Research Note

Evaluating the Primary School ‘Keeping Ourselves Safe’ Programme

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Abstract

‘Keeping Ourselves Safe’ is a personal safety and child abuse prevention programme provided for children, teachers and parents/caregivers in New Zealand primary schools since 1988. A draft early childhood ‘Keeping Ourselves Safe’ module called ‘All About Me’ has been written and is being trialled during the first half of 2006 in early childhood centres in Auckland, Porirua and Dunedin. This paper outlines the research and evaluations to date of ‘Keeping Ourselves Safe’ and reviews the evidence that has informed and led to changes in programme delivery, content, and implementation.

Key Words: Child abuse, personal safety, programme evaluation

Introduction

The Keeping Ourselves Safe programme first developed as a joint project with the New Zealand Department of Education. Police assumed responsibility for it after that Department was restructured into a Ministry in 1989 (see Butterworth & Butterworth 1998). The programme is now provided to schools by the Youth Education Service of the New Zealand Police. Its most distinctive feature is the involvement of sworn (uniformed) Police Education Officers who work with teachers to prepare for and then teach Keeping Ourselves Safe.

Work on Keeping Ourselves Safe began in the early 1980s. Three primary school modules were launched in 1988. Additional material for parents and caregivers was developed in 2002 and currently (2006) a draft early childhood education module of Keeping Ourselves Safe is being trialled. All teaching materials were written by experienced teachers, health educators, school counsellors and Police Education Officers, working under the facilitation of the Youth Education Service Curriculum Officer. Classroom activities were designed to meet the requirements of the health syllabus for schools (1985).

Keeping Ourselves Safe has a threefold aim:

1. To teach young people a range of safe practices they can use when interacting with other people.
2. To encourage young people who have been, or are being, abused to seek help.
3. To contribute to an overall community abuse prevention programme by making parents and teachers more aware of their responsibilities to keep young people safe.

Research and Evaluations of *Keeping Ourselves Safe*

A number of external evaluations and studies of *Keeping Ourselves Safe* have been conducted. Researchers have attempted to gather and interpret evidence about the extent to which the programme is achieving its three aims.

Evaluations have also indicated how the programme modules could be improved. All modules have been revised and republished at least once. The programme for Years 0-3 is currently in its fourth version, reflecting the particular difficulties of working effectively with and developing appropriate materials for young children. Findings from the evaluations are outlined below. The evaluations have led to many changes in the programme delivery, content, and implementation and these changes are discussed.

Two Early Studies

The first external evaluation of *Keeping Ourselves Safe* was conducted by Woodward (1990). Police Education Officers along with principals, teachers, and some parents/caregivers were interviewed at selected Dunedin primary schools about current intentions with regards to the then new programme. Woodward noted that it was taking a long time for some schools to begin their preparation for teaching. Of a sample of 66 schools 24 intended introducing it in the current year, 23 in the future and 19 other schools were either not planning to introduce it or were undecided.

Woodward reviewed two schools that went on to implement *Keeping Ourselves Safe*. One successfully taught it but the other school had not proceeded after a difficult meeting with parents. Woodward’s research stressed the importance of carefully planned and professionally delivered consultation meetings with the school, and that the Police should not be seen to ‘own’ the new programme. Changes were subsequently made to the implementation procedures to ensure the parent and caregivers meetings were seen to be facilitated by the school staff and not by the Police. In fairness, Police Education Officers had sometimes been put in a difficult position by teachers who were apprehensive about how their parent community might respond to a proposal to teach *Keeping Ourselves Safe*. It was made clearer that unless the school was willing to adopt the programme there was little point in proceeding. Indeed, to do so was considered unsafe. As more schools introduced the programme successfully teachers became more confident about using it. Many said that their apprehensions seemed unfounded.

Woodward’s study reflected what a ground breaking programme *Keeping Ourselves Safe* was at that time. For it to be taught successfully required a school to prepare thoroughly and involve teachers, parents and caregivers and Police Education Officers.
Opponents of *Keeping Ourselves Safe* claimed that the programme would frighten and upset children. After reading a newspaper article about these claims Kirsten Van Kessel decided to examine the reactions of children to *Keeping Ourselves Safe* in an Auckland primary school. One hundred and twelve parents and 12 teachers were surveyed. No significant changes were observed in how comfortable children felt in a number of given situations (Van Kessel, 1990). Parents and caregivers considered the programme had a good overall effect and all reported it had led to discussion and the sharing of safety messages at home. As the developers of *Keeping Ourselves Safe* had worked hard to ensure that the programme would involve parents/caregivers this was a most encouraging result.

A spill-over effect into homes has been noted in evaluations of other Police, Youth Education Service programmes as well. Although about different contexts, these are implemented in a similar manner to *Keeping Ourselves Safe*. The Massey University evaluation of the *Dare to make a Choice* drug education programme suggested the “flow on” or “ripple” effects of this programme into homes seemed a somewhat unique outcome (see Harper & Ashcroft, 1992, p.16).

**First Outcome Evaluation**

The first study to try to identify programme outcomes was reported by Briggs (1991a & 1991b). Two hundred and fifty two children aged five to eight years were interviewed in December 1990 from a variety of schools in Taranaki and Porirua. Some teachers in these schools had not taught *Keeping Ourselves Safe* at all, some had taught some of it, and others had taught it completely and thoroughly.

Briggs found that the safest responses came from schools where *Keeping Ourselves Safe* had been taught by committed teachers and where the safety skills in the programme had become part of the culture of a school. She noted that in one school this had happened to such an extent that five-year-olds arrived at school for their first day already familiar with the safety strategies the school followed. Conversely, some of the least safe responses came from children in higher decile schools where the programme was only partly taught because teachers did not consider their children were at risk from molestation. Briggs concluded that the “inadequate” concept of stranger danger was still deeply embedded in New Zealand society.

In a follow up study conducted one year later Briggs and Hawkins (1994 & 1996a) re-interviewed 117 of the original 252 children. The earlier study had concluded that there was evidence that *Keeping Ourselves Safe* increased skills and knowledge about self-protection in the short term. Reassessment 12 months later showed that children had gone on to make additional skill and knowledge gains. Results for some older children who had gone on to use the middle primary module between evaluations suggested that repetition and extension lead to further gains. Briggs and Hawkins reported that teachers and parents had adopted a safety focus that continued beyond the school into homes. The variables of sex, age, race, and academic achievement did not affect additional gains in either the short or longer term. The biggest variable identified was teacher commitment. Children taught by teachers committed to the programme had almost
double the gains compared to children taught by ‘uncommitted’ teachers. Sexual abuse is found in families across all socio-economic groups, and has already been noted some of the least safe responses came from high decile schools. However, children from lower socio-economic groups had additional risk factors. These included a lower initial safety knowledge and less parental support and reinforcement for Keeping Ourselves Safe.

Briggs and Hawkins (1994) recommended that all schools teach Keeping Ourselves Safe, that they use Police Education Officers to help facilitate teaching and support teachers, and that schools involve parents/caregivers as much as possible. They advised that the first module for five to six year-old children needed to be revised. They noted that improving teacher enthusiasm towards the programme was a critical variable.

A revised version of the module for five to six year-olds was written in 1994.

**Two Studies of the Senior Primary School Module**

The nomenclature for senior primary school classes has changed in recent years. It includes Years 7 and 8 students who are in the age group 11 to 12 years. It is also sometimes still referred to as the intermediate school level. In 1995 two studies examined the senior primary school Keeping Ourselves Safe module. Perniski (1995) evaluated Keeping Ourselves Safe with 137 senior primary students from three Wellington schools. Perniski used a Children’s Knowledge of Abuse Questionnaire and role-play scenarios to determine whether children could distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate situations. Results indicated that all children involved in the programme showed statistically significant increases in knowledge at post-test. Perniski concluded that the study provided support for both the need for abuse prevention education, and for Keeping Ourselves Safe as an effective way of doing that.

Briggs and Hawkins (1996b & 1999) sampled ten schools in Dunedin, Nelson and New Plymouth. One of the ten schools was a school for girls with learning disabilities. Two hundred and fifty two children and 142 parents and caregivers were interviewed. Briggs and Hawkins found that all students knew sexual abuse was reportable and there was evidence that some children had reported abuse after the Keeping Ourselves Safe programme. Other children had encouraged victims to report. The children in the study could give examples of how the programme had helped them avoid or report abuse. Students with learning difficulties could be successfully taught Keeping Ourselves Safe. The input from Police Education Officers was greatly appreciated by both schools and parents/caregivers and their presence helped ensure that the problem of children’s safety was taken seriously. Input from male Police Education Officers was reported to be especially valuable for boys.

Keeping Ourselves Safe encouraged children involved with abuse to report. Eighteen parents confirmed that their children had reported abuse after a Keeping Ourselves Safe lesson, two parents revealed cases of incest not already reported. Analysis of the survey responses indicated that as many as 20 percent of the children had been sexually abused. There was anecdotal evidence that some children who stayed away during the survey
period were abuse victims. Ninety five percent of children demonstrated benefits from *Keeping Ourselves Safe*. For example, all knew that sexual abuse was reportable and 21 percent had reported confirmed cases. Children who had completed all three primary school modules demonstrated the greatest benefit. As a result of these evaluation results, a revised senior primary programme was published in 1997.

**A Critical Look at the Development of *Keeping Ourselves Safe***

Mahoney (1998) completed a narrative description of the development and implementation process of *Keeping Ourselves Safe*. She was particularly interested in investigating the controversy provoked in the 1980s during its development. Opposition from the ‘moral right’ had been expected by the developers of the programme, less expected were the difficulties faced from restrictions with education legislation and regulation. Mahoney noted that the “frustration and despair” (p.151) faced by the development team at Police Headquarters is a human story not often remembered now. Mahoney approached her study from a feminist perspective. She acknowledged that leadership for programme development within Police had come largely from a group of men.

**Youngsters with Special Needs**

In 1996 Briggs and Hawkins had shown that girls with learning difficulties were especially vulnerable to sexual abuse. These girls had benefited from being taught *Keeping Ourselves Safe*. In 2004 Briggs and Hawkins conducted a further evaluation (2004) with 116 boy and girl students classified as having learning difficulties. The earlier finding was confirmed but with the caveat that teachers needed to develop innovative ways to reinforce, repeat and consolidate learning with these students. Repetition and reinforcement was the key to working successfully with these young people. All students interviewed wanted to be taught *Keeping Ourselves Safe*, and two thirds named Police Education Officers as their preferred ‘teachers’.

The researchers recommended that greater attention be given to the protection needs of boys. Their vulnerability to abuse was not being taken seriously. Boys were less likely to report abuse, giving the impression that they were less at risk.

**Education Review Office Evaluation**

The Education Review Office is the New Zealand Government agency that reviews schools. In 2004 the Education Review Office reported on the implementation of *Keeping Ourselves Safe* in 358 primary schools located within two Police Districts (Canterbury and North Shore/Waitakere/Rodney). The report showed the wide use of the programme in these schools (84% had used the programme at least once and 76% in the last two years). It concluded that *Keeping Ourselves Safe* was highly valued by these schools. School principals commented positively on its structure, organisation, sequencing, user-friendliness, interesting activities, relevance to student needs and the
ease with which it is linked to the health curriculum. Typical of the responses from schools was one principal’s comment:

Very worthwhile and very valuable. We would not consider being without it. I enjoy teaching it and feel it is essential for the continued well being of our children. (Education Review Office, 2004, p.22).

Twenty four schools indicated children had disclosed abuse at school as a result of the programme. These children were located in schools across all socio-economic groups.

Schools considered that the involvement of a Police Education Officer was a key element in the successful delivery of the programme. The availability of Police Education Officers varied between the two Police Districts studied. This restricted the use of Keeping Ourselves Safe by schools in the less well staffed District.

The main recommendation from the review was to consider ways of increasing parent involvement in the programme. Police are considering some innovative ways to do this but note that the prime responsibility for contacting parents is the schools.

The schools surveyed identified a number of positive outcomes from the programme, including:

- Increased awareness of child abuse by teachers, children and parents.
- Increased knowledge of strategies to use by teachers, children and parents.
- Empowerment of children.
- Children disclosing abuse and schools knowing how to support them.
- Improved school/community relationships.
- Meeting the requirements for the health curriculum.
- Safer school environment.
- Reviewing policies and procedures.
- Positive experiences with police.

The outcomes identified by ERO’s evaluation suggest that the three aims of Keeping Ourselves Safe is being achieved.

Recent Developments

A draft early childhood Keeping Ourselves Safe module called All About Me has been written and is being trialled during the first half of 2006. It has long been the intention of Police to extend Keeping Ourselves Safe into early childhood centres. It is being done now for two reasons. One is the ever increasing awareness of the vulnerability of very young children to sexual and physical abuse. Sexual predators are likely to target these children as they believe the risk of being reported is less. Young children are also at risk from the physical harm that often accompanies New Zealand’s high rate of family violence. A more practical reason for starting now is support Police has received from partner agency ACC.
A number of evaluations reviewed above indicated that the involvement of parents and caregivers in Keeping Ourselves Safe needed to be strengthened. In 2002 Police worked with the then YouthHealth Institute (now the Young New Zealanders’ Foundation) to publish a booklet that provides advice for parents and caregivers on how to keep their children safe from abuse. This booklet is provided free to all families the first time their children are taught *Keeping Ourselves Safe*. Home activities that extend both the booklet and the *Keeping Ourselves Safe* school lessons are available for parents and caregivers on an associated web site (www.noexcuseforabuse.com). It is proposed to use this parent booklet as a resource for the developing early childhood module, *All About Me*.

Briggs and Hawkins’ (1993, 1994, 1996a, 1996b) evaluations demonstrated that having *Keeping Ourselves Safe* taught by motivated teachers was a key factor in the programme’s success. Two initiatives have subsequently been introduced. Training about *Keeping Ourselves Safe* has been made available to health advisors and student wellbeing facilitators. These staff members work in schools to support and encourage teachers of health. A second initiative has been the contracting of a Maori motivational speaker to promote *Keeping Ourselves Safe* in schools with a large numbers of Maori families. The initiative aims at getting better involvement by parents, particularly Maori parents and reminding teachers and children how important *Keeping Ourselves Safe* is. An independent evaluation by the Education Review Office suggested that this initiative is “effective in supporting and enhancing the messages of *Keeping Ourselves Safe*” (Education Review Office, 2003 p.19).

**Concluding Comments**

Today *Keeping Ourselves Safe* operates as a partnership between police and education - between Police Education Officers and teachers in schools and soon in early childhood centres as well. Research and evaluations have confirmed that this partnership is a strength of the programme. Professor Freda Briggs’ view is that: “It would clearly be unwise to make any changes that reduced Police Education Officer contact with schools. My experiences show that, without them, *Keeping Ourselves Safe* would gradually disappear…” (Briggs, 2002, p.25).

The Education Review Office report and other evaluations suggest *Keeping Ourselves Safe* is achieving its aims.

Schools identified many positive outcomes [from] delivering the programme for teachers, children and parents. The immediate outcomes are related to increased awareness and knowledge of strategies. In some schools, the policies and practices related to student safety have been reviewed thus creating a safer school environment. Some schools described cases where children were empowered by the programme to disclose abuse. The schools believed that they were better able to support children and their families. (Education Review Office, 2004, p.4).
Keeping Ourselves Safe is somewhat unique among New Zealand school programmes in that it has been repeatedly evaluated over time to identify what improvements could be made. As modules are revised and republished these improvements are incorporated into the new versions. The next evaluation scheduled will be of the draft early childhood module being trialled during the first half of 2006.

References


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Owen Sanders is the manager of the NZ Police Youth Education Service. After an early career in primary and secondary teaching he began working for Police in 1981. Owen developed *Keeping Ourselves Safe* as a response to the increasing awareness at the time of the extent of child abuse. He was also dissatisfied with the inadequate strategies then being used. Owen was responsible for writing the first set of primary school modules and since then has had managerial responsibility for the whole *Keeping Ourselves Safe* programme. Owen was determined from the beginning to develop a module for the youngest children at school. So, he is now particularly pleased that the programme is being extended into early childhood. Owen’s wife Barbara is an early childhood teacher in Porirua City and his daughter Julia is training to be an early childhood teacher.