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From #MeToo to #HaveTheConversation

Over the past year we have seen a dramatic shift in the public dialogue surrounding sexual assault, exploitation, and abuse. The #MeToo movement, the documentaries and reporting about R. Kelly and Michael Jackson, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony during Justice Kavanaugh's confirmation hearing, the recent charges against Mr. Robert Kraft, and the fallout from the conviction of US Gymnastics Association coach Larry Nassar have sparked an uncomfortable but important conversation.

Those of us on the front-lines helping survivors and working on preventative measures appreciate and applaud the efforts of the Cape Cod Times in highlighting the prevalence of these exploitative and criminal relationships both locally and nationally. Shining a light on such gross violations of human dignity is necessary if we are going to reduce the occurrence of sexual assault.

A few sobering statistics to keep in mind: One in four girls -- and one in six boys -- will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday. Most victims suffer in silence as it is estimated that more than 90 percent of abuse victims never report what happened to them. Even more alarming, more than 90 percent of perpetrators are someone that an abused child knows and trusts – a coach, camp counselor, teacher, someone in their faith community or family member.

Although awareness may be at an all-time high, when we listen and read the interviews of victims involved in many of these cases, the most common refrain we come across: “No one talked to us about child sexual abuse.”

That's because something vital is missing when the focus is solely on the believability of survivors, as is often the case. When the believability of the survivor is the focus, it discourages timely disclosures, intensifies victim-shaming/blaming, far too narrowly defines human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, and fuels confusion about why victims don't “fight back.” When the believability of survivors is the focus, the conversation about prevention, early detection and intervention fades into the background. Sadly, even with all of these high-profile cases in the news, child sexual abuse continues to be a taboo topic with a mountain of misunderstanding blocking a clear view of the issue.

As April has been designated National Child Abuse Prevention Month, we ask that parents and caregivers #HaveTheConversation with their children, their family, and friends. Yes, it's a sensitive conversation, but it doesn't have to be about sex or graphic details of abuse. For parents, it starts with talking to their children, early and often, about body safety and reporting. A part of that is being careful to use the correct words for body parts to minimize shame and misunderstandings.

Another part of that conversation is explaining to children which parts of their bodies are private, not to be touched by anyone, and reminding them they need to immediately tell an adult they trust if someone does touch them inappropriately. Children don't understand the nuances of who can “sometimes” touch their private parts, which is why it's also important to inform children that no one should be showing them their private parts or asking to touch them. That may seem obvious, but it is something that is often left unsaid.

The idea is to keep it simple and create a comfortable conversation that allows children to know they can talk to their parents/caregivers about what we (adults) may see as difficult. By taking these small but important steps, it makes it easier for the children and increases the likelihood a child will report abuse if it occurs.

Let's elevate the conversation to a higher level. We don't have to settle for a society where survivors stop at #MeToo. Let's #HaveTheConversation that creates space for children's voices to be heard; a place where the most vulnerable feel safe and empowered. We are here to help. If you want to learn more, have questions or need assistance, please contact us at Children's Cove at www.ChildrensCove.org

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