

Using Policies to Promote Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: An interview with Alisa Klein

[17:55] by Ali Mailen Perrotto for VAWnet, the National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (Recorded November 2012)

[music]

Intro: You are listening to the applied research podcast series featuring interviews with authors exploring key research topics by VAWnet, the National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women in partnership with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse.

AP- My name is Ali Perrotto and it is November 5, 2012. Today we are speaking with Alisa Klein, the advocate consultant for the Applied Research Paper entitled “Using Policies to Promote Child Sexual Abuse Prevention.” Alisa, thank you so much for joining me today to discuss this new paper. I’d like to start by asking you to share a little bit about what drew you to your work on this topic.

AK- I started working on the prevention of and response to child sexual abuse many years ago. In the 1980s while I was in college I started working first as a volunteer victim advocate and educator advocate at a rape crisis center, and then one summer when I was college I actually received a paid summer internship at a rape crisis center in a large city to develop a comprehensive protocol for responding to situations of child sexual abuse, including forming relationships with child serving agencies, law enforcement, clinicians and all kinds of other folks for a referral system that was going to be a part of the protocol that I was developing. I think that’s when I caught the policy bug. Several years later I went to graduate school to study Public Policy. After several years of working in international policy, I returned to the field of sexual violence prevention and response. I brought with me my knowledge and experience of public policy and the analysis and policy infrastructure building, strategic planning and implementation, and policy advocacy so that I could apply those skills to working on the issues related to the prevention of child sexual abuse and sexual violence more broadly. Then, for the past 12 years, I’ve been working almost exclusively in this field, working from a policy angle on prevention.

One other quick thing I want to say is that as a survivor myself of child sexual abuse, I’m really doing work that matters deeply to me and I love being part of a community that’s working to

bring about primary prevention and to find ways to prevent child sexual abuse before a child is harmed.

AP- Thank you so much for sharing your experience in the field and personally with this issue. It is really important that we have people working on it. I'm wondering if you can share how you understand or define policy?

AK- That's a really good question because policy is such an amorphous concept for so many people. I think a shorthand understanding of policy for many people is that policy is laws, you know, it's the laws that we have in place to regulate and control a societal problem or issue and I think people think that policy is made only at the legislative level by elected officials. Policy is actually so much more broad than that. There's both informal policy and formal policy and it's important to know that and to think about that because in order to be effective when we do policy advocacy we need to be aware of all those different levels so we can tackle our policy advocacy work on multiple fronts. I always start by defining informal policy first, and then formal policy. Interestingly, it helps to think about where policy is made and where it gets carried out by looking at the ecological model of public health prevention that we use a lot in this field and thinking about the four realms that are identified there, the individual, the relationship, the community, and the societal, because those are the same places where policy gets made and where it's implemented. I'll give a few examples.

For instance, how we as individuals respond to child sexual abuse, you know perhaps willfully ignoring it within our families and communities, looking the other way in situations of risk because we're scared to intervene or don't have the tools to intervene, or don't have the resources and support to do so—that essentially becomes informal individual policy regarding child sexual abuse prevention and response. At the community level, how we as communities haven't done a good job of developing formal policies to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse has become informal policies. And when I say communities here, I'm talking about anything from organizations to schools to churches to faith communities to particular ethnic or neighborhood-based communities. This inaction becomes communities informal policy around child sexual abuse. Another example of informal policy can be illustrated through looking at the late 1980s and 1990s practice of offering prevention programming to students, to children, about how to protect themselves from child sexual abuse. Enough schools and school systems instituted this kind of child-focused prevention education that we can actually consider this, although it wasn't mandated by law per se, a policy approach to child sexual abuse prevention. Teaching kids how to protect themselves constituted an informal community-based, or maybe we could even say a societal policy approach to child sexual abuse prevention. Those are all examples of informal policy.

If we're looking at formal policy, first, most clearly there's legislative and governmental policy. Then there's administrative policy that people don't think about much. That's policy that is made and carried out by administrative governmental agencies. As an example, the U.S. Department of Justice is an administrative agency at the federal level that interprets and rolls out legislation and policy practice. At the state level, the department of public safety or a public health department might be responsible for designing and implementing policy for responding to child sexual abuse. Those are examples of administrative policy at the state level or local level. Also at the governmental level we have policy that ends up being altered and ultimately made by the judicial branch of government. Court decisions often set policies for how we respond to social issues. Those are all levels where policy is made, all places where policy is made, and it's good to know this again because when we do policy advocacy work, we can kind of target any one of those three levels of formal, governmental policy—not just going to our policy makers, to our elected officials.

And then the last thing I want to say about what policy is, is somewhat controversial, even within the field of public policy, but I personally believe that the media is not just an influence on our decision making regarding policy, but that it actually constitutes public policy. Media today plays such a strong role in how we act as individuals, families, and communities. It has such strong influence on our decision making and essentially our policy. Especially with regard to something like child sexual abuse that I see media as a kind of purveyor of policy standards and practices.

A definition for public policy that I use takes into account all of these ways in which policy is made and affected. I'll just read it very quickly. Public policy is a course of public or private action or inaction chosen by a society and by members of a society to address a given problem or interrelated set of problems. It is the structures, norms, and culture we create and perpetuate around issues of social significance.

AP- What kinds of policies are out there now to address child sexual abuse?

AK- Well, to answer that, let's look first at formal policy. I have to say that almost everything that is in place around child sexual abuse is about child sexual abuse after it's been perpetrated. We don't have a lot of primary prevention oriented public policy at the formal level. For instance, we have mandate reporting laws that make it the legal obligation of certain professionals to report it to the authorities a suspected or know situation of child sexual abuse. We have CAPTA, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, that was passed in 1974 and reauthorized just recently in 2010. CAPTA is an act that addressed child maltreatment broadly. Although it contains a number of prevention oriented mandates, it doesn't address child sexual abuse prevention specifically, and the reason I wanted to bring that up is because I believe there's such a dearth of formal child sexual abuse specific policy because child sexual abuse has

kind of tended to get lost in the policy world between the fields of child maltreatment and sexual violence. Traditionally, sexual violence advocates seem to have left child sexual abuse largely up to child welfare folks to deal with. And then, child welfare and child maltreatment folks always saw child sexual abuse as the purview of sexual violence prevention advocacy. Community level prevention oriented policies, there's been that kind of disconnect so that nobody kind of picked up thinking around child sexual abuse prevention policy.

Focusing on community level prevention oriented policies and youth serving organizations, schools, things like that, we've seen a lot of no-touch policies for teachers and the people who work with kids; performing criminal background checks on potential employees; ensuring that there are always two adults present with a child or a group of children—that's the kind of stuff that we've seen at the community level. We've seen a movement away from policies and practice that focus on educating children about how to protect themselves and a movement toward adult and bystander responsibility in preventing child sexual abuse before its perpetrated.

The realm in which we've seen the preponderance of policy approaches to child sexual abuse has been in sex offender policy, and I think that's fairly clear to everyone. Both federally and at the state and local levels, there is just such an outcropping of laws related to sex-offender policy. It's not to say that those policies around responding to and managing sex offenders aren't necessary, but much of the policy that has been implemented is really faulty. I think there are two central reasons why this policy is particularly misguided. First, it doesn't address primary prevention at all. It's really responding to the people who perpetrate harm after the fact, after the harm has been done. Second, it targets a tiny fraction of the people who perpetrate child sexual abuse. We know from research that child sexual abuse is reported at a rate of only about 12 percent. Ultimately only about 3-5 percent of all people who perpetrate child sexual abuse even make their way into the criminal justice system. So, while we're focusing all of our efforts and time and money on that 3-5 percent of people who have perpetrated sexual harm—those folks who have make their way into the system—it has the effect of forcing us to neglect so many other ways that we should be keeping children safe and so many other kinds of policy approaches that we should be creating to be preventing child sexual abuse.

AP- What do you think should be included or involved in developing policy at the macro level?

AK- If we go back to the notion of where policy is made, both formally and informally, as a field we need to create a kind of matrix of targets, stakeholders, and allies, both likely and unlikely, for our policy advocacy work. In examining that matrix, we can consider a range of policies on a range of levels that will work comprehensively and interdependently to shift the policy environment for the prevention of child sexual abuse. Some things that come to mind for me

are mandating healthy sexuality education in schools and youth-serving organizations, the crafting and adoption of corporate policies that outline a commitment to desistance from sexualizing children in advertising, comprehensive education of media outlets, really diverse kinds of media outlets, about how to report on child sexual abuse in ways that focus on and encourage prevention instead of just covering the most horrific and sensationalized stories of child sexual abuse. At the federal level, at the more legislative level, and at the state level as well I think we should be focusing on the creation of funding streams for formative and evaluative research for the development of child sexual abuse prevention programming.

I have so many ideas that need time and funding and people power and the policy champions so that they can get some teeth behind them and get us moving in the right direction. I could go on forever about this, but I do want to say that I'm grateful that there are organizations like the National Coalition for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation, and the NSVRC and VAWnet, and the Ms. Foundation for Women that are finally taking policy approaches to prevention seriously and attempting to get some real policy advocacy work off the ground because I think the time has come. We've been working on this issue for 20, 25 years now and were focusing mainly on practice and programming and I think a policy approach to this issue is absolutely necessary for us to really make headway.

AP- How can organizations use policy to promote child sexual abuse prevention?

AK- I think policy mobilizes us in a different way than when we're just thinking about public education and programming—the things that we've done for so long. That's not to say that these things are separate from one another. In fact, I think they're very intertwined and interdependent for the success of each and both. Because policy work can be tackled from a number of directions, it's about mobilizing and empowering at the grassroots level. That, of course, takes individual, family and community education. You can see how those things are interdependent. Public policy advocacy work can also be more of a top down process, one where you can go to policy makers and convince them, for instance, to create funding streams and implement laws and so forth. Ideally, while you're doing public education and other types of programming, an organization should also be conducting policy level work, both formally and informally, grassroots and top-down policy-maker focused, while at the same time doing education and working with the media so that all things are affecting the other for optimal success.

AP- What do you think advocates and preventionists should take away from this paper?

AK- Well I would hope that it would open up their thinking around how policy work should be done, what kinds of work can be done, and how, in fact, there is interplay between public policy work and public education and prevention programming. They're so interdependent for success

that we can't leave one behind, and we certainly can't leave public policy behind. I think the paper has some very concrete ideas for what some of those target areas can be for public policy work. I really do hope that it serves people in that way.

AP- Thank you for taking the time to discuss your thoughts on policy and on this paper. "Using policies to promote child sexual abuse prevention" will be published and available for download on VAWnet in 2013.

[music]

Outro: Applied Research Papers and podcasts in this audio series can be found at www.vawnet.org. VAWnet is a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence supported by a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Music by Beulah.