

Empowered Adolescents

A Self-Help Prevention Framework For Adolescents At Risk

by Traci Walters

Les jeunes qui sont atteints de handicaps sont extrêmement vulnérables à l'abus physique et sexuel, au mauvais traitement affectif et à la négligence. Le Mouvement pour une vie autonome (Independent Living Movement) procure aux enfants et aux jeunes atteints d'un handicap une façon de développer leurs propres stratégies pour se protéger contre les abus sexuels.

Youth with disabilities are our most powerful tools for great change, yet they are at risk. Many children with disabilities in this country are extremely vulnerable to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect and deprivation. Many children and adolescents with disabilities grow up living in foster homes and institutions, subject to personal care from hundreds of strangers throughout their lives.

The complete lack of sexual education for children with disabilities is alarming. Society simply does not want to deal with the fact that everyone needs appropriate education on their bodily parts, functions, and sexuality. Without it, children are vulnerable to learning only what abusers may want to coerce them into learning. This is probably one of the reasons why abuse runs rampant within the walls of foster homes, institutions, group homes, and family environments.

I once heard that when someone walks up behind us and gets within a certain radius of our spine, we naturally tense up, shiver, and quickly turn around. Our instincts tell us that there could be danger—a stranger may be behind us. Move!

After years of having caregivers and family members moving freely all around them, children and youth with disabilities learn to let their defences down. Their natural instincts fade and disappear. When their territory is invaded, the message is often not transmitted that danger is lurking. Thus, our children and youth with disabilities are prime targets for abusers. It is easy for the perpetrator to think, "who is going to believe them anyway?" And, people with disabilities who report abuse *are* generally classified as trouble makers. It is not only the caregivers who have this attitude, but also the police, courts, agencies, etc.

The child or youth with a disability who has been abused might have difficulty speaking, may be non-verbal, or may have low literacy skills. He or she may have been labelled developmentally disabled. In these circumstances, the victims often simply do not stand a chance. If the child or youth does report the abuse, they may expose themselves to still more abuse—perhaps of different kinds. This time, they could be left sitting and waiting for hours on end because they are now being neglected or deprived of personal care as a result of their disclosure. Maybe the caregiver decides not to feed them on time, leaving the child with hunger pains. Or maybe they are placed in a room facing a wall with no ability to move their wheelchair. Equally devastating abuses can be inflicted on children with intellectual, psychiatric, or develop-

mental disabilities. Abuse of any kind can lead to self-blame, shame, guilt, low self-confidence, low self-esteem, and a feeling of complete powerlessness.

The Independent Living Movement empowers people with disabilities to take control over their lives, to make their own decisions, to be offered options, and to take risks. Independent Living Resource Centres are consumer controlled organizations where people with any type of disability work with each other to find solutions, to work their way through the "system," and to provide support to each other. It is a unique place in the community which is run by and for people with disabilities. For many people it is a safe haven.

Many cases of abuse of people with disabilities are brought to the attention of the Independent Living Resource Centres. The Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (CAILC) is responding to this need by delivering a national outreach project to promote primary prevention of family violence and abuse of persons with a disability in Canada. Three major objective areas for this jointly funded Health and Welfare Canada and Secretary of State initiative will be to coordinate both national and local resources towards: 1) instituting a national Train-The-Trainer Prevention Program; 2) developing an Independent Living Self-Help Prevention model for adolescents who have a disability; 3) testing and promoting a rural outreach prevention model for adults and seniors living in rural and isolated regions.

CAILC is co-ordinating and implementing the development of a community prevention framework to prevent family violence and abuse of adolescents who have a disability. By utilizing Independent Living self-help methodologies, in parallel with inter-agency and interdisciplinary collaborations, this project will develop a model for community prevention that may be transferred from community to community across Canada.

The philosophy of the Independent Living Movement encourages self-help, peer intervention, individual empowerment skills development, research and development. People with disabilities are best able to define our own needs, recognize what is making us vulnerable, and change the environment around us to remove ourselves from risk. We need to educate adolescents with disabilities and give them the ability to identify abuse and protect themselves through personal empowerment and self-help.

If you would like more information on this project, please contact the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres, 350 Sparks Street, Suite 1004, Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 7S8.

Traci Walters is presently the National Director of the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres. She lives with a chronic illness (Still's Disease) and is the mother of two small children.

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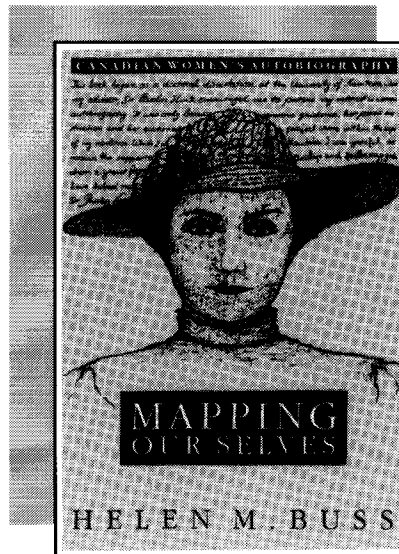
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