

Social Problem Solving in Unsafe Situations: Implications for Sexual Abuse Education Programs¹

Jacqueline S. Grober and G. Anne Bogat²

Michigan State University

Examined the impact of two subject variables (age and gender) and two contextual factors (antagonist age and nature of the social dilemma) on children's social problem solving (SPS). Preschoolers (N = 62) were individually presented with four stories that varied the antagonist age (peer vs. adult) and social dilemma (nonsexual vs. sexual). Responses were coded for three SPS variables: number of alternative solutions, solution content, and planfulness. Younger preschoolers were less competent problem solvers in all types of unsafe situations, and, compared to girls, some aspects of boys' problem solving were compromised in sexual encounters. Results also suggest that the nature of the social dilemma, but not the age of the antagonist, affects preschoolers' SPS. Children generated fewer alternative solutions and fewer effective strategies to the sexual encounters compared to the nonsexual dilemmas. Findings are discussed in relation to research on children's SPS and child sexual abuse prevention efforts.

KEY WORDS: sexual abuse; problem solving; cognitive problem solving; preschoolers; prevention.

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²All correspondence should be addressed to G. Anne Bogat, Department of Psychology, Psychology Research Building, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824.

Research evaluating sexual abuse education programs generally finds that school-aged children are able to learn prevention skills and knowledge quite well (e.g., "no, go, tell"), whereas preschoolers have difficulty with some concepts. Wurtele and Miller-Perrin (1992) have suggested that future research must examine "why some children learn the concepts and skills, but others do not" (p. 74). Unfortunately, because sexual abuse education programs have been pragmatically, rather than theoretically based, it is often not clear whether it is young children who cannot learn certain concepts or whether it is practitioners who cannot develop age-appropriate curricula. In this paper, we argue that social problem solving is a theoretical perspective that can help researchers understand children's responses to sexually abusive encounters. This in turn can lead to specific ways of revising and evaluating existing sexual abuse education curricula.

Social problem solving (SPS) has been defined as "the ability to attain personal goals during a social interaction" (Rubin & Krasnor, 1983, p. 263). For preschool and latency-age children, the ability to encode social cues, generate alternative solutions, anticipate their consequences, select effective strategies, and utilize planful thinking are considered defining features of SPS and relate to more adaptive social functioning (Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986; Richard & Dodge, 1982; Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976; Urbain & Kendall, 1980). Implicit in most SPS studies is the assumption that SPS involves generic skills that all children can learn to apply in a variety of social contexts (Spivack & Shure, 1982; Urbain & Kendall, 1980). However, it is also possible that, particularly for young children, their competence in these skills could be differently affected by their own attributes (e.g., age, gender) and/or contextual factors (e.g., age of the antagonist, nature of the dilemma) inherent in particular situations.

Moreover, basic research on young children's SPS has typically focused on performance in safe social situations (e.g., object acquisition, friendship initiation), and SPS curricula for young children tend to address only very benign, unsafe dilemmas such as peer verbal aggression or object-oriented aggression (Shure, 1992; Spivack et al., 1976). Unfortunately, preschool-age children face more harmful unsafe situations than these examples suggest, such as sexual abuse. Between 18–33% of all sexually abused children are 6 years of age or younger (Conte & Berliner, 1981; Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1988).

Sexual abuse prevention curricula targeted at preschoolers typically teach five self-protective skills: recognize inappropriate touch, say "no" to the perpetrator, leave the situation, find a trusted adult, and disclose the abusive encounter to this adult (for a review see Conte, Rosen, & Saperstein,

1986; Wurtele, 1987). These skills can readily be conceptualized as more general SPS skills. The ability to recognize that certain types of touch are inappropriate involves accurately encoding social cues. Similarly, the capacity to generate self-protective behaviors such as "say no, go, and tell" necessitates more general SPS skills such as alternative strategy generation, selection of effective strategies, and planful thinking. Reconceptualizing a sexually abusive encounter as a social dilemma that requires the use of general SPS skills may lead to more effective interventions that teach children how to protect themselves in potentially sexually abusive situations as well as enhance our understanding of how contextual factors affect SPS.

Subject Factors

Previous research suggests that a child's age and gender are related to their ability to generate diverse, effective, planful, and prosocial strategies in commonly occurring safe social dilemmas (Caplan, Bennetto, & Weissberg, 1991; Fischler & Kendall, 1988; Getz, Goldman, & Corsini, 1984; Reid, 1991; Rubin & Krasnor, 1983). In general, boys and younger children exhibit less sophisticated SPS skills compared to girls and older children. Gender differences in social skills are more pronounced in younger children and diminish with age (Cohen, 1991). Research on the development of SPS skills in children suggests that while preschoolers possess rudimentary forms of basic SPS skills, both the quantity and quality of children's social strategies increase with age (Marsh, 1982; McGillicuddy-DiLisi, 1980). However, these studies have compared SPS between children from different developmental stages. To specify the developmental aspects of SPS more precisely, researchers need to examine developmental changes that may occur *within* a single developmental level.

As noted at the outset of this paper, evaluations of programs to prevent sexual abuse also have found that competency on prevention skills and concepts increases with age (Blumberg, Chadwick, Fogarty, & Speth, 1991; Conte, Rosen, Saperstein, & Shermack, 1985; Liang, Bogat, & McGrath, 1993; Saslawsky & Wurtele, 1986; Wurtele, Saslawsky, Miller, Marrs, & Britcher, 1986). It has been suggested that these age differences may reflect a lack of prerequisite cognitive skills among preschool-age children (deYoung, 1988; Gilbert, Berrick, LeProhn, & Nyman, 1980). Unfortunately, current research has failed to answer this question.

Subject gender has also been hypothesized to influence children's ability to resolve sexually abusive encounters. For instance, girls are more frequently victims of sexual abuse than are boys, (DHHS, 1988; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990). This putative difference may reflect relative differences in reporting of abuse, actual differences in the frequency with which perpetrators approach girls and boys, or a gender difference in the effective use of problem-solving skills to terminate sexually abusive encounters. In addition, some researchers report that girls' knowledge of specific sexual abuse concepts is more limited than boys' at present (Plummer, 1983; Swan, Press, & Briggs, 1985), while other researchers, employing more comprehensive measures of sexual abuse prevention skills, have not found gender differences (Conte et al., 1985; Wurtele, Kast, Miller-Perrin, & Kondrick, 1989; Wurtele, Marrs, & Miller-Perrin, 1987).

If self-protective skills can be reconceptualized as SPS skills, then assessment of SPS in sexual situations will help determine whether reported age and gender differences in self-protective ability reflect underlying differences in social problem solving among young children. Moreover, comparison of these skills among preschoolers will provide more precise information regarding when and how self-protective skills develop.

Contextual Factors

Previous research also suggests that children's SPS ability is affected by both antagonist characteristics and the nature of the problem requiring resolution. In commonly occurring social dilemmas, observational and experimental studies find that children vary their social strategies according to the age (Holmberg, 1980; Krasnor, 1982; Langlois, Gottfried, Barnes, & Hendricks, 1978; Rubin & Krasnor, 1983), social status (Putallaz & Gottman, 1981), and familiarity (Caplan et al., 1991; Doyle, 1982; Gottman & Parkhurst, 1980) of the antagonist. Overall, children select more prosocial strategies in situations involving older, higher status, and less familiar antagonists. Antagonist characteristics are also believed to be influential in sexually abusive situations (Conte, Wolfe, & Smith, 1989). In particular, the older age and higher social status of most perpetrators are believed to contribute to children's tendency to comply with requests to engage in inappropriate sexual touching (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Conte et al., 1989; Finkelhor, 1984).

The nature of the problem may also influence deployment of SPS skills; however, few studies have examined this issue. Early research often assessed SPS skills in a variety of hypothetical social dilemmas; however, responses were summed across different dilemmas, thus masking possible variations in SPS skills across situations (e.g., Spivack et al., 1976). More recent research finds that children over a wide age range have difficulty generalizing SPS skills across various *safe* situations (Caplan et al., 1991; Dodge et al., 1986; Fischler & Kendall, 1988; Hopper & Kirschenbaum, 1985; McKim, Weissberg, Cowen, Gesten & Rapkin, 1982). Research has shown that subjects also cannot generalize SPS skills across different *unsafe* encounters (e.g., peer requests to use illicit drugs or skip school); however, studies have been conducted only with adolescents (Hawkins & Weis, 1985; Gersick, Grady, & Snow, 1988). Studies are needed to examine preschoolers' capacity to generalize SPS skills across unsafe situations and isolate the contextual factors which contribute to generalization failure.

The current study systematically examined the influence of two subject variables (age, gender) and two contextual factors (antagonist age, sexual vs. nonsexual nature of the dilemma) on SPS competence. With regard to the subject factors, two hypotheses were formulated. First, regardless of situational factors, younger preschoolers were expected to be less competent problem solvers than older ones. Second, it was predicted that while boys and girls would be equally competent problem solvers in the nonsexual dilemmas, girls would demonstrate less proficient SPS skills compared to boys in sexual situations. With regard to contextual factors, it was hypothesized that preschoolers would be more prosocial with an adult antagonist than with a peer partner. In addition, it was predicted that preschoolers' SPS would be compromised in the sexual situations compared to the nonsexual ones.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants were 62 preschoolers (32 boys, 30 girls) from six preschools located in South-Central Michigan. Their mean age was 4.4 years (range: 3.3–6.2). Ninety percent of the participants were Caucasian, 8% were African American, and 2% were Asian American.

Measure

The Preschool Alternative Solutions Test (PAST) was used to assess SPS. This measure, developed by the first author, combines features of a number of previously used measures of SPS in commonly occurring situations (i.e., Spivack & Shure's, 1974, Preschool Interpersonal Problem-Solving

[PIPS], Rubin & Krasnor's, 1983, Social Problem Solving Test [SPST], and Caplan, Weissberg, Bersoff, Ezekowitz, & Wells's, 1988, Alternative Solutions Test [AST]). The PAST presents four hypothetical problem situations in story form. Each story systematically varies the age of the antagonist and the nature of the unsafe dilemma. The antagonist is either an adult or a preschool-age peer. The social dilemma is either nonsexual or sexual. In the nonsexual dilemmas, the antagonist asks the child to cross a busy street the child is not allowed to cross. In the sexual dilemmas, the antagonist asks the child to "touch private parts." The gender of the characters in the dilemmas is matched to the gender of the subjects so that boys are presented with stories involving only male characters and girls are presented with stories involving only females. Each story is accompanied by a picture that depicts the central dilemma of the story. After listening to each story, children are asked a number of standardized questions to ensure that they accurately perceive the age and gender of the antagonist and the nature of the problem. Next, children are asked what the target child in the story could do or say if he/she *did not* want to perform the requested behavior. Children's responses are recorded verbatim.

Scoring

Responses were classified into 1 of 10 solution content categories. The first 3 categories (assertive, nonconfrontational, and help-seeking) are similar to the "say no, go, and tell" self-protective strategies of interest in child sexual abuse prevention research (for reviews, see Conte et al., 1986; Gilbert et al., 1989; Wurtele, 1987). Most of the remaining solution categories are similar to those used in other studies of SPS (Caplan et al., 1988; Rubin & Krasnor, 1983). After training two coders to 95% reliability with a criterion judge, interrater reliability for 20% of PAST protocols was 87%. Prototypical examples of responses for each solution category are provided in Table I.

In addition, each response was rated for the extent to which it articulated the formation of a plan (i.e., planfulness). Planful thinking is conceptually similar to means-ends thinking traditionally assessed in SPS studies (e.g., Shure & Spivack, 1972; Weissberg et al., 1981). Indicators of planfulness included the description of a step-by-step plan, obstacles that would interfere with the efficacy of solutions, possible methods of overcoming obstacles, the use of situational elements, timing, or voice, or the consideration of the mood of the antagonist (Caplan et al., 1988; Shure & Spivack, 1972; Weissberg et al., 1981). Children were given scores of 0 (e.g., "Run away."), 1 (e.g., "Just walk away slowly and calmly."), or 2 (e.g., "She should say, 'Let's play a game first,' then, when they weren't looking, run away."). Interrater reliability for planfulness was 89%.

Table I. Sample Responses on the Preschool Alternative Solutions Test

Solution Category	Sample Responses
Assertive	He could say, "No!"
Nonconfrontational	She could run away.
Help-seeking	He should tell his mom.
Invoke-a-Rule	She should say, "My parents said never do that."
Aggressive	Hit him.
Finagle	He could say, "Let's play with the cat instead."
Restructure the situation	His friend could go across the street and bring candy back.
Passive resistance	He could just ignore him.
Compliant	He should do it.
Unrealistic	Shoot him with a ray gun.

Because a number of researchers have argued that measurement of both the quantity and quality of problem-solving solutions yields the most accurate description of SPS competence (Hopper & Kirschenbaum, 1985; Rubin & Krasnor, 1986), both types of scores were used as dependent variables in this study. The three dependent variables were (a) the number of solutions falling into separate content categories (this variable is referred to as alternative solutions), (b) the number of solutions falling into *each* content category (solution content), and (c) a planfulness score (planfulness). The solution content and planfulness variables indicate the quality of solutions. Each of the four vignettes was scored for each of these variables.

Procedure

The PAST was administered as part of a battery of measures on personal safety skills and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Parental consent and child assent were obtained prior to interviewing. Before administration of stories involving hypothetical sexual abuse, the term "private parts" was explained as "the parts of your body covered by your bathing suit or underwear." Both a verbal description and a picture of a girl and a boy in bathing suits at the beach were employed to ensure children understood this term.

Children were interviewed by trained graduate and undergraduate research assistants who were blind to the hypotheses of this study. To become familiar to study subjects, interviewers played with children at the preschools for a total of 4 hours in the 2 weeks preceding the interview. All measures, including the PAST, were individually administered to each child in a quiet area of the preschool.

RESULTS

A series of $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ repeated measures MANOVAs for unequal cells were used to assess the impact of subject and contextual factors on SPS variables (alternative solutions, solution content, and planfulness). The age and gender of the subject were between-subjects factors; the age of the antagonist and the nature of the dilemma were within-subjects factors. Using a median split procedure, children were divided into two age groups: younger preschoolers (3.3–4.3 years, $M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.3$; $n = 28$) and older preschoolers (4.4–6.2 years, $M = 4.9$, $SD = 0.4$; $n = 32$). No significant differences were found between the ages of boys and girls, $t(1, 59) = 2.05$.

Subject Variables

Both subject variables influenced children's SPS. First, regardless of the contextual factors, the *subject's age* significantly affected solutions content. Younger preschoolers offered a greater number of unrealistic, $F(1, 56) = 5.36$, $p < .05$, and compliant solutions, $F(1, 56) = 5.09$, $p < .05$, compared to older preschoolers (Table II).

Second, regardless of contextual factors, the *subject's gender* affected both solutions content and planfulness scores. Girls were more likely than boys to suggest nonconfrontational solutions, $F(1, 56) = 5.77$, $p < .05$. In addition, girls' solutions exhibited a greater degree of planfulness compared to boys' solutions, $F(1, 50) = 4.03$, $p < .05$. See Table II.

Contextual Factors

The *age of the antagonist* did not influence any SPS variables. However, the *nature of the dilemma* did significantly affect both the number of alternative solutions generated and solution content. Children suggested fewer alternative solutions to sexual than to nonsexual dilemmas, $F(1, 56) = 11.16$, $p < .001$. In addition, they generated fewer assertive, $F(1, 56) = 4.91$, $p < .05$; rule-based, $F(1, 56) = 20.06$, $p < .001$; and

Table II. Descriptive Statistics for Between-Subjects Factors

SPS Variable	Age group ^a		Gender	
	Younger (<i>n</i> = 28)	Older (<i>n</i> = 32)	Boys (<i>n</i> = 32)	Girls (<i>n</i> = 30)
Solution Content ^b				
Unrealistic				
<i>M</i>	1.89	1.16	1.53	1.47
<i>SD</i>	1.13	1.40	1.44	1.17
Compliant				
<i>M</i>	1.18	0.56	0.91	0.83
<i>SD</i>	1.31	0.95	1.25	1.12
Nonconfrontational				
<i>M</i>	1.86	1.56	1.28	2.13
<i>SD</i>	1.56	1.48	1.35	1.46
Planfulness Score ^b				
<i>M</i>	3.08	2.67	2.96	3.89
<i>SD</i>	1.32	1.39	2.98	2.18

^a Age data was missing on 2 subjects.

^b Means tabulated across all four unsafe situations, range 0-4.

help-seeking, $F(1, 56) = 6.12, p < .05$, solutions to the sexual compared to the nonsexual dilemmas. However, more nonconfrontational solutions were offered for the sexual than for the nonsexual dilemmas, $F(1, 56) = 7.17, p < .05$. See Table III.

For nonconfrontational solutions, the Subject Gender \times Social Dilemma interaction reached significance, $F(1, 56) = 6.59, p < .01$. Boys suggested about the same number of nonconfrontational solutions to nonsexual and sexual dilemmas. Girls, however, suggested more of these solutions to the sexual than the nonsexual situations. For help-seeking solutions, the Subject Gender \times Social Dilemma interaction approached significance, $F(1, 56) = 2.95, p < .10$. Girls chose help-seeking solutions with nearly equal frequency in the nonsexual and sexual problem situations. Boys, however, offered fewer help-seeking solutions in sexual as compared to nonsexual dilemmas (Table IV).

Table III. Means for Selected SPS Variables in Sexual and Nonsexual Social Dilemmas

SPS variable	Social dilemma			
	Nonsexual		Sexual	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Solution content ^a				
Assertive	1.48	0.74	1.29	0.82
Rule-based	0.58	0.69	0.17	0.46
Help-seeking	0.63	0.71	0.42	0.76
Nonconfrontational	0.74	0.78	0.95	0.81
Total number of alternative solutions ^b	4.61	1.74	4.00	1.70

^aNumber of solutions for each content category was tabulated across the two types of unsafe situations (sexual and nonsexual). Range: 0-2.

^bTotal number of alternative solutions were tabulated across the two stories for each type of unsafe situation (sexual vs. nonsexual). A maximum of 9 alternative solutions could be generated for each story. Range: 0-9 for nonsexual stories; 0-7 for sexual stories.

Table IV. Mean Number of Solutions for Two Strategy Categories.

Solution content ^a	Social dilemma			
	Nonsexual		Sexual	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Nonconfrontational				
Boys	0.66	0.79	0.63	0.75
Girls	0.83	0.79	1.30	0.79
Help-seeking				
Boys	0.66	0.70	0.31	0.59
Girls	0.60	0.72	0.53	0.90

^aNumber of solutions for each content category was tabulated across the two types of unsafe situations (sexual and nonsexual). Range: 0-2.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that both subject and contextual factors affect preschoolers' SPS. Moreover, these findings have implications for both social problem solving and child sexual abuse prevention research.

Subject Factors

Study findings suggest that both younger and older preschoolers are capable of utilizing a number of effective problem-solving strategies in unsafe encounters. However, younger preschoolers' tendency also to offer ineffective solutions (i.e., compliant and unrealistic) suggests that they may not *consistently* set appropriate self-protective goals or distinguish between effective and ineffective means of achieving them. This finding is congruous with existing research on the development of SPS skills in young children (Rubin & Krasnor, 1986).

Our findings indicate that preschool boys may be at risk for abuse not only because they generate few effective strategies but also because their strategies lack planfulness (across both sexual and nonsexual dilemmas). The capacity to generate planful strategies has been identified as an important component of problem solving in commonly occurring dilemmas (e.g., Shure, 1982; Spivack et al., 1976). This skill becomes particularly critical in sexually abusive encounters because requests to engage in sexually abusive touching often occur in complex circumstances that may require multiple-step resistance strategies (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Conte et al., 1989). Moreover, problem-solving failure in sexually abusive episodes has especially harmful consequences for the child (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986).

Existing SPS training programs have developed techniques to remediate many of the age- and gender-related SPS deficits exhibited by our subjects. Problem-solving effectiveness can often be improved by teaching preschoolers to anticipate the consequences of each solution they generate (e.g., Shure, 1992). Furthermore, by providing children with opportunities to practice multiple-step problem solving in social encounters, planfulness can be enhanced.

Most sexual abuse education programs do not systematically attempt to strengthen children's capacities to generate effective and planful solutions (see Gilbert et al., 1989, for a summary of several widely employed curricula). However, the complex circumstances in which a sexually abusive request is often embedded suggest that children's self-protective competence may be increased if they learn general skills that enable them to tailor their solutions to the specific circumstances surrounding the abusive request. Thus, personal safety curricula may be more effective if they also teach general SPS skills along with specific self-protective strategies.

Contextual Factors

The age of the antagonist in our stories did not influence children's SPS — a finding that is at variance with existing SPS research on common dilemmas. It may be that children's strategy choice is not statically controlled by the same factors (e.g., antagonist age) in all social dilemmas, but instead is determined by an interplay of contextual factors (Rubin & Krasnor, 1983). For example, research on children's perceptions of adult authority has found that children are more likely to obey an adult authority figure in social conventional rather than moral dilemmas (Braine, Pomerantz, Lorber, & Krantz, 1991; Smetana, 1985), thus suggesting that antagonist age influences children's social behavior in some types of social dilemmas while remaining unimportant in others. However, this area of research has not examined situations that threaten the child's safety. Future studies need to more clearly delineate possible contextual factors that affect children's SPS in unsafe encounters.

Study results support our hypothesis regarding the influence of the nature of the social dilemma on children's SPS. Preschoolers suggested fewer alternative solutions to the sexual than to the nonsexual dilemmas. Although previous research with preschoolers has not found that the nature of the dilemma influences SPS (Getz et al., 1984), such results have been reported in studies of older children (Caplan et al., 1991; Fischler & Kendall, 1988).

Preschoolers' ability to generate alternative solutions has been related to adaptive social functioning (e.g., Shure & Spivack, 1982; Spivack et al., 1976). This finding suggests that the more solutions a child is able to generate, the more likely he/she is to produce a strategy that effectively resolves the problem at hand (e.g., Spivack & Shure, 1982; Spivack et al., 1976). Thus, children's deficits in generating alternative solutions to the sexually abusive dilemmas may ultimately compromise their self-protective ability in a similar manner. A child who can generate alternative strategies for self-protection (e.g., say no, say "my parents won't let me," yell for help, run away, tell an adult) may be more likely to thwart the perpetrator's repeated overtures and terminate the abusive encounter, compared to a child who can think of only a single resistance solution.

The nature of the dilemma also affected solution content. Children were able to generate different types of self-protective strategies (i.e., assertive, rule-based, and help-seeking) in nonsexual situations but failed to do so in the sexual dilemmas. Script theory provides one possible explanation for these results (cf. Abelson, 1981; Rubin & Krasnor, 1986). Children as young as 3 years old possess a script or "mental blueprint" for the usual sequence of events in common social interactions (Nelson & Gruendel, 1979). These scripts can be acquired through observation of interactions or participation in events (Nelson,

1981). Preschool-age children are preoccupied with the concrete details of a script and do not easily generalize scripted behavior to new situations (Nelson, 1981). In the current study, the nature of the request to engage in sexual touching may have altered situational cues sufficiently so that the child's script for unsafe situations (e.g., crossing the busy street) was not triggered in the sexual situation. Therefore, preschoolers failed to enact even well-known resistance strategies. The assertion that the sexual situations are unfamiliar, and that preschoolers lack information regarding the rules that apply to them, is supported by studies examining preschoolers' knowledge of sexual abuse (e.g., Conte et al., 1985; Finkelhor, 1984; Gilbert et al., 1989; Wurtele & Miller, 1987). The main effect for social dilemma is particularly relevant to *how* child sexual abuse education is taught. Prevention programs may be more effective if they focus on enhancing generalization of these well-known resistance behaviors. This could be accomplished by focusing on the parallels between effective resistance behaviors used in well-known situations and self-protection in sexually abusive encounters.

Conclusion

This study's findings both challenge and support previous work in the areas of social problem solving and child sexual abuse education. Contrary to previous SPS research, our findings suggest that both subject variables and contextual factors play an important role in determining problem-solving performance. The importance of these factors in both common and unsafe social dilemmas needs to be examined more carefully in future SPS research. Also, future research should include scenarios in which female children are presented with male perpetrators; the generalizability of our results may be compromised because female-to-female sexual abuse occurs less frequently than does male-to-female sexual abuse.

While our findings are consonant with much of the child sexual abuse education literature, they suggest that programmatic efforts might be more effective if curricula are tailored to the specific strengths and weaknesses of different age groups and address potential differences in boys' and girls' self-protective skills. They also suggest that children's capacity to negotiate unsafe social encounters might be best enhanced by developing curricula that provide training in both general SPS skills and domain-specific application of these skills (cf. Caplan et al., 1992; Durlack, 1983; Hawkins & Weis, 1985). To teach self-protective skills effectively, child sexual abuse prevention research must develop a theoretical framework that delineates the cognitive processes required to terminate a sexually abusive encounter as well as the subject and contextual factors that can interfere with self-protection. This study suggests that the literature on children's SPS is a viable place to start.

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