

How Penn State Can Educate Us All

By Penny Ettinger, Executive Director of PEI Kids

Is there a silver lining to the Penn State tragedies? What good can possibly come out of the public uncovering of the allegations that the prominent figure, Jerry Sandusky, sexually abused multiple young boys over a period of many years -- and that knowledge of at least one incident was covered up by senior and revered university officials?

Sadly, it often takes a tragic event reaching celebrity proportions to move our communities to take action to protect our most important and cherished asset – our children. The Megan Kanka rape and murder led to the national legislation of Megan’s Law. The bullying and suicide of Rutgers student Tyler Clementi resulted in New Jersey enacting the toughest anti-bullying legislation in the nation.

Alarmingly, statistics show that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused by the time they reach 18 years of age. This means there are more than 42 million adult survivors of child sexual abuse in the United States. Sadly, 90% of these egregious violations are committed by someone the child and child’s family knows and trusts – clergy, coaches, physicians, family members, baby sitters, a neighbor or an older child. If any good can possibly come from the Penn State tragedies, it may be that parents become more aware of these facts -- as well as what to do and where to turn if they suspect abuse or their child discloses an abusive incident or relationship.

Since 1985, PEI Kids, a Mercer County nonprofit, has provided immediate counseling for 95% of the County’s reported child victims of sexual abuse (more than 220 children in 2010 alone), helping families and children cope and heal from the potentially devastating effects of child sexual abuse. We have long known what most members of the public are just realizing -- that sexual abuse is endemic in our society, and that there are no “typical” abusers. Without immediate and professional treatment, psychological, emotional and social trauma can last a lifetime, resulting in depression, withdrawal, substance abuse, acting out sexually and suicide. Keith Smith, an adult survivor of child sexual abuse, author, former Board member of PEI Kids and member of the *Greater Mercer Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse*, has developed “5 Steps You Can Take to Keep Kids Safe” that I would like to summarize. A link to the full article can be found at www.peikids.org.

- 1) Know the Facts.** The numbers of children who are reported to have been sexually abused is a small proportion of the number of children living in our community who have been abused.
- 2) Know the Signs.** There are signs that child victims may exhibit and there are signs of “grooming” by the child’s perpetrator. Physical and behavioral signs include unwarranted changes in behaviors, such as the onset of depression, cutting by older children, bedwetting, significant changes in sleep patterns, resistance by a young child to be alone with a particular adult or older child, or acting out sexually among others.

- 3) Know What to Do.** Educate yourself and educate your children. Talk to them often. As the Mercer County Designee for NJ Child Assault Prevention (CAP), PEI Kids also provides child assault prevention programs to children and parents in 60 area schools each year. Encourage your local school to present such programs; and demand that organizations serving youth – sports programs, churches, groups such as scouts and schools – have established policies on sexual abuse prevention and require that all volunteers and staff have background checks.
- 4) Know Where to Go.** Always seek immediate help! As explained recently by Dr. Juanita Brooks, the Clinical Director for PEI Kids, “Children can recover from the psychological and emotional trauma of the sexual abuse if they receive specialized early intervention.” Any person having reasonable cause to believe a child has been subjected to abuse or acts of abuse should immediately report it to the local police or the child abuse hotline. The caller does not need proof of an allegation to report the abuse and all information is confidential. Remember, it is the responsibility of the parent or caregiver to get the child help, not to determine exactly what occurred.
- 5) Know What to Say.** Most importantly, BELIEVE the child. One way perpetrators manipulate a child victim is to tell them that no one will believe them. Assure children in advance that you would always believe them. Should a child ever disclose to you that they’ve been sexually abused, the child needs to hear you say, "I believe you. You can trust me. I will help you."

Working together, we can stop child sexual abuse if we all educate ourselves and our children. For information on the newly established *Mercer Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse*, which PEI Kids is leading, and for information on getting help for a child who has been abused, visit www.peikids.org.

Penny Ettinger is the Executive Director of PEI Kids in Lawrenceville, NJ. Currently serving approximately 16,000 children and their families annually, the nonprofit organization began 26 years ago when its founders discovered that there were no services provided for local children who had been sexually abused. Since then, PEI Kids’ mission has been dedicated to promoting and maintaining a safe environment for all children.