

Aggression Prevention

Hope for the Future

By Leona Heiligg

Assault prevention has traditionally meant victim control: don't talk to strangers, don't go out at night, don't dress provocatively. The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre offers an alternative to victim control with an empowering approach to aggression prevention focussing on those who are most vulnerable to aggression of all kinds.

With all the attention being focussed these days on violence against women and children, far too little is being said about its prevention. Unfortunately, the prevailing approach to assault prevention for vulnerable groups of people is to give rules: don't go out at night, don't talk to strangers, never (or always) carry a purse. Women, elderly people and parents are bombarded with these unhelpful, fear-inducing rules, and few people are given accurate information about how to recognize and prevent various kinds of violence without shutting themselves away behind locked doors.

The traditional approach to assault prevention, what we call "victim control," assumes that the potential victims of aggression should limit their lives, live in fear, and try to avoid situations where assault may occur. There are many problems with this approach, the main one being that it doesn't work. The rules we are given are most often based on myths about where and when assault occurs, and to and by whom. Since the vast majority of sexual assault done to women is done by someone the woman knows, telling her not to talk to strangers, or not to walk on the street alone, is not adequate assault prevention.

Victim control is the opposite of empowerment. While an empowering approach to prevention informs the people most vulnerable to aggression about their situation, and gives them the tools to recognize aggression and take more control of their lives, victim control raises fear because it does not address what is likely to happen, what can be done to stop it, and whose responsibility it is that it happened. A woman who is attacked on the street will be told, "You asked for it, you should have known better." Nobody asks to be assaulted, and this attitude of victim-blam-

ing which is so prevalent in our society that we are all infected with it, ignores the source of the problem: Who is doing all this assaulting, and why?

The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre

The Child Assault Prevention (CAP) Project, first developed in Columbus, Ohio, in 1978, examines the connections between various groups of people who are vulnerable to assault, and finds ways to empower these groups to reduce their



Photo: David Singleton

vulnerability. Groups who are dependent on others are necessarily more vulnerable to aggression from those on whom they depend. Children depend on adults for their food and shelter, as well as for love, affection and guidance. Women are often dependent on men financially and emotionally. Even those of us who choose not to be dependent on individual men, are dependent on a male system of law and medicine, and all of us suffer from societal pressure to be in a relationship with a man and to maintain that relationship. People with disabilities and elderly people are often dependent on their caretakers, who may be family members, hired attendants or staff in institutions and residences.

The lack of information contributes greatly to our vulnerability: if a woman does not know how to defend herself against an attacker, she will likely decide to do nothing, and the attack will continue. If a woman does not know where to go to get help she may not leave her abusive husband. If children do not know that they have the right to say "no" to an adult who wants them to do something they feel is an invasion of their privacy, they may believe the adult who tells them they *have* to do it.

Isolation is the third major factor of vulnerability. An aggressor will look for a victim who is not likely to fight back or to tell anyone else. Therefore, the more isolated the person is from others, the more vulnerable she or he will be. Women, children and people with disabilities are taught to think of themselves as weak and helpless. This isolates us from each other, as we do not recognize the resources for fighting back against aggression that we do possess, both individually and collectively.

At the Montreal Assault Prevention Centre, we work at reducing the vulnerability of certain groups by spreading information through public education. We offer the CAP programme to children from preschool through high school, as well as parents and school personnel. This community approach enables people to work together to recognize the factors in their lives which make them vulnerable, and to begin to effect change. We offer an assault prevention course for women called ACTION, a 15-hour course giving tools for assertiveness, awareness and self-defense. With some simplified physical self-defense techniques from Wen Do (a women's self-defense course developed

by martial arts instructors in Toronto in the 1970s, and the empowering feminist philosophy of the CAP project, ACTION meets the needs of women who do not want to spend years perfecting a martial art. ACTION is designed to address the kinds of situations women face both in our daily lives and in our nightmares, and offers a choice of responses and tools for individual women and various situations, encouraging women to trust their instincts instead of trying to follow someone else's rules.

The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre grew out of the two separate organizations, CAP and ACTION, which were sharing office space, many of the same personnel, and a common feminist analysis of societal factors of sexual assault, as well as a philosophy of empowerment. What makes the Centre unique is that we offer programming for many different groups: elderly people, people with intellectual and physical disabilities, children and adolescents, parents, women and adolescent women, and people who help survivors of sexual assault. Our mandate is to break down isolation, dependence and lack of information by providing communities and individuals with tools for reducing aggression and greater awareness of assault issues. We also promote the recognition and development of resources already existing within individuals and in the larger community.

Since prevention of any kind is not given much priority in our society, and issues of sexual assault are particularly misunderstood, the Centre faces a perpetual struggle to become known, understood and above all recognized as an expert in the field of prevention. Lack of funding is of course our major problem, especially since we are neither a "women's group," a shelter, nor a crisis counselling centre. Our belief that children and adolescents need positive male role models has led to our becoming alienated from some women's groups, since we make it a priority to have male animators on our teams.

The Centre is run by three coordinators: Lisa Weintraub, David Singleton, and Leona Heillig, who work as a small collective, and who have final responsibility for the perpetually uncertain survival of the organization. The size of the staff fluctuates according to our funding at any given time, but is usually about 15 altogether. As much as possible, all decisions

are made with input and agreement of those who will be affected by them, as the coordinators are committed to carrying the empowering philosophy of the programming into the workplace as much as possible.

Since the formation of the Montreal Assault Prevention Centre in 1988, we have become more and more recognized and sought after as experts in the field of assault prevention. Awareness of prevention as a vital issue in the discussion of assault is growing, but there is still a lack of information and faith both in and out of the women's community regarding assault prevention. We find it frustrating that the issue of sexual assault and violence against women and children is nearly always addressed without inclusion of prevention issues. As long as we are still focussing only on the horrible statistics, as long as the media only report rapes and murders and never give credit to the many, many women and children who avoid and stop situations of violence, we are no nearer to a solution to the problem, and we continue to see ourselves as victims.

We live in a violent society. Girls are socialized to believe they are helpless and must please men; boys are socialized to go after what they want, to solve their problems using aggressive means, and to believe that when a woman says no she means yes. Education must begin with children and must touch all members of our society in order to effect change. As we say in CAP, everyone has the right to be Safe, Strong and Free.

The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre can be reached at (514) 284-1212.

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