

Running head: Evaluation of a CSA Web-Based Survey

Evaluation of a Web-Based Survey  
on the Effectiveness of a  
Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program  
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## Abstract

In response to the high prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA), numerous programs have been focused on its prevention. The present study evaluated the efficacy of sexual abuse prevention information provided by *Darkness to Light* (D2L), a non-profit organization that works to place the burden of preventing CSA on adults. In the study, 117 participants completed web-based surveys both before and after reading the “7 Steps to Protecting our Children,” found on the D2L website. Results showed a significant increase in knowledge about CSA prevention ( $t(116) = -13.67, p < .001$ ) after exposure to the 7 Steps . These results indicate that exposure to the 7 steps is an effective way to increase knowledge about the prevalence and prevention of CSA.

Evaluation of a Web-Based Survey on the Effectiveness of a  
Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program

Extensive research has highlighted the high prevalence rates (25% of girls, 15% of boys are sexually abused before age 18) of CSA (e.g., Sandberg, Lynn, & Green, 1994). The focus of many child-oriented programs has been to define CSA for children and to explain how to detect and respond to an abusive situation. Research by Repucci and Haugard (1989) has suggested that many children do not possess the level of cognitive understanding and maturation necessary to detect and report sexual abuse. CSA encompasses so many elements, it is not only difficult to prepare a child for every possible approach, the resulting fear and insecurity instilled in the child could eliminate any benefit of such preparation (Bolen, 1999).

*Darkness to Light* is a non-profit organization whose mission is to prevent CSA by educating adults about the statistics, effects, and prevalence of CSA. By lifting the burden of CSA prevention from children and placing it on adults, D2L hopes to be more effective in raising awareness about CSA and its social and emotional implications.

The goal of the current study was to examine D2L's "7 Steps to Protecting Our Children," which include statistics and risk factors for CSA, techniques for limiting abusive situations, encouragement of open communication, and appropriate reactions to abuse. We hypothesized that after reading the "7 Steps to Protecting our Children" participants would have increased knowledge about child sexual abuse and its prevention.

## Method

### *Participants*

Study participants (97 females and 20 males) were those individuals who accessed D2L's website ([www.darkness2light.org](http://www.darkness2light.org)) and agreed to participate in a 14-item survey that contained questions about child sexual abuse. Most participants (73.2%) were Caucasian, although other racial/ethnic groups were represented as well (3.3% African American, 3.3% Hispanic, and 4.9% identified as "Other). The age of participants was distributed across several age categories with 30.1% between 30-39 years old, and 24.4% in the 18-29 and 25.2% in the 40-49 age categories, respectively. Almost all participants were from the United States (81.3%), with the remaining participants living in Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean Islands.

To ensure that participants completing the pre-exposure survey HAD NOT previously read the 7 Steps, they responded to the question, "Have you read the 7 Steps?" prior to taking the first survey. Those individuals (N=6) who responded that they had read the 7 steps were eliminated from analysis. Similarly, to ensure that individuals who completed the post-exposure survey HAD read the 7 steps when directed to do so, those individuals who responded "No," to "Have you read the 7 steps" (N=18) were eliminated from analysis

### *Materials*

The survey consisted of 14 Likert-scale statements focused on prevalence rates/other statistics, prevention strategies, and reporting procedures for CSA. The 5-point scale ranged from "Absolutely Agree" to "Absolutely Disagree." Statements were worded in such a way that half of the "correct" responses were at the positive end of the scale and half at the negative end of the scale. The positive and negative responses were randomly distributed.

Scoring was accomplished by issuing one point for every correct response (Absolutely Agree/Agree, Absolutely Disagree/Disagree, depending on the direction of the question), and no points for incorrect responses. The survey could only be submitted if all items were answered.

### *Procedure*

Upon first-time entry into the D2L website, a pop-up screen invited individuals to participate in the survey. Individuals had the option of not participating by closing the pop-up, or to participate by answering the question, “Have you read the 7 Steps to Protecting our Children?” Next, participants were directed to the survey where they used the mouse to select a response to each statement. At the end of the CSA questions, participants completed demographic questions, and were asked to provide an email address for follow-up surveys.

Upon completion of the survey, participants who had not previously read the 7 Steps were directed to read them. Upon exiting from the 7 Steps, participants were invited to take the survey a second time by answering the question “Have you read the 7 Steps to Protecting Our Children?” If participants answered “yes,” they were presented with the survey. If they answered “no,” they were given another opportunity to read the 7 steps. The same survey was given at pre- and post-exposure.

### Results

The **pre-test mean was 11.10** ( $SD = 1.62$ ) and the **post-test mean was 13.31** ( $SD = 1.09$ ). A paired samples t-test showed a significant improvement ( $t(116) = -13.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in participants’ knowledge of CSA and attitudes regarding its prevention after exposure to the 7 steps information.

### Discussion

Due to the pervasiveness of child sexual abuse, various prevention programs have been developed over the past 20 years. Many of these programs have focused on educating children to protect themselves from becoming victims of CSA; however, evaluation of child-oriented programs has not shown them to reduce a child’s chance of being abused (Bolen, 1999). Instead, research has suggested that prevention strategies that educate adults might be more effective.

*Darkness To Light* developed the “7 Steps to Protecting our Children” with the intention of placing the burden of preventing CSA on adults. This study evaluated the efficacy of this program by measuring knowledge of CSA statistics and prevention strategies before and after reading the 7 Steps. The data show that knowledge improved after exposure to the 7 Steps.

Although this study is an important first step in understanding how CSA prevention information enhances knowledge about how to protect children, more questions have been raised than answered. Currently, we are collecting 4-week follow up data to determine the extent to which the 7 steps information is retained. Also, we are including questions about behavioral change with the aim of measuring the actual impact of exposure to information about CSA on behaviors that lead to its prevention.

In addition to the follow-up investigation, we are including several important control groups in our on-line study. In particular, we are interested in the 4-week retention of those individuals who took the pre-exposure survey only compared to individuals who took both pre- and post-exposure surveys. Also, we are collecting data on a group of individuals who take the post-exposure survey only. These control groups facilitate an analysis of the impact of taking the survey on knowledge acquisition. They also allow us to explore the possibility of practice effects.

Because the on-line format of this study limits experimental control, we also plan to take our investigation into the laboratory, where we can fully implement a pre-exposure/post-exposure study with all of the relevant control groups. Although the laboratory format will have less ecological validity than the on-line version, a combination of the two types of studies will fill necessary gaps in our analysis of the efficacy of the 7 Steps as an educational tool.

## References

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