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Let's build a community in Texas to prevent child sexual abuse

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By **Joy Rauls**, For the Express-News

April is Child Abuse Prevention and Awareness Month, and over the years, as the CEO of Children's Advocacy Centers of Texas, I have penned and ghostwritten proclamations, and written op-eds and letters detailing the prevalence and impact of sexual abuse. I've warned about the signs and symptoms, and advised how to keep kids safe and how to report suspected abuse.

This year I'm taking a different approach — because something is not working.

Sexual abuse continues to be all too common in our state. Sadly, 1 in 6 Texas high school students report having experienced sexual abuse. This is unacceptable.

So, instead of the checklist we ask parents and caretakers to go through, I'm advocating something different: Let's talk to each other.

Behaviors that help prevent the opportunity for the vast majority of abuse are highly relational. They only make sense or feel remotely feasible in the context of a purpose-centered community of adults.

And this makes sense. As human beings, our evolutionary advantage has always been our ability to relate to one another, creating interdependency for the purpose of survival.

Coming together when it matters is usually what has allowed mankind to prevail through the hardest of trials. Why wouldn't this also be the case for something as prevalent and damaging as child sexual abuse? Could it be that, almost like a riddle, the solution to one of our most intractable problems is right there in all of us?

I think so. Purpose-driven community is the mechanism required to support preventative behaviors. It's the step I have missed in two decades of writing calls to action that were largely focused on education and awareness.

The good news is that society is full of examples of adults coming together around a shared goal for the children in their lives. When my daughter was in kindergarten, we were invited to join a community league soccer team, lovingly named the Electric Unicorns. The coaches were intentional about defining the team's goals: learn teamwork, build confidence, develop accountability, make friends, develop skills and get physical activity.

During games, parents cheered each child toward those goals by applauding effort, newly developed skills, resiliency and sportsmanship. At the conclusion of the second game, a mother asked all parents to form a tunnel with their hands for the girls to run through as they exited the field. This felt goofy to me for a second, and then I was immediately on my feet joining in.

This became a ritual for the next four seasons. We didn't question the rotating obligation to bring the postgame juice boxes to keep everyone hydrated and motivated. During the hotter months a mother brought 20 washcloths soaked in ice water for the team members to hold to their sweaty faces. A dad brought two portable tents, large enough to shade the team. As the year went on, Tuesday night practices were followed by pasta dinners at a local restaurant.

Parents were organized around a set of shared goals for these children and didn't think anything of using their individual agency in their pursuit for the collective. I would say that this group fits the definitions of not just a team but a community.

Now imagine you're on the sidelines with a group of parents and your shared goal is to keep the children on the team safe from child sexual abuse. You would quickly jump in and deploy preventative behaviors. Your actions would be supported, understood, mirrored and even applauded.

Clearly, organizing a youth soccer team is easier than filling a roster of parents committed to the shared goal of child sexual abuse prevention — but not for a lack of interest. Despite the uncomfortable nature of this issue, adults — no matter their age, demographic or political affiliation — want to help. It's not just common sense; we have the data to prove it.

Unfortunately, we also have data that shows when asked whether they had taken action to help prevent child sexual abuse, only about 60% of adults surveyed could answer yes. This tells me that we have the makings for a community that will protect children and a powerful opportunity gap to close.

But where do we begin? How do we surface this widely shared but seemingly unspoken priority so we can build a team around it? How do we get below the surface of the relationships in our life so we can find this critical point of alignment: our shared pursuit of safeguarding our children? How do we build authentic relationships within parenting culture so we can share our desire to work on the difficult things together?

Conversations that drive us toward true connection and purpose can start in any circle, no matter how small. Each day we have tiny moments of opportunity to build the relationships that eventually will hold these conversations.

So the next time you're waiting on the sidelines, volunteering with other parents or on a group playdate among families, look at these parents as potential teammates on the most important of pursuits and see how this begins, even gradually, to deepen the conversation.

Most adults are ready to raise their hand and get on the team. Someone just needs to organize the roster. Could that be you?

About the Author



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