Parents, caregivers and educators are responsible for keeping our children safe, creating safe environments for them, and teaching them healthy behaviors.

Research confirms that when children learn empathy skills, and when parents and caregivers show strong attachment, the risk of violent behavior in later life is substantially reduced.

We must join together to increase the accountability of individuals, schools, and communities in keeping our children safe and creating safe environments.

With support from
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention & Control and
New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, Division on Women
Prepared by the Prevention & Public Education Committee of the Governor’s Advisory Council Against Sexual Violence, NJ
Increasing Empathy & Attachment as Key Protective Factors

The 2010 – 2020 New Jersey’s State Prevention Plan for Sexual Violence focuses on the causes of violence, as identified by public health research. Violence is caused and fostered by exposure to violent behavior and by social expectations. It is sustained by societal and individual neglect. To prevent its occurrence, we must change those expectations, build positive, healthy relationships for children and young people, and hold ourselves and each other accountable to maintain safe families, schools and communities.

The Situation

- Numerous studies point to a lack of empathy and low attachment as risk factors for perpetration of sexual violence and other forms of power based personal violence. Since these conditions are set early in life, it is critical that prevention activities be focused on children (birth to 12 years) and their parents/caregivers.

- New Jersey has multiple efforts to combat sexual violence, bullying, child abuse, gang violence and dating violence. Tested strategies already exist in New Jersey for increasing empathy and attachment in young children including but not limited to: I Can Problem Solve, Incredible Years, Second Step, Social Decision Making, Dare to be You, Strengthening Families, Healthy Families America, Nurse Family Partnerships. Prevention efforts for older youth include Safe Dates and various forms of Bystander/Upstander strategies.

- Because of the regulatory, administrative and topical differences among these programs, they operate in separate silos, even though virtually all practitioners understand that child abuse, sexual violence, gang violence, bullying, and dating violence all share the same risk factors and will be reduced by related prevention efforts.

- People and agencies working to prevent all forms of personal violence have a responsibility to pool our efforts and approaches. We can make our separate work more effective, and build a mutually reinforcing, interconnected system for prevention.

Actions Needed

- Build strong partnerships to include cross training of prevention staff and acknowledgement of the continuum of violence prevention efforts across the ages.

- Increase the availability of integrated primary prevention strategies across the ages. This includes integrating sexual violence prevention efforts with other types of prevention efforts to ensure that our children learn empathy for others and have strong relationships that protect them from a life of violence.

- Develop a plan and strategies for joint advocacy to develop the resources necessary to reach high risk children, parents, adults and communities.
The Key Players

- State level leadership from Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey, the New Jersey Prevention Network, the New Jersey Department of Children & Families: Division of Prevention and Community Partnerships, the New Jersey Department of Education, and the New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women.

- Leadership support from the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJCASA), the New Jersey Department of Health & Senior Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Division of Violence Prevention.

- The Empathy & Attachment Workgroup of the New Jersey Sexual Violence State Prevention Team.

- Local programs that coordinate prevention efforts in communities, schools and colleges. This includes those providers that offer a wide range of prevention strategies for all forms of power based violence

- County-based coalitions that support the state prevention goals and customize prevention efforts to meet local needs.

The Desired Outcomes

- Elimination of power based personal violence in NJ.

- A change in individual and community behaviors and attitudes: where we now look away from violence and risks of violence, we must acknowledge it and take responsibility.

- Strengthened capacity of individuals, organizations and communities to implement, integrate and evaluate prevention efforts.

- Coordinated data collection systems to track trends and evaluate progress and success.

- Adequate funding streams for integrated primary prevention efforts across the lifespan

Your Role – Become A Partner in Prevention

- Join us to start the discussion of how we can better integrate our work on primary prevention.

- Share your perspectives. We can achieve our shared goals, by intentional and open collaboration across many kinds of organizations in several diverse systems. By combining our assets we can increase resources and ability to make substantial and measurable progress in preventing violence.