

## PROJECT PROPER TOUCH: EFFECTIVENESS, ISSUES AND IMPACT OF A CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION EDUCATION PROGRAM

**Remedios O. Azarcon**

Bulacan State University, Philippines

**Abstract:** *The study is an analysis of a child sexual abuse intervention program entitled Project Proper Touch. The Project Proper Touch is a locally and contextually designed program for sexual abuse prevention. This project is done through a puppet show with the goals of helping children be familiarized with what is proper and improper touches; acquire basic understanding on child sexual abuse; and the ability to protect themselves. The study utilized a mixed-method design. Findings revealed that majority of the beneficiaries “agreed” that the presentation as a whole is “very satisfactory.” Almost a hundred percent revealed that the presentation is an outstanding one and the messages were clearly conveyed. On being equipped to handle untoward instances leading to abuse and improper touching, respondents signified a high approval and declared that they are now more than equipped and knowledgeable. A considerable number have experienced sexual abuse and improper touching from persons not related to them and others from members of their immediate family. Most of them are males and majority were afraid after the incidents and told about it to others who have given them some form of advice.*

**Key words:** *child sexual abuse, intervention program, proper touch, improper touch, extension program*

### Introduction

Child sexual abuse cases are becoming a very serious problem and rampant even worldwide. Statistics are revealing proofs of alarming results. Across the world, significant numbers of children experience sexual abuse, resulting in lifelong consequences for victims (WHO, 2016). In the Philippines alone, 100,000 children have been sexually abused. Of them, 60,000 children have been prostituted. Meanwhile, according to a statistics, nearly 700,000 children are abused in the U.S annually which were confirmed by Pulido et. al. (2015) that among US children, the incidence rate of sexual abuse was 24% in 2009, and in 2012, 62936 cases of child sexual abuse were substantiated nationwide and authorities suspect that large numbers go unreported. About one in three girls and one in seven boys were sexually abused during childhood. Many of these children will never tell anyone about what happened to them, often as a result of threats or manipulation by the perpetrator (Finkelhor et. al, 2008). Children are the greatest gift to humanity and childhood is an important and impressionable stage of human development (Attri, 2014). With such kind of reports and realities, it is but of deemed importance to see the need of

eliminating situations of child abuse worldwide. Child protection programs should be concentrated on the efforts of lessening the instances of sexual child abuse (Moreno-Manso et. al., 2014) by setting up an education program that will give awareness to these children that are very vulnerable victims.

Child sexual abuse is any sexual act with a child by a parent, an adult or someone who is older or more powerful than the child. It involves forcing, tricking, bribing, threatening or pressuring a child into sexual acts. The abuse can be physical, verbal or emotional and includes such acts as sexual touching, exposing the child to pornography, taking pornographic pictures of the child, “peeping” at the child, exposing oneself to a child, and attempting/performing oral, anal, or vaginal penetration (Marshall University Women’s Center, 2015).

Meanwhile, The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network define sexual assault that includes sexual touching and fondling. Though, the prevalence of child sexual abuse is difficult to determine because it is often not reported and experts agree that the incidence is far greater than what is reported to authorities (Finkelhor, 2007).

The need for intervention programs has realized by many advocates and organizations. The effectiveness of these child abuse prevention programs has been researched and analyzed in several studies (Topping and Barron, 2009). The research literature notes the need for evaluations based on reliable measures (Brown, 2016). Prevention programs designed for children are an important part of a multifaceted strategy to build community efforts to prevent child sexual abuse, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2011). NSVRC reported that teaching children to avoid child sexual abuse may involve teaching them: (1) the concept of ‘private zones’ and what parts of the body are considered ‘private’; (2) the different kinds of appropriate and inappropriate touching that a child can experience; (3) that it is possible that a person whom the child knows and likes may try to hurt them; and (4) to trust their intuition about people and situations. These and other things are the concerns why the project and this study was done.

## **Review of Related Literature**

One of the earlier child sexual abuse prevention program was done by Borkin and Frank in 1986 (Moreno-Manso et. al., 2014). The program also involves a puppet show designed to teach children their right to resist an inappropriate touch and the importance of telling a trusted figure if someone has touched them inappropriately; and group discussion of safety rules to prevent sexual abuse. Results from the year-long pilot study suggest that the program was well-received by preschoolers, teachers, and parents and that such a program can be easily and inexpensively implemented into the school setting (PsycINFO Database Record, 2016).

Tower (2003) came out with a user manual series and stressed in the latest edition the basis for the involvement of educators in combating the problem of child abuse and neglect. One of the researches with the same concern was the evaluation that was done by Pulido et. al. (2015), wherein they used a prevention program from which they called as the Safe Touches, in a low

socioeconomic status and found it to be effective since young children benefited from a school-based one-time prevention program.

Moreno-Manso et. al. (2014), also found the need of introducing and making an analysis of a child abuse prevention program in an educational context. The analysis was found to be effective in improving a child's capacity to face potentially threatening situations whose aims were for children to gain an awareness of abuse, identify situations of abuse and learn strategies to face them.

The most prominent among the different evaluations of child sexual abuse prevention is the study done by Topping and Barron (2009). They have done a systematic and critical review of purely school-based child sexual abuse prevention program efficacy studies. They found out that many studies had methodological limitations (e.g., sampling problems, lack of adequate control groups, lack of reliable and valid measures). However, most investigators claimed that their results showed significant impact in primary prevention (increasing all children's knowledge or awareness and/or abuse prevention skills) although there was little evidence of change in disclosure.

In the Philippines, Lapa, Garcia et. al. (2012), are one of those who have done a study on child abuse. Findings revealed that child abuse damages the child not only physically but also psychologically. Furthermore, part of the problem in abuse is the witnesses' unwillingness to get involved in the earliest possible time. The researcher recommends public education, creation of a crisis intervention program, and undertaking of a parallel study to identify the type of abuse at specific age groups, examination of a ten-year data and establishment of the dynamics of abuse.

An earlier study has seen the importance of education and intervention program in the Philippines. For Protacio-Marcelino et. al. (1998), education is the most widely practiced forms of preventive intervention. According to these authors, in general, here in the Philippines, the theories, methods and approaches used in intervention works are dominantly based on Western models. Regrettably, there is a dearth of local theorizing from a Philippine perspective. Moreover, existing interventions work for child abuse cases is basically eclectic, with the government and non-government responding in different ways. They concluded that it can be said that intervention work is still at a stage of "pakapa-kapa (nowhere)," an experimental stage where the most effective method still has yet to be identified. Up to the present, (Ramiro et. al. in Roche, 2017), responses to child maltreatment specifically child sexual abuse in the Philippines, despite its significance and impact, policy and research to its concern remains in its infancy after the many years that this has been a big threat to the lives of many children in the country. Intervention work on child abuse in the Philippines, Protacio-Marcelino et. al (1998) then concluded, needs to be elevated to the next level, with proper documentation and impact evaluation as requisites: the development of localized theories and methodologies for helping the victims/survivors of child abuse.

Being a child poses the greatest risk factor for sexual victimization (Brown, 2016). It is truly noteworthy to intensify the campaign against sexual child abuse. Moreover, it is the obligation of the Filipinos to promote a society where the rights of Filipino children are respected and protected and the education sector is one that can do so much. If children will remain unaware

of the possible threats that could bring harm into their lives, the more the impossibility for them to come up with self-protective skills. A key focus within a number of international framework documents is for prevention education to be targeted at young people (Carmody, 2003). Thus, the program Project Proper Touch was born and now the focus of this paper.

The Project Proper Touch is a locally and contextually designed program for sexual abuse education and intervention that could fill the gap in local literatures. It is also one of the extension programs of the Bulacan State University College of Education which was conceptualized and created by one of its faculty members, Dr, Liwayway Galingan. It is an active response to the need of Filipino children to be protected from abuse, especially of physical and sexual abuses which most of the time lead to long-term negative consequences. This is primarily meant to give awareness and teach school children on what to do if someone touches the intimate parts of their bodies making them feel uncomfortable and most of the time lead to a long lasting detrimental psychological effect. This project is done through a puppet show that lasts for at least two (2) and a half hour, including the open forum and distribution of evaluation forms and questionnaires guided by the following goals: 1) be familiar with what is proper touch and improper touch; 2) acquire basic understanding on child abuse; and 3) acquire the “know how” to strengthen their ability to protect themselves.

The main objective of the study is to provide an impact analysis of the Project Proper Touch and the efficiency of its implementation, as a sexual abuse and assault intervention program and as an extension project of the Bulacan State University Extension Services Office and the College of Education. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. How do the beneficiaries perceive the project presentation based on the learning acquired, content, skills of the presenter, manner of presentation and materials used?
2. How does the puppet show fulfill its mission of providing information to the beneficiaries in terms of acceptance, understanding, awareness and information gained?
3. What is the extent and nature of sexual assault or abuse experienced as revealed by the participants?
4. How may the outcomes/results of the activity be described based on the reactions and comments obtained from the participants?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

From the Bulacan State University being the main proponent, a minimum of two teachers were present in every session together with the staff of the extension services office to foresee and supervise the puppet shows that are being done by select students from the College of Education.

The participating schools are the eleven (11) elementary schools from the two (2) municipalities of Bulacan which are also considered as two school districts. Results from the two municipalities are presented individually to find out in which areas sexual abuse became more prevalent which were labeled as District A and B to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The data used were those gathered from the most recent implementation of the puppet show

(2016). The number of students that participated in the project are composed of 650 students in District A and 418 from District B for a total of 1068 students, which ranges from grade 1 to 6 and ages between 7 to 12.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Quantitative and qualitative methods of research were done. The study utilized two sets of questionnaires, the first is the evaluation form regarding the presentation of the puppet show and the other one is a questionnaire designed to find out the extent of the program outcomes which were treated quantitatively by descriptive statistics.

The participants were asked to write secretly on a piece of paper their comments and questions after the presentation. Responses obtained here were treated qualitatively and data were distilled to determine some response thematic patterns. A focus group was also formed based on the nature and degree of the answers of the beneficiaries in this area to triangulate the results and obtain validity on their answers.

On the questions about the nature of the presentation and the main objectives which are all about proper and improper touches, a binary-response of yes or no was used in order to lessen the difficulty of responding since the majority of the beneficiaries are young children.

For the questions regarding the nature of sexual abuse they might have experienced, different kinds of options-responses were used.

### **Research Limitations**

The study is an analysis and evaluation of the program that is intended to give information and awareness that dealt only on assessing whether it was able to help the children to be far of being victims and to detect indicators that might signify that a child is being sexually abused. It does not include legal aspects and clinical intervention.

The beneficiaries were the elementary schools in only two municipalities of Bulacan since they were the ones that requested for the program and where a duly signed Memorandum of Agreement with the Extension Office of Bulacan State University were available.

### **Results and Discussion**

The gathered data that were inferred quantitatively are presented as follows: Of all of the eleven questions about the nature of the presentation, the presenters, the material used, if the objectives were met as well as the content and messages that need to be clarified, the responses obtained an overall weighted mean of 4.35 with a verbal interpretation of “agree” that is based on a five-point Likert scale.

The beneficiaries were also asked to give an overall impression and the result obtained a weighted mean of 4.44 with a verbal interpretation of “very satisfactory”.

On the question asking what aspect of the presentation needs further improvement, the responses were ranked based on its frequencies and the top five are the following:

- 1 – there has to be another form of training or a broader education campaign about sexual abuse;*
- 2 – emphasis has to be given on how to be free from fears;*
- 3 – satisfactorily done;*
- 4 – nothing to say and add; and*
- 5 – lengthen the presentation and deepen the concerned issues.*

From the results obtained, the presentation itself was considered by the respondents to be an outstanding one since it gained a one hundred percent approval. Moreover, the message that needs to be conveyed was achieved by almost a hundred percent.

The most striking aspect is on the question if they became knowledgeable enough on what to do when a situation arise wherein an improper touch will most likely to happen obtain a 94.62% response. Let us remember that the main objective of the puppet show itself is to increase awareness and understanding on the part of the children when a touch is improper that might therefore increase the possibility of being victimized of sexual abuse. Based on these data alone, we can conclude that the project is a big success and was able to produce a magnanimous impact to the beneficiaries.

But in spite of this information, it is also a saddening fact and alarming one to find out that there is an 8.77% or 57 pupils in District A that had experienced improper touching and there is a 4.46% or 29 pupils that are presently experiencing or continuously experiencing not only improper touching but a real sexual abuse cases.

It seems that the trend of incidence is almost the same with what is happening in literatures. In the United States, a Bureau of Justice Statistics report shows 1.6 % (sixteen out of one thousand) of children between the ages of 12-17 were victims of rape/sexual assault. Almost the same is the report by Tower (2003) on sexual abuse. Of all reported child maltreatment cases, almost one-tenth (9.6 percent) had been sexually abused, an estimated rate of 1 per 1,000 children.

The worst that can be considered from the findings of the study is the fact that 8.92% of those who did the sexual abuse or just the improper touching are members of the victims' immediate family.

On the nature of what the respondents have experienced in District A, a very surprising amount of 44.2% or 38 pupils are males who had experienced being touched on their sex organs compared to a 20.9% or 18 girls that had experienced being touched on their vagina. Although it can be noted the addition of 29.1% or the 25 female cases that indicated being touched on their breasts, the number of male victims is still larger. Another surprising revelation are those who had experienced being touched on their buttocks that is composed of 41.9% of the group or 36 of them.

These facts are implying that unlike before, the girls are the ones that are considered to be prone to sexual assault and abuse (Ramiro et. al. in Roche, 2017). Based on these findings, it seems that nowadays, boys are also in great danger, such the case of these pupils from District A. The reason might be the cultural and gender elements that cause and perpetuate child abuse are not adequately addressed in the existing programs and methods of intervention for child abuse (Protacio-Marcelino et. al.,1998).

On the responses of what are their reactions after experiencing improper touching, “natakot” (fear) and “lumayo” (just ignore), get an equal share of 61 or 70.9% which is the highest among the four options. Regarding the perpetrators, persons not related to the victims got the highest frequency of 68 or a 79%. Next are those that belong to the immediate members of the family, such as fathers and brothers and last offenders in the rank are the grandfathers which is also a finding of Maiquilla et. al. and Terol in Roche (2017) and Velayo (2006), that in most cases of child sexual abuse, the victim knew the offender.

Majority of the respondents also revealed that they told the incidents to other people and the majority of these people tried to give them advises on what to do next but no actions were done.

In the second district, the same trend regarding the presentation became obvious. The majority of the respondents found the presentation to be outstanding and also having obtained clearly the messages it is intended to proclaim.

With regards to being equipped with the ‘know how’s of improper touching and prevention, there is only a bit more than a half of the respondents answered yes, gaining a number of 361 or only 55.5% and only 1.07% responded that they are not. These could only mean that the respondents are still uncertain whether they could prevent improper touching to happen to them or not. It seems that they want to indicate that many among them are still lacking with the necessary skills and knowledge in preventing these things to happen to them, from which a part of the findings that was confirmed from their answers on the qualitative part. Another factor that might have contributed to this result is the fact that those who performed the puppet show in District B were a different group of students, which might somehow projected it differently compared to the groups that made the presentation in District A.

In the case of District B, comparing them to District A, data revealed that there is a greater number of pupils or 140 of them (which is almost a half of the number of the victims in District A) who admitted that they have experienced improper touching and some of them to the point of being raped (as revealed on the secretly done responses and comments) with an additional of 39 who are still experiencing improper touching continuously. Also, what seems to be alarming is the reality that 45 out of 179 cases, the perpetrators are members of the victims’ immediate families.

Just like the cases in District A, it is also somewhat surprising that even if we put together the number of girls who have experienced being touched in their vaginas and breast, which is 18 and 39 for a total of 57, the 75 or 41.9% of the male victims is still greater with the addition of 65 out of the 70 who have experienced being touched on their buttocks. But it can be said also that this

can be a weakness of this study, for it has not been clarified whether the males were just having the courage to admit and reveal what happened to them as compared to the female respondents which is usually a personality trait of many Filipino children. Maybe this can be one suggestion for future researches.

To add to these realities, is the fact that gleaning on the individual questionnaires, five among the perpetrators of these male respondents are their own fathers. Although there are five individuals that did not reveal which sensitive parts of the body have been touched, there are two that did not reveal who did it to them. These facts seem to imply that a number of victims were having some fear which was revealed on the secretly written comments and interviews.

The same trend is shown on the part of who are the perpetrators with persons that are not related to the victims got the highest frequency of 128, next are brothers, followed by fathers and the last in the rank are the grandfathers. Also, the majority of the respondents said that they have told the incidents to others and most of them just plainly gave them some advices.

### Qualitative Part

About the questions and other inquiries that were written secretly by the respondents after the session, three categorical themes arose.

The first one concerns their welfare after they have experienced improper touching with questions such as follows:

*“What shall I do if had experienced/continuously experiencing sexual abuse...?”*

*“What will happen to me... /what if I got pregnant/got sick (STD)...?”*

*“How can I remove the fear/trauma/Is there any cure to lessen the fear/trauma...?”*

*“What if the perpetrator is a member of my family/my father/the boyfriend of my mother..?”*

*“What if no one believes in me?”*

*“What if the one who did it to me is also a girl/boy? Will I just let it pass?”*

Another category that came out concerns legal aspect, such as:

*“Where/to whom am I going to ask for help?”*

*“Will the perpetrator goes to jail just because he did/is doing improper touching to me?”*

*“What if no one is there? /What if I don't have witness?”*

*“What if who did it to me is also a minor?”*

In the nature of these replies, the beneficiaries seemed to obtained courage due to the program and has incurred the desire to make an action and come to an end what they are experiencing.

The last category came out based on curiosity and regrets of the victims or in their quest/longing for an answer such as the following:

*“How come they can do such things/How come they can do that to a child like me?”*

*“Why is it there are rapist/maniacs/persons who loves to do improper touching?”*

*“How come my father/grandfather/older brother/uncle was able to do this thing to me?”*

## Conclusion

Although the concern of the study may be somewhat limited as it is, as well as the number of children involved, even in these weaknesses and limitations, a number of incidences leading to some impact were able to be identified.

First, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (Martyniuk and Dworkin, 2011), helping children to avoid sexual abuse may involve teaching them: 1) the concept of ‘private zones’ and what parts of the body are considered ‘private’; 2) the different kinds of appropriate and inappropriate touching that a child can experience; 3) that it is possible that a person whom the child knows and likes may try to hurt them; 4) to trust their intuition about people and situations, which were all given and achieved through the project.

Second, it is difficult to present complicated prevention concepts in a way that is understandable to children, especially when children are young (Finkelhor, 2007). In this case, this hindrance was eliminated since the presentation was made in a puppet show and native language where children are said to adapt easily and found it enjoyable for them to watch. Hence, researches declared that an effective prevention program combines the techniques of modeling, group discussion, and role-playing (Davis & Gidycz, 2000; Topping & Barron, 2009 on Martyniuk and Dworkin, 2011) which is the nature of Project Proper Touch.

Third, after a careful analysis of the data gathered, it can be said that the sexual abuse intervention program had made a significant impact. The presentation was declared to be an outstanding one and had presented the messages that it needs to convey. The intended outcome of giving the full information on how these young people might be equipped in knowing when a touch is proper or improper and in preventing any assault or sexual abuse that might happen to them were achieved. Those that were experiencing sexual abuses were alarmed and found hope that produced enough courage to make an action that might stop these horrible things. Most of all, the authorities of the schools and the respective advisers became aware that some of their students are experiencing different forms of sexual abuse and through them, counseling and some necessary actions became possible. Moreover, since the project is a joint effort with some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s), legal and other measures also became possible.

A great revelation is the reality that the focus must not be concentrated with possible female victims only, but it was revealed that we need to give the same attention and care with their male counterparts. This, in turn, could serve as a milestone to refine future intervention works.

Indeed, in the study, it was proven that education is the most widely practiced forms of preventive intervention (Protacio-Marcelino, 1998; Tower, 2003; Velayo, 2006; Roche, 2017). That an intervention education such as The Project Proper Touch can be used in both formal and informal settings with a satisfactory degree of success. Hence, relating to the recommendations of different researches, this is an answer to the need for a contextualized and locally designed intervention program for child sexual abuse problems.

For further researches, it is recommended that a parallel study be done in other areas and strengthen the findings by including a deeper qualitative process to look into the dimensions of historicity, frequency, severity and range of the incidents. It is also suggested to take into account the demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, location, etc. since researches found out that children who do not live with both parents as well as children living in homes marked by parental discord, divorce, or domestic violence, have a higher risk of being sexually abused (The National Center for Victims of Crime, 2017). Moreover, prevention can be tailored more specifically towards those people or sites identified as having a greater risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence or sexual assault (Carmody, 2003).

#### References:

- Attri, A. K (2014). Indian Initiatives Against Child Labour. *International Journal of English and Education*. Vol.3, issue 2; [www.ijee.org](http://www.ijee.org).
- Brown, D. M. (2017). Evaluation of Safer, Smarter Kids: child sexual abuse prevention curriculum for kindergartners. *Child and adolescent social work journal*, 213-222.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). <https://www.bjs.gov/>
- Carmody, M. (2003). Conceptualising the prevention of sexual assault and the role of education. Australian Institute of Family Studies. [www.aifs.gov.au/acssa](http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa)
- Finkelhor, D. (2007). Prevention of sexual abuse through educational programs directed toward children. *Pediatrics*, 120; doi:10.1542/peds.2007-0754
- Finkelhor, D., Hammer, H., & Sedlak, A. (2008). Sexually assaulted children: National estimates and characteristics Bulletin: National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrown away Children Series.
- Lapa, M.I., Cempron, J., Garcia, L. and Obiedo, A. (2012). Child Abuse: The Profile of the abused and the Abuser. Cebu Normal University - College of Nursing - <https://www.academia.edu/2491137/>
- Marshall University Women's Center (2015). <http://www.marshall.edu/wcenter/sexual-assault/types-of-sexual-assault/>
- Martyniuk, H., & Dworkin, E. (2011). Child sexual abuse prevention: Programs for children. National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 1-1.

- Moreno-Manso, J. M., et. al. (2014). Application of a child abuse prevention programme in an educational context. *Anales de Psicología/Annals of Psychology*, 1014-1024.
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2011). <https://www.nsvrc.org/>
- Protacio-Marcelino et. Al. (1998). CHILD ABUSE IN THE PHILIPPINES: An Integrated Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography. <http://aboutphilippines.ph/documents-etc/ChildAbuse.pdf>
- Pulido, M. L. et. al . (2015). Knowledge Gains Following a Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program Among Urban Students: A Cluster-Randomized Evaluation; *American Journal of Public Health*; July 2015, Vol 105, No. 7.
- PsycINFO Database Record (2016). American Psychological Association. <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1987-05714-001>
- Roche, S. (2017). Child protection and maltreatment in the Philippines: a systematic review of the literature. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 4(1), 104-128.
- The National Center for Victims of Crime (2017).<https://victimsofcrime.org/>
- Topping, K. J., & Barron, I. G. (2009). School-based child sexual abuse prevention programs: A review of effectiveness. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 431-463.
- Tower, C. (2003). The role of educators in preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect.
- World Health Organisation (2016). Child maltreatment fact sheet. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/>
- Velayo, R. (2006). A Perspective on Child Abuse in the Philippines. In *Violence in Schools* (pp. 191-205). Springer, Boston, MA