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Children must be taught to deal with assaults, bullying

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by **Christine Boucher**

Mar. 23, 2005

In recent weeks, The Gazette has provided ongoing coverage related to a series of disturbing sexual assaults on county school buses.

As the director for the Metropolitan Center for Assault Prevention (MetroCap), an organization that offers violence and sexual assault prevention programs, I applaud the county school board for taking a strong stance on what must be done to address these incidents. Board member Sharon Cox asked what the school system is doing to make sure students understand their rights and know how to report incidents to appropriate adults. That is an important question.

Children, teachers and parents must be prepared properly to deal with situations of sexual assault and bullying when they occur.

For nearly 10 years, MetroCap provided the public school system with workshops that gave students strategies to protect themselves from sexual assault and bullying. More importantly, it provided them with information on how and to whom to report such assaults. The program served more than 50 schools annually until, unfortunately, county funding was cut from the budget last year.

Ironically, our program provided the school community with the necessary tools to deal with the current problems.

MetroCap's message is founded on a few basic principles that parents and children need to understand in order to deal with violent behavior. I am happy to share them with parents in these worrisome times:

*It is never the child's fault when victimized.

*Children must be taught to trust their feelings, especially when something seems "wrong."

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- *Grown-ups who come into contact with children regularly must be trained to be "trusted adults" who children can approach when their safety is threatened.
- *Adults need to know how to identify a potential problem and provide appropriate intervention.
- *Children need to learn to tell someone when their personal safety is being threatened.
- *If the first person they tell doesn't help them, children should be taught to move on until they find someone who will help.
- *Parents need to listen to their children without passing judgment. This is how children learn to be open with their parents and share their problems with those who can help them most.
- *Parents cannot be afraid to approach the subject of their children's personal safety. Some may fear that this topic will scare children, or even teach them inappropriate behavior, but this isn't true.

Although schools have policies for dealing with sexual assaults against students, policies themselves do nothing to prevent assaults.

Sexual assaults and other forms of violence between and against children will continue to occur, often without being reported, until we start sharing responsibility, as a community, for teaching appropriate behaviors to children. It is the responsibility of educators, parents, and community leaders to respond clearly -- and together -- so that young victims know the community stands behind them.

Remember, children want to be heard and they want to communicate. They just need someone who is receptive on the other end. From an early age, we must introduce children to concepts and practical strategies for both protecting themselves and respecting others.

After all, it is a child's right as a member of society not to suffer abuse.

Christine Boucher is president and CEO of the Metropolitan Center for Assault Prevention in Wheaton (www.metrocap.org).