



Government of Bermuda
Ministry of Legal Affairs

Child Sexual Abuse:

Protecting Children Through Community-Wide Education

By

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Mr. Speaker,

I rise today in this Honourable House to address a matter of considerable and urgent public importance: Child sexual abuse.

Mr. Speaker,

On Saturday, 18 May, 2013 I had the privilege of attending a Training Workshop run by a local charity organization called SCARS Bermuda. SCARS is an acronym that stands for “Saving Children And Revealing Secrets”. It is a fantastic organization, with a mission to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse and to be an advocate and voice for sexually molested children and their affected families. SCARS was formed to create a greater awareness of the devastation cause by child abuse. They provide training to individuals and organizations in frequent contact with children, or entrusted with their care, to prevent, recognize and react responsibly to child sexual

abuse. They also provide access to resources that promote healing for victims of sexual abuse.

Mr. Speaker,

SCARS training is based on a programme called “Darkness to Light, Stewards of Children” developed in the United States. The workshop consists of a three-hour round table discussion punctuated periodically by video clips of testimonials given by survivors of child sexual abuse and experts. It engages the participants actively, requiring interaction with the moderator and other members of the group. I can say that on the morning I attended this informative workshop, what struck me most was the wide range of people in attendance. Students, teachers, medical professionals, curious members of the public and supportive friends were all present, and most actively participated. This showed me that there is a desire in our community to learn more about this problem, and as leaders we should foster this interest.

Mr. Speaker,

I would like to take this opportunity to give a brief overview of the training I received to this Honourable House. My hope is that in doing so, Honourable Members will be inspired to seek out more information themselves, and encourage others around them to get educated. The SCARS programme, as I have already said, is a 7 step programme. In brief they are:

1. Learn the facts and understand the risks. Consider, Mr. Speaker, the facts I have already reported, and the taboos that we must fight against.

2. Minimise opportunities for sexual abuse to occur. Minimise one-on-one situations with adults and children, or take steps to make sure that such interactions can be interrupted unexpectedly, or observed by others.
3. Talk about sexual abuse with children. Children often keep abuse a secret, but barriers can be broken down by talking openly about it.
4. Stay alert. Don't expect obvious signs when a child is being sexually abused. Signs are often there but you have got to spot them.
5. Make a plan. Know where to go, whom to call and how to react. Don't over-react, and offer support to your child.
6. Act on Suspicions. The future well-being of a child is at stake.
7. Get involved. Volunteer and support organizations that fight sexual abuse.

Mr. Speaker,

Child sexual abuse is a cancer to Bermuda, voraciously eating away at the fabric of our society from the inside. Its victims are left emotionally and physically traumatized. Its perpetrators hide behind veils of trust and manipulation. The sickness that is child sexual abuse is a haunting one and, if left untreated, can have severe and long-lasting ramifications for our island community and the well-being of its people.

Mr. Speaker,

Most citizens on the street will recognize that sexual abuse is becoming increasingly prevalent in Bermuda. The newspapers have reported numerous cases in the Magistrates' and Supreme Courts where members of our community have been tried and convicted of abusing children for their own sexual gratification. Bermuda's Law Enforcement agencies do a commendable job at bringing perpetrators of child sexual abuse to justice, but punishment alone isn't going to fix the problem. This cancer can be cured, but it's going to take more than just enforcing the criminal laws against such abuses. Prevention is the key, **Mr. Speaker**. By raising awareness about how to prevent child sexual abuse, we can empower the members of our community to recognize the symptoms of the problem. Through education and training, we can provide our people with the tools to fight this affliction. The challenge is getting the training out there, raising the level awareness to a point where the problem is impossible to ignore. All of this is possible.

Mr. Speaker,

Child sexual abuse may be an uncomfortable topic for some to discuss. That is entirely understandable. When we talk about child sexual abuse, we are talking about two subjects that, almost instinctively, we recognize should never go together-children and sexual abuse. This instinctive response is not a bad thing, **Mr. Speaker**. It shows us that we as a community have a profound aversion to acts of sexual abuse perpetrated against children; we recognize instinctively that such abuse is abhorrent and unacceptable. Mr.

Speaker, we can take comfort in this. But we cannot allow that comfort to obscure the need for action.

Mr. Speaker,

We must do more than recognize that there is a problem in our community. As is so often said when attempting to fix something, the first thing to do is identify the problem. Please allow me to take this opportunity to do so in clear terms.

Mr. Speaker,

When we talk about child sexual abuse, we are talking about a wide range of behaviours. We are talking, of course, about sexual acts directed towards minors, not only by adults but sometimes by older children. We are also talking about less direct acts. Acts like exhibitionism, exposing children to pornography, voyeurism and communicating with a child in a sexual manner are all acts that can be described as sexual abuse.

Mr. Speaker,

All of these behaviours have one result: they harm children. Victims of child sexual abuse can be severely traumatized by these experiences. Many times, children won't reveal that they have been abused until they become adults themselves. There are many reasons for this, but the outcome is usually the same. Years of bottling up feelings of shame, confusion and embarrassment will often lead to anti-social behaviours in the future, behaviours that can be avoided when the right action is taken at the right time.

Mr. Speaker,

Who are these children? It is highly likely that Honourable Members will already know a child that is abused or is being abused. Experts estimate that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before their 18th birthday. Most children never report their abuse. Children may blame themselves for the abuse. They may feel embarrassed or ashamed, or even hate themselves. They may feel betrayed by their bodies, or grow to fear engaging in relationships and friendships. Some may even doubt that they are worthy of being loved. One thing is clear, Mr. Speaker. Children of sexual abuse are at a greater risk of psychological, emotional, social and physical problems.

Mr. Speaker,

Sexual abuse survivors often report excessive drug and alcohol abuse. One American study showed that among male survivors, 50% have suicidal thoughts and more than 20% attempt suicide. Young girls who are sexually abused are more likely to develop eating disorders as adolescents. Many teen first pregnancies are preceded by experiences of molestation, rape or attempted rape. Many adult sexual offenders have reported being victims of sexual abuse themselves as children. The problems created by sexual abuse are many and varied, and with the many social problems Bermuda faces at present, as leaders of this island community we must do our part to rid our society of their causes.

Mr. Speaker,

Perhaps a more important question to ask is who are the abusers?

Conventional wisdom would have us believe that strangers in our midst are the real danger. There lies the true danger to our children. The disturbing fact is that the overwhelming majority of victims of child sexual abuse suffered their abuse at the hands of someone known to them. These can include family members or trusted family friends, coaches and mentors. This is a difficult thing to accept for some adults. No one wants to believe their family member or friend is a child abuser.

Mr. Speaker,

The refusal (conscious or unconscious) by adults to acknowledge this truth is a major contributor to the problem as a whole. It might even be said that such ideas are taboo in our society. I don't say that to lay blame at anyone's feet. This problem isn't anyone person's fault. It is a problem that must be dealt with collectively.

Denying the possibility that someone close to you is capable of abusing a child only serves to develop an environment where abusers of children can flourish. Children are often taught how to keep themselves safe from abuse- and that is important for them to learn-but it is no substitute for adult responsibility. We make sure children wear their seat belts. We walk them across busy streets. We store toxic household products out of reach. Why, then, would we leave the job of preventing child abuse solely to children? A child's safety is an adult's job. And the best way for us adults to do that job is to educate ourselves.

Mr. Speaker,

The best way we, as leaders of this country, can help fight child sexual abuse is to spread the word, and educate the community. We can encourage our constituents and family members to take part in training programmes, like SCARS, to raise the level of awareness about this horrible social evil. We can encourage our professionals, our judiciary and our Government departments to undergo training. We can encourage our fellow Bermudians to be more vigilant and listen to our children. What is important, Mr. Speaker, is that as a community we rise to the challenge. What is important is that as parliamentarians we rise above politics and partisanship to encourage a society where abusers of children are not welcome, where they will be found out and held accountable. What is important is that we take the opportunities available to us to educate ourselves for the sake of the children.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.