

# Sexual Abuse Prevention Task Force Report

## About the Task Force

Prevent Child Abuse Iowa convened and staffed a task force on the prevention of sexual abuse of children, pursuant to Section 87 of Senate File 533, which was signed into law on July 27, 2011.

As provided in the legislation, this task force consisted of:

- Four ex-officio members of the General Assembly
- Appointees of the directors of the:
  - Department of Education
  - Department of Public Health
  - Department of Human Services
- A designee of the state court administrator
- Representatives of the Iowa County Attorneys association and the chief juvenile court administrators
- Representatives of the:
  - Iowa State Education Association
  - Iowa Association of School Boards
  - School Administrators of Iowa
  - Iowa Psychological Association
  - Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault
  - Prevent Child Abuse Iowa
  - Iowa's accredited Child Protection Centers

The task force conducted its first meeting on September 29, 2011 and met subsequently on October 31 and December 6. At the task force's final meeting on January 4, 2012, the committee approved this report, which is hereby submitted, along with a model school district policy addressing the sexual abuse prevention of children.

This report summarizes the charge from the general assembly, describes the work of the task force, provides an overview of child sexual abuse and its prevention, lists the policy goals to prevent child sexual abuse, and makes recommendations for legislative action.

**The task force appreciates the opportunity offered by the general assembly to serve on Iowa's first task force focusing on the prevention of child sexual abuse.**

## Task Force Goals

Section 87 of SF 533 gave the task force on preventing child sexual abuse three main responsibilities:

1. To develop a model policy addressing sexual abuse of children, for adoption by school districts
2. To create goals for state policy that would prevent child sexual abuse
3. To make recommendations for statutory changes and/or methods to foster cooperation among state agencies and between state and local governments and school districts

## Inside this report:

|                                    |          |
|------------------------------------|----------|
| <b>Sexual Abuse</b>                | <b>2</b> |
| <b>Prevention</b>                  | <b>2</b> |
| <b>Task Force Considerations</b>   | <b>3</b> |
| <b>State Goals</b>                 | <b>4</b> |
| <b>Legislative Recommendations</b> | <b>5</b> |
| <b>Conclusions</b>                 | <b>5</b> |
| <b>Task Force Members</b>          | <b>6</b> |

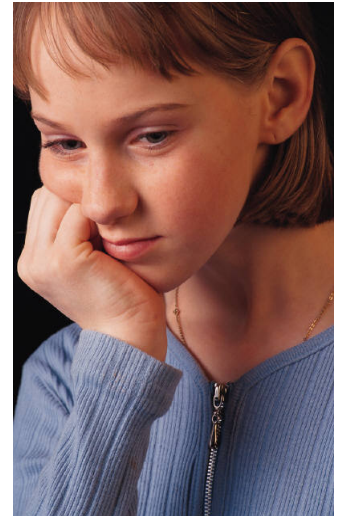
## Child Sexual Abuse in Iowa

According to Iowa DHS data, the number of founded cases of child sexual abuse has declined by sixty percent over the last two decades – from **1,471 instances in 1991** and 1,483 in 1993 to 636 instances in 2008 and **637 in 2010**.

In the early 1990s, founded sexual abuse cases represented 16 to 18 percent of all abuse; **in 2007-10, sexual abuse was four percent or lower**. Other national reports and studies show a similar decline in sexual abuse across the country over the same time.

Leading national experts, including those at the respected Crimes Against Children Research Center, maintain that these surveys and reports indicate a real drop in child sexual abuse and not a change in reporting or agency actions. The extent of any decline is uncertain, however, because of the overall unreliability of child sexual abuse numbers in two areas: 1) **child sexual abuse is significantly underreported by its victims and others**, and 2) even when reported, **confirming that sexual abuse occurred is challenging**.

A 2001 population based survey in Iowa estimated one in ten Iowans had experienced sexual violence. Of those, 67 percent were first assaulted/abused before the age of 18, with the vast majority (73 percent) of perpetrators known to the victim.



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## Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

**For more than three decades, teaching children important prevention concepts has been a key component of child sexual abuse prevention.** This child-focused instruction, usually presented in schools, attempts to reach children before sexual abuse occurs and to encourage them to tell an adult if there has been sexual abuse. Children learn prevention concepts including body boundaries, their right to say “no” to inappropriate touches, how to recognize and respond to perpetrator tricks, and the importance of telling and getting help from an adult if they might be abused. Children also learn empathy and communication skills and how to respond to peer-to-peer acts of bullying, sexual harassment and assault, and gender-based violence.

Children should not, however, be expected to keep themselves safe from sexual abuse on their own. Recognizing this, **Iowa prevention efforts have recently expanded to teaching parents, other caregivers, and adults about their responsibility to keep children safe.** This instruction occurs in group parent education settings, home-visiting programs, and public awareness activities. A curriculum used in Iowa and elsewhere, called *Nurturing Healthy Sexual Development*, helps participants better understand the scope of sexual abuse, healthy sexual development of children, and ways to respond to children’s sexual behaviors and questions. Unfortunately, resources for providing this instruction widely in Iowa are lacking.

**“Children should not be expected to keep themselves safe from sexual abuse on their own.”**

**Experts have highlighted the need to also educate community members, youth-serving professionals, and concerned adults because child sexual abuse happens in organizations, churches, schools, and other locations outside the home.** This instruction helps professionals and other adults identify steps to keep children safe, the warning signs of sexual abuse, and actions they can take to keep children safe. An example of a program providing this information is *Stewards of Children*, developed by a national child sexual abuse prevention organization called Darkness to Light. *Stewards of Children* is an evidence-based sexual abuse prevention program for adults but is not widely available in Iowa.

## Task Force Areas of Consideration

### 1. Creation of a school model policy addressing sexual abuse of children

The task force recognized the critical role schools can play in addressing child sexual abuse by:

- Educating children, parents, and educators about child sexual abuse
- Providing information and education on how to stop abuse before it starts, increase protective factors and reduce risk factors
- Respond effectively to possible threats of sexual abuse
- Intervening when sexual abuse may have occurred
- Ensuring support for sexually-abused children



The task force and education subcommittee examined sexual abuse prevention education options; awareness resources for parents, school personnel, and others; methods for educating parents and professionals about the warning signs of abuse and how to respond; and options for counseling, treatment, and support services.

**At its December 6 and January 4 meetings, the task force reviewed and approved a model policy.** Critical to the model policy's success will be creation of a web-based resource page, with links to supporting resources and instructional materials.

### 2. Goals and recommendations for preventing child sexual abuse

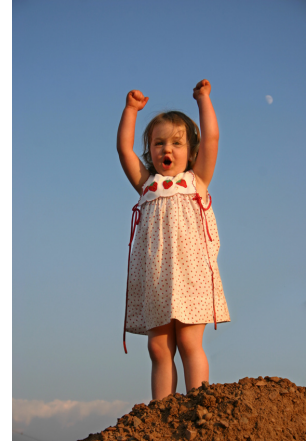
The task force spent most of its time examining areas for improving Iowa's efforts to prevent child sexual abuse. Here are the major areas included in its review:

- **Current child sexual abuse prevention efforts** and possible new strategies
- How to improve the **ability of all adults to protect children** from sexual abuse and respond effectively when it may have occurred
- Opportunities for expanding overall **community knowledge** about child sexual abuse and its prevention
- The need for youth-serving organizations to have **effective sexual abuse prevention policies**
- The difficulties children and youth, particularly males, face in **disclosing abuse** and/or barriers to sexually abused children receiving support and treatment
- The critical role of Iowa's **mandatory reporters** in protecting children from sexual abuse and the need to improve their capability to discharge their responsibilities
- Whether to include other professionals, such as **clergy, as mandatory reporters**
- Whether to require that **all adults be mandated to report** suspected child abuse
- The role of **school counselors, nurses, and other professionals in child sexual abuse prevention**
- Possible changes in the **handling of allegations of sexual abuse** by education professionals
- The importance of having a **school climate** that reduces the risk of sexual abuse
- Advancements in the **treatment of juvenile sex offenders**

## State Goals for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

The task force recognized the value of current child sexual abuse prevention efforts and the importance of continuing and enhancing these efforts. The task force identified the need to take additional steps, however, to **enhance the ability of parents, school personnel, and other community members to recognize and respond effectively to the risks of child sexual abuse.**

The task force also identified the value of preventing further sexual abuse by providing treatment for juveniles who have sexually offended against children and school-based instruction for youth to reduce their likelihood of committing offenses.



### **1) Increase adult awareness of child sexual abuse, its precursors and warning signs, ways to protect children from it, and how to report its occurrence by:**

Expanding educational programs for parents on child sexual abuse and its prevention

Offering trainings for parents, educators, health and human services professionals, staff of youth-serving organizations, and community members about behaviors and policies that prevent child sexual abuse

Making available to parents of schoolchildren educational resources on the warning signs of abuse, along with advice on how to respond

Conducting public education campaigns on the prevention of child sexual abuse

### **2) Teach children and youth important skills to reduce their risk of sexual victimization and perpetration and provide resources to increase protective factors by:**

Increasing the provision of prevention instruction that meets best practice standards.

Encouraging schools to offer age-appropriate instructional materials on sexual abuse for schoolchildren

### **3) Expand the knowledge, capability, and responsiveness of mandatory reporters of child abuse by:**

Increasing the frequency of required mandatory reporter training

Requiring that reporters receive in-person training from knowledgeable professionals

Ensuring that the training reporters receive provides sufficient content to fully inform them about abuse, its warning signs, and how to report it

Offering profession-specific information, where appropriate

### **4) Improve the responsiveness of school staff and administrators to child sexual abuse or the risk of it by:**

Providing training for school personnel on the indicators of child sexual abuse and how to respond

Offering culturally relevant resources and support for a student and family to ensure educational success for a child who has suffered sexual abuse

### **5) Support the reporting of suspected child sexual abuse by:**

Prohibiting retaliatory action against employees (including non-mandatory reporters) who have made a good faith report of child abuse

### **6) Reduce child sexual abuse by ensuring adequate and effective treatment for juveniles who have committed sexual offenses against children**

### **7) Provide clarity about the involvement of law enforcement in non-caretaker sexual abuse cases when reports are made to DHS or education officials.**

## Recommendations for Legislative Action

- Amend Iowa's mandatory reporter law to address the need for more frequent, informative, profession-specific, and effective training for mandatory reporters
- Add clergy to the list of professionals who are mandatory reporters—while acknowledging the issue of the confidentiality of penitential communications
- Enact legislation to prevent employers from retaliatory action against employees who in good faith report suspected child abuse
- Provide funding to support a new series of trainings and public education activities to enhance public awareness of child sexual abuse, its precursors and warnings, ways to protect children from it, and how to report its occurrence
- Increase funding for Iowa's current child sexual abuse prevention programs
- Increase funding for the treatment of juveniles who have committed sexual offenses against children
- Ensure resources to assist in developing and maintaining a single web-based platform for providing state-of-the-art information about child sexual abuse to all Iowa citizens



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## Conclusions

Task force members fully support the need to achieve these goals and take the recommended action in order to prevent child sexual abuse. Task force members respectfully submit this report and welcome the advice and support of the Governor and general assembly in addressing the identified needs and opportunities.



## Task Force Members

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**Barb Anderson**, Iowa Department of Education

**Gail Barber**, State Court Administrator

**Elizabeth Barnhill**, Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault

**Lisa Bender**, Iowa Department of Human Services

**Nancy Boettger**, Iowa Senate (ex-officio)

**Matt Carver**, School Administrators of Iowa

**Mary Gannon**, Iowa Association of School Boards

**Julian Garrett**, Iowa House (ex-officio)

**Chris Hall**, Iowa House (ex-officio)

**Scott Hobart**, Chief Juvenile Court Officers

**Rob Hogg**, Iowa Senate (ex-officio)

**Nan Horvat**, Iowa County Attorneys Association

**Binnie LeHew**, Iowa Department of Public Health

**Lynn Lutze**, Iowa Psychological Association

**Barb Ramos**, Prevent Child Abuse Iowa

**Nancy Scheumann**, Iowa's accredited child protection centers

**Steve Scott**, Prevent Child Abuse Iowa (chair)

**Virginia Traxler**, Iowa State Education Association

Amber Russell of Prevent Child Abuse Iowa staffed the task force

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**Prevent Child Abuse**  
Iowa