“This is a multidisciplinary issue”: David Finkelhor of Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire on public awareness and scaling school-based prevention education.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Can you start by introducing yourself? Tell me your name, a little bit about your work, and your current affiliations.

David Finkelhor: I'm David Finkelhor, and I direct the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. I'm a sociologist, and I've been working on the issue of preventing sexual abuse since my first research activities in 1978, so I have a long history here. I've written quite a bit about the prevention of sexual abuse and done some surveys and deep literature reviews, including one I just recently co-authored for the World Health Organization.

Rollo Romig: Who is your intended audience for your writing?

David Finkelhor: Other researchers, policymakers, journalists, and just the public at large.

Rollo Romig: What would you say makes your particular approach distinct in the field, different from other researchers and writers who are working on this?

David Finkelhor: I'm very familiar with the scientific literature, the evaluation research, and I have a pretty long historical perspective having been involved in this problem for so many years. So I think I have a relatively nuanced and complex view of the whole domain. I'm also familiar with most of the leading organizations, researchers, and policymakers in the field.

Rollo Romig: Do you feel like there was a particular moment, or maybe multiple moments, when you could feel the tide turning in terms of the right kind of public attention on the problem of childhood sexual abuse? What caused that moment to happen?

David Finkelhor: There've been three or four main turning points. One occurred in the late-1970s and early-1980s, when a number of survivors began to speak out. They wrote books on the subject. Marilyn Van Derbur Atler, who was Miss America, told her story. A senior senator from Florida came out as a survivor of sexual abuse, and it got a lot of attention. There was even a movie made, so there was a big turning point there.

In the 1990s, there were a number of very important scandals regarding youth-serving organizations, including Boy Scouts, the Catholic Church, and daycare. That led to another big surge in public awareness development. Then, the publicity that started to come out about internet crimes involving sexual abuse, from around 2006-2010, raised the profile of this issue again. That's not to say that all the events that raised public awareness resulted in positive preventive developments or positive policy reactions. These moments were important in terms of a general journalistic and general public awareness of the problem.

Rollo Romig: Could you point to an example where there was a tension that wasn't productive?

David Finkelhor: I think that a lot of the concern about technology has created a strong bias in policy response to focus on technology-related forms of sexual abuse, perhaps even as the main problem. But it's not at all clear to me that it is more important, more damaging, or deserving of priority over more conventional kinds of sexual abuse involving family members, people who are members of your serving organizations, intimate partners, and that kind of situation. There are times, and I think we're in one time now, when the publicity about certain kinds of dynamics tends to hijack the narrative.

Rollo Romig: When one aspect of a problem gets outsized attention, it warps the sense of the problem overall. But of course, from what you're saying, it's these big moments that bring more attention. One very important tool is stories, both personal stories and people who are willing

to come forward with their stories. Have you seen those survivor accounts have a direct effect on addressing the problem?

David Finkelhor: The survivor accounts have been very, very important in educating people about the problem and helping them to understand some of the dynamics.

For instance, Erin Maran has turned her victimhood into a campaign to get state legislators to pass legislation to require prevention education programs. She's been very successful at doing that. I think the testimonies from victims of abuse in Scouts and the Catholic Church were very influential in opening up the topic of sexual abuse of boys. That issue had never before been centered in the conversation because a lot of the mobilization in the 1970s and 1980s had been an outgrowth of the women's movement. The awareness of the abuse of boys increased a lot when the Church and the Scout scandals came to the fore.

Rollo Romig: Is there an example of a tactic or approach from your own work, or even something you observed in the movement in general, that hasn't really paid off? Why do you think it didn't work?

David Finkelhor: There have been a number of serious policy missteps throughout the years. One has been reliance on increasing criminal penalties. There's a fair amount of doubt that the setting up of sex offender registries has really had much impact on the problem. There's been a big effort to require people to get background record checks for employment, but once again, there's not a lot of evidence that this has had an impact. There's been an effort to put juvenile offenders on sex offender registries, which has been widely criticized, and there hasn't been as much research on that, but I think almost everybody in the field agrees that was also a misstep.

I happen to think that setting up a special silo of online sexual abuse prevention education programs is a mistake, too. It's crowding out other, more evidence-based and comprehensive sex abuse prevention education efforts.

Rollo Romig: Would you suggest a better approach to presenting that information? Or is there different information or resources that would be better to present?

David Finkelhor: I'll give you my bottom line here, which is that school-based and organization-based prevention education directed at children and parents is the most effective tool we have for this problem. It's a modality of behavior change that has been very effective in all kinds of public health and safety efforts, including things like drug abuse prevention, dating violence prevention, and sexual behavior awareness, as well as in areas like mental health

promotion and driving safety. It is a very powerful tool that has been studied probably more than any other behavioral intervention that we have, and the results are overwhelmingly positive.

It doesn't mean that every program works, but in almost all these fields, there are examples of programs that do work, and they have a lot of commonalities to them. They involve building skills like decision-making, disengagement, conflict resolution, help seeking, and emotion management. The prevention research literature shows that this kind of skill-building among young people is very important. Giving them skills is more effective than just giving them information or teaching them about dangers. How do you disengage from a situation? How do you assess when something dangerous is happening? How do you get help for yourself? How do you talk to your friends to help them disengage? It's important to know.

Unfortunately, what we've got in the way of an ecosystem here are a lot of siloed prevention efforts that are trying to educate kids around certain kinds of risks. When there's a commonality for keeping kids safe and preventing dangerous, delinquent behavior, the education around that has been very effective. You get people excited about a particular danger, and then they want to invent a set of prevention programs that are built around that danger. I think the more comprehensive we could make our safety education, the more effective it's likely to be, and the more likely it is to stick around, and have a durability to it. But unfortunately, that's not where the field has been going, and that's one of the big problems in the field.

Rollo Romig: Where do you see the field going instead?

David Finkelhor: People are adopting all kinds of specialized prevention education programs about internet safety. There's a new program that's being developed about preventing youth perpetration, and there are specific target education programs being developed about sex trafficking. However, these are all interrelated problems that should be handled by a comprehensive prevention education program. Frankly, one that is built into the educational curriculum in the same way as social studies or language arts or mathematical skills.

Rollo Romig: What do you think the roadblocks are to getting that approach implemented much more widely?

David Finkelhor: One thing is that schools are being asked to do so much these days. They're overwhelmed. And curriculum change is really slow. It takes a very concerted effort. Our traditional curricula have a priority, and this has been baked into our educational system in a

way that, unfortunately, doesn't create any real space, or a track, for this other content. Some people call it social emotional skills, but I think of it as safety.

Another big issue is that education has become very politicized. There's debate about social studies, and how you should teach the Civil War and slavery and things like that. In this area of safety, especially when it comes to things like sexual behavior, sexual abuse, and drugs, it is even more controversial. I think educators are really afraid of creating controversy by introducing new topic areas that parents who already have suspicions or complaints about the educational system can then attack them about.

The other problem is that education is a decentralized function that is basically organized by the states. In many countries, you have national educational systems, and it's much easier to introduce new curriculum ideas in that kind of a structure. But when you have all these different school districts in control of what goes on, it's very difficult to get everybody on the same page.

Rollo Romig: How have you seen this kind of hyper-politicization and polarization play out in terms of interfering with the ability to effectively implement this kind of probe?

David Finkelhor: A lot of kids get sexually abused because they don't have sufficient information about sexual behavior, or they're developing curiosity about sex and romance and don't know where to get that, so they get it from inappropriate people or inappropriate places. Providing information and skills in this area is very important. But it's extremely controversial because parents are afraid that their particular values are not going to be represented by the program. They may think that you need to be married in order to have sex, and so introducing any program that wants to address the idea that kids may be engaging in sexual behavior before they're married is something that they don't want to happen.

Rollo Romig: What are some leading challenges either in your work, or in the movement in general?

David Finkelhor: This is a multidisciplinary issue. It is handled by a combination of law enforcement, social service, mental health, and medical professionals. There have been some very deep divisions and differences in how these professions look at the problem and what they propose to do. Police are strongly oriented towards things like increasing penalties, and having the police educate the public about the issue. They see that as a very central part of their professional commitment. Whereas mental health professionals have a rather different point of view about what the priority should be.

There has been some big progress in terms of building multidisciplinary teams and communities, and getting police, mental health professionals, child protection services, and medical professionals together to map a common strategy and common way of talking about and intervening with the problem. That is, perhaps, the most important innovation that has occurred throughout the 50 years that we've been working on this problem. But there are still significant professional differences around how this issue is viewed, and these differences are still a very big problem. They make different claims, and you can see differences in how agencies relate to the problem. For instance, the Center for Disease Control views the problem very differently than the Department of Justice.

I think that's part of the funding problem, too. There's no one agency that has jurisdiction here, and those different authorities don't play well together in terms of developing and mapping an overall comprehensive strategy.

One thing you should know, which is not widely publicized, but has been very important to my own understanding of this problem, is that there are many statistical indications that sexual abuse has declined in the United States since the mid-1990s, by a rather large amount. Cases that are substantiated by child protection agencies in the United States have declined over 65% in the past 30 years or so. There are other signs that things have been improving, both here and in other countries. To me, that means important features of what we've been doing have been working.

Unfortunately, there are still a lot of people who, hearing the cases that get attention in the news and the scandals that get reported on, either think the problem is getting worse or that we're failing and not accomplishing anything. But I don't think that's the case.

This myopia is also present in the overall views about crime. Crime itself is down a considerable amount in the United States, but people do not recognize that. People generally make judgments about the frequency of crime based on how many cases they hear about in the news. And journalism has been quite good at covering crime. In fact, they've probably gotten better at it, so people hear more about it, and that conditions their perception about what's actually happening.

Rollo Romig: What would you say are the primary factors that account for that improvement, and why do you think the perception is otherwise, beyond the journalism aspect?

David Finkelhor: I think the news coverage largely explains why. New forms of abuse are constantly being bruited, and there's a big effort now to notice and write about teacher misconduct. That's been going on for years, but it's a new topic for some people.

In terms of why it's getting better, I think that public awareness and prevention education programs have been very important. I also think that some of the new forms of behavioral health treatment and psychiatric treatment, including drugs and psychiatric medication, as well as more cognitive behavioral approaches to changing behaviors, have been helpful in undercutting some of this behavior. Greater accessibility to sex education, and a decline in what are basically shame-based sex education policies, have probably resulted in fewer people who are sexually damaged and who are acting that out on other people. I think the empowerment of women and the rise of women in various organizations, including law enforcement and public policy, has brought more awareness and more attention to things like sexual predation. There are more people who are creating barriers to these behaviors and calling them out.

Rollo Romig: It's clear that, in a lot of ways, shifting cultural norms has had a big effect on both bringing more attention to the problem and helping with some of the solutions. What would you say are some of the most effective strategies in helping to shift cultural norms in a positive or useful direction?

David Finkelhor: Influencers in the public eye and the media in general have been very important. When prominent survivors told their stories, that was very important. It's also been important to see men advocating for victims of sexual abuse.

Rollo Romig: What role have partnerships and collaborations played in your work? How have collaborations helped you in different phases of your work?

David Finkelhor: It's a very collaborative field, with lots of people and organizations, so divisions constantly come up, like questions about sex education and prevention of sexual behaviors, or about whether an abstinence approach is effective. I mentioned some of the problems, like some of the different views of different professions. This is something that runs through everything that people do. There are always people on one side or another of an issue, complicating everything you do. And that's good. The levels of collaboration are so intensive and multiplicative.

Rollo Romig: Do you have any suggestions on how to best cultivate and maintain good collaborations, particularly with this work?

David Finkelhor: One of the most effective things has been the establishment of multidisciplinary organizations like the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. They have gotten people from different organizations and different professions to work together.

The other thing that I want to emphasize, and I think this is very important, is that a lot of people in the field think that the barriers to success are that we haven't raised enough awareness. I don't agree with that. I think there's a very high level of awareness in the population, even at the policy level, around this issue. The biggest barrier is that we haven't been able to show what policies are most effective in a clear enough way, so people still aren't willing to take the big step of adopting those policies and practices.

I think that points directly to the role of research. When you have goals like getting people to stop smoking, and there are evidence-based practices and proven successful public health strategies like cigarette alternatives, nicotine patches, creating no-smoke zones, or putting messages on cigarette packs, policymakers are more willing to get behind them and fund them. I think in the area of sexual abuse prevention and intervention, we don't have those clear cut, evidence-based interventions that everybody can get behind and say, "This is what we should do." I think the evidence is getting clearer around these educational programs that I'm talking about, but the convincing science that says, "This has really worked, we should make it universal," hasn't happened yet. We haven't had that moment.

Frankly, I don't think the main problem is getting people to speak up more about the issue, or knowing what the numbers are in terms of assessing how big a problem this is, or how much it costs society every year. The biggest barrier is that we haven't been able to show what works and what doesn't work in a clear enough way that brings everyone together with a consensus about what needs to be done. That seems, to me, to be the most important issue. I put my bet on prevention education. The evidence is getting better. We have a new study that's just been reported, and is going to get some publicity, about how prevention education has reduced the rate of sexual abuse in Pennsylvania counties. I think we need more studies like that to convince people that we know what to do, and we know where to put money and resources.

Rollo Romig: We need more data on what has been working so that we can better communicate what some of these solutions are and why they work.

David Finkelhor: One of the big barriers to the successful evaluation of our policies is that it's hard to ask children whether they have been sexually abused. So we need to do various kinds of

interventions and then assess, at a population level, whether they've reduced sexual abuse. But we don't have regular ways of getting that information in the same way that we get information about a lot of other things. We have measures about drug usage, we have measures about seatbelt usage, but sexual abuse, not so much. We need to incorporate measures of that sort into our statistical systems, so we can figure out what's working, and what's not.

Rollo Romig: Looking ahead to the next five years, what factors, solutions, or policies do you think have the potential to make the most significant impact on stopping childhood sexual abuse?

David Finkelhor: I would say increasing the database with more studies that can show population-level improvements as a result of policy implementations such as providing education programs, providing training for parents, and providing better treatment, like mental health treatment, for adolescents.

Rollo Romig: Thank you, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk.

Rollo Romig (he/him) is a freelance journalist who writes most often for The New York Times and The New Yorker. He is the author of the book I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India. He teaches writing at The New School in New York City. He was born and raised in Detroit.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*