual behavior is because they have limited understanding of what constitutes appropriate sexual behavior. When schools offer programs that teach about appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviors, young people can develop the appropriate boundaries they need to keep them from ever harming another child.</p>

Set your communication within a proven or promising prevention program

Most people are largely unaware of what we could do to stop CSA from occurring in the first place, which is one of the main reasons why they believe it is inevitable—and why it is so difficult to build support for prevention efforts. By setting your story in a context where prevention happens, you help people see the possibility of a world where CSA is prevented and motivate them to invest in that future.

What this looks like:

A checklist for telling solutions stories:

- Give concrete examples of prevention efforts at work.
- Replace passive, indirect process words (*ensuring, encouraging*) with vivid action verbs (*tackling, launching, equipping*).
- Use “when” words (*now, right now, currently, today*) to show that prevention is already happening.
- Swap in other synonyms and sayings for the term “prevention” to bring the concept to life (e.g., *guardrails, working to get ahead of issues, steering clear of problems we can see ahead, or setting ourselves up for success*).

Help Provided Narrative Checklist

Check your communications against the key features of the “Help Provided” narrative as you write.

Does your communication ...

- Lead with an affirmation that CSA is preventable?
- Take the time to give a robust explanation of how systemic changes support prevention?
- Include a proven or promising preventative solution?

If not, or if you aren't sure, refer to “Crafting Your Plot and Setting.”

Does your communication ...

- Take the point of view of someone at risk of committing CSA?
- Make character(s) relatable?
- Allow the complexity of the character(s) to come through?
- Situate individual stories in context?

If not, or if you aren't sure, refer to “Crafting Your Characters and POV.”

Does your communication ...

- AVOID leading with the idea that CSA is a public health issue?
- AVOID front-loading with stark statistics?
- AVOID unframed data?
- AVOID “yes, but” statements that reinforce a *law and punishment* narrative?

If not, or if you aren't sure, refer to “Avoiding Common Communications Traps.”

Sample Legislative Testimony

I am testifying today in support of [budget appropriation bill] that would provide \$__ in funding for child sexual abuse prevention research in the upcoming fiscal year. While the current fiscal year's funding is a good first step, additional investment is needed to make a real difference in the lives of our children. Child sexual abuse is a serious issue, and research shows that it can—with the proper investment—be prevented.

I have witnessed the power of prevention firsthand many times in my work running a program at Southview Middle School. One of the children I worked with, who I'll call Sam, told me he had thought about inappropriately touching a classmate. In our program, Sam learned about healthy and age-appropriate boundaries. Now he understands how he might have caused harm and is grateful that he learned about consent and how to navigate sexual development before he hurt anyone.

Sam's story is very familiar to those of us who work in child sexual abuse prevention. Those of us who work in this field know that adolescents are learning how to navigate their own development and can need support to avoid making mistakes and potentially causing harm. Our programming is designed to encourage teens to think about younger children as needing special care and empathy and as "off limits" when it comes to certain behaviors. Our programming is also designed to encourage teens to interact with close-in-age peers within a framework of mutual respect and consent. By creating a context of trust, practicing a nonjudgmental approach to prevention and response to disclosure, and operating within clear and unobtrusive reporting mandates, we are able to help adolescents whose brain and executive functioning skills are still developing. We can give them tools to navigate around their own budding interests while avoiding acting without thinking or understanding the law or the consequences of their actions.

Unfortunately, not every child like Sam has access to the sort of prevention program he did. In fact, most children are left to navigate adolescent development by themselves, with no education around consent or age-appropriate boundaries to serve as **guardrails** against child sexual abuse. Since around half of all sexual offenses against children under age 18 are caused by other children under age 18, it only makes sense to focus on targeted approaches, which stand to have a big impact.

If we can prevent abuse before it starts, we can make a difference not only in the lives of the approximately 3.7 million children who are harmed annually by child sexual abuse, but we can also change the story for children who might otherwise have caused harm and whose lives and communities stand to be changed for the better.

Child sexual abuse is preventable. We know the root causes and how to address them, and we have solutions that can truly make a difference to children, families, communities, and our society as a whole.

Talking about policies and programs to prevent abuse as “guardrails” is effective to help build public understanding of CSA prevention and support for systemic solutions.

Social Media Posts

Ideally, you will be using social media posts in conjunction with other communications (or to call attention to those sharing an article or announcing a conference, for example) where you will deploy the narrative with all its components. Used in conjunction, social media posts that repeat elements of the narrative can strengthen the overarching narrative.

Some people who are at risk of committing child sexual abuse have an unwanted sexual attraction to children. [Program] provides access to [services], which give participants the tools they need so that they will never abuse a child.

You can deploy a mini version of the narrative even in a small space. Here's an example of the character in a social media post.

When people who are at high risk of committing child sexual abuse have access to prevention programs that focus on mental health and wellbeing, they are better able to develop appropriate boundaries that will keep them from ever abusing a **child**.

Step-by-step explanations walk the reader through an understanding of how and why programs work.

Contrary to public perception, about half of all sexual offenses committed against children are committed by other children, and of those who are convicted, most (97%) do not re-offend. These statistics show us that interventions targeted toward teens are particularly **effective**.

Here, numbers are used to make the case, but crucially, data are given framing support to show the reader how to interpret them.

The **Help Wanted** perpetration prevention program connects people who have unwanted sexual attraction to children with mental health professionals who provide strategies for coping with feelings, to prevent child sexual abuse from ever happening.

Here's an example of a specific program that's being used as the contextual setting of the Help Provided narrative strategy.

We can make it easier for survivors to disclose their experiences and seek help by making changes to our systems: Changes to our health care, child welfare, law enforcement, and education systems can make a difference in the lives of those impacted by child sexual abuse.

Talking about collective solutions can be used to set up different conversations about people impacted by abuse.

We can **redesign our systems** to make it easier to prevent child sexual abuse: Changes to our health care reporting protocols could invite greater participation in prevention programs by guaranteeing confidentiality and avoiding forced disclosure.

Talking about redesigning systems can be useful to set up conversations about how to prevent abuse before it happens and overcome fatalism about the issue.

Because we know the factors that contribute to child sexual abuse, including inadequate supervision of adults who interact with youth, insufficient education of youth about appropriate behavior, and the prior exposure of youth to earlier abuse, we can address the root causes and prevent child sexual abuse.

Just like we need **guardrails** to prevent crashes on the road, we need systemic solutions, such as perpetration prevention programs, to prevent child sexual abuse.

This is an example of how you can use the Guardrails metaphor to build public understanding of CSA prevention.

What if, rather than treating child sexual abuse solely as a criminal justice issue or blaming and shaming individuals who have experienced trauma, we focused our efforts on interventions we know to be effective at preventing child sexual abuse before it **happens?**

This is an example of a big-picture nod to the Help Provided narrative strategy.

Grab-and-Go Starter Language

Here we have pulled together some phrases and key ideas that can be used to get started on communications pieces such as blogs, reports, flyers, websites, invitations to meetings, and emails. Use them as is or as inspirational jumping-off points to craft communications for your stakeholders in your own voice.

Advance the affirmative case

Ideas like the ones below probably can't be repeated enough. They instill a sense of efficacy: the idea that difficult challenges can (and must) be solved.

- Child sexual abuse (CSA) is preventable.
- Prevention is key to ending child sexual abuse.
- We have strong evidence that programs focused on preventing abuse before it happens are highly effective.
- Prevention programs can play a transformative role in the lives of people who are at risk of committing child sexual abuse.
- We have seen how our current national approach to respond to child sexual abuse only after harm has occurred does not do enough to prevent it from happening in the first place. We need to prioritize prevention *before* child sexual abuse happens.

Shared responsibility/Shared benefit

Point to “the why of the work” to help new constituencies understand why your work matters to all of us. Also, these communications strategies remind those who are doing the work why it matters, and what's at stake:

- We all have a role to play.
- We can do better as a society to prevent child sexual abuse.
- We know the risk factors, and we know what works to prevent child sexual abuse.
- We have a responsibility as a society to prevent child sexual abuse.

- As a culture, we need to change the normalization of sexual violence—which would make things better for all of us.
- It is in our interest as a society to ensure there are prevention programs for people who are at risk of committing child sexual abuse to receive the help they need, so they never commit harm against children.

Solutions

Make sure to bring the focus to collective solutions, policies, and programs, highlighting the role of non-parental adults and public systems. We don't want to place responsibility for safety solely on the shoulders of families, much less individual children. One powerful way to expand responsibility in our communications is to describe how proposed interventions actually work to prevent child sexual abuse:

- When we provide prevention programs to people who are at risk of committing child sexual abuse, we can make a real difference in the lives of so many.
- We can do more to provide appropriate clinical services to individuals who are at risk for committing child sexual abuse.
- We can do more to offer appropriate clinical services for youth who exhibit problematic sexual behaviors.
- We also need interventions like comprehensive sex education classes in schools, which provide all children with age-appropriate information about bodily autonomy and what is and isn't an accurate portrayal of sex and sexual intimacy.



About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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Endnotes

1. Throughout this toolkit, we refer to “people who are at risk of committing CSA.” People engage in harmful sexual behavior with children for varied reasons. Teens may engage in these behaviors out of ignorance, impulsivity, or in response to their own victimization experiences, among numerous other reasons. Adults may engage in child sexual abuse if they are primarily attracted to children and unconcerned about the harm it causes. Adults primarily attracted to other adults may engage in abuse through an interplay of emotions, cognitions, access, and opportunity. As just one example: A middle-school teacher who experiences unexpectedly strong pleasure from the attention of a child, believes the child is mature enough to consent to sex with adults and can arrange for opportunities to offend against the child due to inadequate prevention policies, practices, and even the physical structure of the school. Adults primarily attracted to other adults may also engage in child sexual abuse when power, prestige, and/or wealth allow them to operate with impunity—that is, to place their own desires over the wellbeing of others without fear of retribution.”



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Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with the FrameWorks Institute as publisher:

FrameWorks Institute (2024). *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Toolkit*. FrameWorks Institute.

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