



Child sexual abuse prevention goes online: Introducing “Cool and Safe” and its effects



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ABSTRACT

Due to the high prevalence and serious consequences of child sexual abuse, various preventive efforts were developed in the last years. The present contribution introduces a newly developed web-based training aiming at the prevention of child sexual abuse and describes the results of the first evaluation of “Cool and Safe”. In the study children were asked about their knowledge, behavioral intentions, emotional awareness, and anxiety before and after participating in “Cool and Safe”. Results showed that the training improves knowledge and trains secure behavioral strategies. Moreover, a decrease in the hiding of emotions for children who participated in the training in comparison to a control group was found. No increase in anxiety could be detected. With respect to the acceptance of the prevention program positive results were obtained. The benefits of web-based prevention and especially the advantages of “Cool and Safe” will be discussed.

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1. Introduction

Caregivers, educators and prevention researchers do their best to ensure a healthy and positive development of all children. One risk for a healthy child development with serious consequences is the experience of child sexual abuse. With the experience of child sexual abuse, mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, or suicide attempts are associated (Chen et al., 2010). Pereda, Guilera, Forns, and Gómez-Benito (2009) conducted a meta-analysis to highlight that the prevalence of child sexual abuse is alarmingly high all over the world. For example, 25.3 percent of women and 7.5 percent of men reported sexual abuse in their childhood in the U.S.-American studies reviewed by Pereda et al. (2009). Due to the far reaching negative consequences and the high prevalence, programs aiming at the prevention of child sexual abuse have been developed. Efforts to prevent child sexual abuse can address different target groups, such as potential offenders, children, caregivers or the community (Finkelhor, 2009). Especially child-centered prevention can take various forms (videos, puppet shows, group discussions, lecture, drama; Davis & Gidycz, 2000). Fortunately, a lot of research has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of child-centered prevention programs. Mean effects of large size regarding children's knowledge were reported in meta-analyses, whereas negative effects such as increased anxiety are very rare (Davis & Gidycz, 2000; Rispens, Aleman, & Goudena, 1997; Topping & Barron, 2009). Topics usually addressed by abuse prevention programs are good and bad feelings and secrets as well as strategies to reduce the likelihood of being abused or to report abuse (Topping & Barron, 2009). As manifold as the target groups of child sexual abuse prevention are, as multifaceted are the methods and teaching strategies. However, many programs or offers are realized in a face-to-face context (Zwi et al., 2009). Wurtele (2009) argued that modern media allows for new forms of prevention programs and that modern media should be used to deliver prevention programs to the target groups. A comparable statement was recently presented by Collin-Venzina, Daigneault, and Hébert (2013). The authors suggested using web sites or online interactive games for sexual abuse prevention. In e.g., health prevention, programs that use computers or the Internet have already been developed (Palmer, Graham, & Elliott, 2005). Even in the prevention of child sexual abuse first approaches have been developed (BZgA, 2014; von Weiler, 2013). The present contribution supports the idea to use the Internet for the delivery of prevention programs and outlines the advantages of web-based prevention. In

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addition, the newly developed prevention program “Cool and Safe” is introduced and its unique features are highlighted, before the results that could be obtained in an evaluation of this prevention program are presented.

1.1. New media as a promising step for prevention

Kenny (2007) was among the first researchers who developed a web-based training for counseling master students and education undergraduates that included information about signs and symptoms of sexual abuse, statistics, consequences of abuse, and reporting procedures. An evaluation showed that the program was effective in improving the knowledge that the users had about child sexual abuse. Since then, several other programs that teach professionals about child sexual abuse have been developed (e.g., *Darkness to Light*, 2014; Hoffmann et al., 2013; Paranel, Thomas, & Derrick, 2012). These examples show that information about child sexual abuse can successfully be taught via web-based training. Due to the promising results it is desirable to expand the development of web-based offers to teach knowledge and to improve preventive skills. Offers for different target groups (e.g., children, professionals, potential offenders) should be developed, implemented and evaluated. The claim that web-based offers for children should be created is supported by findings from other prevention domains, where it has already been shown that web-based offers can successfully be delivered to children. For example, Rubin-Vaughan, Pepler, Brown, and Craig (2011) were able to show that an online game can raise awareness about bullying and promote knowledge about friendliness and fairness. Palmer et al. (2005) reported a significant knowledge gain in fifth graders after taking part in an online prevention program called Healthy Hearts 4 Kids. Even abduction prevention, which might be comparable to abuse prevention, can be successfully conducted by computer-based training (Seckinger-Bancroft, 2010).

2. “Cool and SAFE” – A newly developed web-based training

“Cool and Safe” is a web-based prevention program targeting children in elementary school age. The major goal of “Cool and Safe” is to prevent child sexual abuse by teaching knowledge about safe behaviors, appropriate and inappropriate touches as well as good and bad secrets. As offenders can be strangers as well as familiar to the child, and can target them in person or via the Internet, the issue is addressed with respect to three different settings of children’s everyday life: 1) interactions with strangers, 2) interactions on the Internet and 3) interactions with acquaintances or family members. The program is available on the Internet and it can be accessed free of costs at www.coolandsafe.eu (available languages are German and French). “Cool and Safe” is divided into five thematic units that have to be completed in a predesigned order. Unit one contains the topics bad feelings and good feelings as well as good and bad secrets. Furthermore, it is explained that every child has the right to decide, who is allowed to touch him or her. In unit two the topic of stranger danger is discussed. Children learn that they should keep distance to cars and that it is their right to refuse to talk to strangers when they are alone. Safety strategies for ambivalent or risky situations are discussed. Unit three focuses on topics that are typical for the use of the Internet such as friend requests in social networks, responses to harassment in chat programs, and protecting private information. The topic of sexual abuse by acquaintances and family members is addressed in unit 4. Children are taught that nobody has the right to hurt them or to touch them in private parts of their body. In unit five all of the training contents are repeated and summarized. The completion of the whole program takes about two hours. The program completion can be paused at any time and can be continued at a later time. With the help of a nickname and password, children can access the training at any time. As the training is designed for elementary school children the training is completely read aloud by a tutor figure that guides the children through the training. Children are involved in the program by various film clips, stories, tasks and games and can choose between different behavior alternatives.

3. Quality aspects of prevention programs

When developing a prevention program, several quality criteria have to be considered. Nation et al. (2003) list nine core principals of effective prevention programs, varying from comprehensiveness to outcome evaluation. Additionally, Wolf (1978) emphasizes the importance of acceptance by the participants for any kind of treatment. Other principals that are especially important for child sexual abuse prevention were pointed out by other authors. These include support systems in case of disclosure (Barron & Topping, 2010), active participation of students (Davis & Gidycz, 2000), and, as almost every child in Europe (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011) and the USA (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) has access to the Internet, the coverage of the online risks as an important topic (Wurtele, 2009). All these requirements have to be met by face-to-face as well as web-based prevention programs. How “Cool and Safe” meets these requirements can be found in Table 1. Especially important for this study is the outcome evaluation, that should not only include effects on knowledge, but also should address how the program affects children emotionally. This is important because 1) dealing with positive and negative emotions is often part of prevention programs (Topping & Barron, 2009) and 2) programs should not increase anxiety in children.

4. Goals of the present study

This study was conducted to evaluate the prevention program “Cool and Safe”. Evaluating a newly developed program means to assess its effectiveness and acceptance. Usually measuring the changes in participants’ knowledge and behavioral strategies assesses the effectiveness of programs preventing sexual abuse. Therefore, it was important to analyze if there was an increase of knowledge and secure behavioral intentions. A further goal of the present contribution is to analyze if there are any negative side effects related to the completion of “Cool and Safe” (Topping & Barron, 2009). Therefore it was analyzed if the individual level of anxiety differed before and after the training.

As many other programs (Topping & Barron, 2009), “Cool and Safe” focuses on emotions and emphasizes that children should pay attention to their feelings and talk about bad feelings with trusted adults. Therefore, it was expected that children should show an increase of emotional awareness after completing “Cool and Safe”. In addition, to the indicators of the program’s effectiveness we were interested in the acceptance of the program (Wolf, 1978). Therefore, the children were asked to report their levels of acceptance of “Cool and Safe”.

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