

School board approves sex abuse prevention program

- BY ANGIE HOLLAND Managing editor

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Angie Holland/The HeraldCrisis Intervention Services sexual abuse advocate Martha Comfort presents the sexual abuse prevention program Care for Kids to the Oskaloosa school board on Tuesday, Jan. 8. The program will begin this school year for students kindergarten through second grades. Only students with permission from parents may participate.

OSKALOOSA — A research and evidence-based, trauma-informed sexual abuse prevention program for children will be coming to Oskaloosa schools this school year.

The program will be opt-in only, meaning parents must choose to have their children in grades kindergarten through second grade participate. Children who do not return a form will not be involved in the education.

Martha Comfort, a Crisis Intervention Services sexual assault advocate, will be teaching the program, which was approved by the Oskaloosa Community School District Board of Directors on Tuesday, Jan. 8.

"The children that I see in the classroom," she said, "their parents want them there."

Oskaloosa Community School District Curriculum Director Steph Wilson said Comfort approached her about the program and gave a presentation to the elementary school counselors.

"After talking with that group, realizing that it would work well with our current structure with counseling," she said, "we're bringing it here for approval to use for this school year with our K, 1 and 2."

Comfort said the Care for Kids program is an early childhood sexual abuse prevention program that works on social-emotional development and improving communication between adults and children.

"We're teaching kids to ask for help when they need it. It nurtures children's social and emotional development," she said. "We help kids to understand their feelings and recognize feelings in other children, teaching empathy and nurturing."

It emphasizes adults are responsible for the protection of children, Comfort said.

"Too many former child sexual abuse prevention programs put it on the child," she said. "No, no, no."

'Stranger danger' should never be a primary prevention program, Comfort said, and school is the perfect environment to teach prevention education.

"Our schools are a safe haven for our students," she said. "Kids experience a lot of trauma, a lot of toxic stress goes in their lives. And for them, school is their safe haven."

Care for Kids, Comfort said, is research-based.

"The program is put together based on peer-reviewed journal articles and a lot of research. It is trauma-informed," she said. "That means that we keep the need of those kids and even the teachers in mind when I am teaching"

Comfort said you never know who has experienced trauma in their life, so you never want to re-victimize.

"And never use the word 'should' with kids. 'You should have gone and asked for help, you should have told,'" she said. "That's re-victimizing them and we never do that."

The curriculum is a lesson progression format, with messages expanded based on developmental growth. Principles will be taught and discussed, a book will be read, followed by discussion and an activity.

The principles

- Asking for help. This is not tattling, Comfort said, but going to someone for help.
- Identifying a mixed up, confused feeling. Children who are able to recognize and communicate their feelings are at less risk for sexual abuse victimizations. Children learn that when they feel mixed up or confused, they can tell a trusted adult and ask for help.
- Learning the names of all body parts, including their genitals, in order to give children the vocabulary to tell what has happened to them. Using accurate words reduces a child's risk of being victimized.

"I am not teaching sex-ed to preschoolers," she said. "We need to be teaching our kids all the names of their body parts."

- Learn to be nurturing and empathetic.
- Asking for permission (consent). Children will learn about asking permission before touching other people.
- No secrets regarding touching and review of previous lessons. This principle will discuss the common thread throughout all the lessons, which is children can ask for help.

