

By Christine Montgomery
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One little boy in the classroom caught Iris Beckwith's attention almost immediately. The fourth-grader said nothing during the three-hour-long presentations that week, but his eyes were on Mrs. Beckwith as she spoke about "good touches vs. bad touches" and how to recognize your "uh-oh" feeling — the emotion adults more often call a "gut instinct" — an innate feeling of dread.

Mrs. Beckwith had an "uh-oh" feeling about this little boy.

At the end of the program, Mrs. Beckwith explained to these Northern Virginia classmates how they could help a friend they think needs protection. Telling an adult, she said, is the first step. Five of the little boy's classmates brought her notes saying they thought their peer was in trouble.

The child told Mrs. Beckwith he was being physically and sexually abused at home — and since his friends had told Mrs. Beckwith, he would talk.

Mrs. Beckwith, manager of abuse-prevention programs for Childhelp — a national, nonprofit child-abuse prevention and treatment organization that is based in Los Angeles but also has offices in Falls Church — initiated an investigation. Privacy laws prevent her from knowing the fate of the 10-year-old.

The youngster was one of about 36,000 victims of reported child abuse or neglect in Virginia last year, according to the Virginia Department of Social Services. Nationwide, the number of children reported as victims of abuse is more than 3 million, according to Childhelp's studies. One in three girls is said to be abused by the time she's 18; for boys, one in five.

"Every day I read stories in the newspapers and on line about [child abuse]," Mrs. Beckwith says. "While the reporting is critically important, we also need to say, 'OK, we can do something.'"

As April is National Child Abuse Awareness Month, Childhelp's staff is getting the word out that children need to learn safety rules to protect themselves in a fire. That is the goal of "Good-Touch Bad-Touch," the program Mrs. Beckwith brings to area classrooms. It is part of the services offered by Childhelp and paid for by grants from the Discovery Channel and the Mobil Foundation, among other donors. It is free to schools.

"We teach that sexual abuse is the forced or tricked touching of your private parts," Mrs. Beckwith says.

Private parts, she tell them, are those areas covered by swimming trunks on a boy and a two-piece bathing suit on a girl. Anatomically correct names are not used because young children have different terms for body parts and also because the program doesn't teach sex education, she says.

"Most of the touches kids get in their lives are good. But this is about cocooning a child in safety," she says. "We're not teaching them about sexual abuse because we want to scare them. We're teaching them about sexual abuse so they can protect themselves."

The program's curriculum is tailored by age for each grade it's presented to — pre-kindergarten through sixth.

The signs of abuse are usually evident in a child, Mrs. Beckwith says, but since abuse



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is something most adults are uncomfortable discussing — and even more uncomfortable confronting — many crimes go unreported.

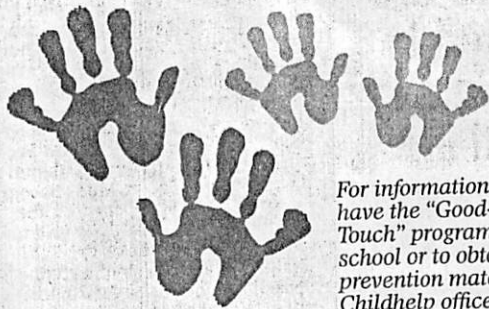
"Adults need to trust their instincts and keep their eyes and ears open and ask questions," she says.

If you suspect a child you know is being neglected or abused, you can call Childhelp's hot line at 800/4-A-CHILD (800/422-4453) to report an incident, get referrals for services in your area or seek crisis counseling.

Other avenues of reporting include the local police department, local child-protection services department, a school administrator, a counselor or clergy.

The following are some common signals that indicate a child is being abused. One or two symptoms or behaviors alone don't necessarily mean abuse is taking place. Instead, Mrs. Beckwith says, look for "clusters of behavior."

- Sign of physical abuse include:**
- Unexplained burns, cuts, bruises, welts.
 - Bite marks.
 - Anti-social behavior.
 - Problems in school.
 - Fear of adults.
- Signs of emotional abuse include:**
- Depression.
 - Hostility or stress.
 - Eating disorders.
 - Apathy.
- Signs of sexual abuse include:**
- Inappropriate interest in or knowledge of sexual acts.
 - Nightmares and bed-wetting.
 - Drastic change in appetite.
 - Overcompliance or excessive affection.
 - Fear of a particular person or member.
- Signs of neglect include:**



For information on how to have the "Good-Touch Bad-Touch" program in your school or to obtain abuse-prevention materials, call the Childhelp office (703/241-9100) in Falls Church.

CHILD ABUSE CASES ARE INCREASING IN U.S.

The incidence of all forms of child abuse continues to rise in this country. The following statistics are provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, from its Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3). The study compares 1993 findings with 1986, the last year the same national study was completed.

Physical abuse

In 1986, there were an estimated 269,700 child victims
In 1993, the estimated number rose to 381,700

Sexual abuse

In 1986, there were an estimated 119,200 child victims
In 1993, the estimated number rose to 217,700

Physical neglect

In 1986, there were an estimated 167,800 child victims
In 1993, the estimated number rose to 338,900

Emotional neglect

In 1986, there were an estimated 49,200 child victims
In 1993, the estimated number rose to 212,800

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of child abuse

Unsuitable clothing.
Dirty or unbathed appearance.
Extreme hunger.
Lack of apparent supervision.
Of the founded child-abuse complaints in Virginia last year, more than 80 percent occurred in family homes. More than 7,000 caretakers (a group that includes parents, grandparents, baby sitters, day care workers, Scout leaders and school personnel) were found to have abused or neglected a child left in their care, according to Virginia Department of Social Service estimates. Childhelp offers tips for protecting your child from abuse:
1. Get to know your child's friends and participate in his or her activities as much as possible.
2. Teach your child the differences between good touches, bad touches and confusing touches.
3. Be attuned to changes in your child's

behavior or attitude.
4. Listen when your child tells you he or she does not want to be with someone and ask why.
5. Be alert to any kind of talk from your child that reveals a premature sexual understanding.
6. Teach your child what to do if you become separated away from home. (Children should know their phone numbers and addresses as early as possible.)
7. Pay attention to someone who shows a greater than normal interest in your child. Ask about it. Don't be afraid to check the background of your child's coach, Scout leader, etc.
8. Make sure your child's school or day care center will release him or her only to you or someone you officially designate.
9. Have recent photos of your child available in case he or she becomes missing.
10. Teach your child about "911" and when and how he or she should use it.



Photos by Tracy A. Woodward/The Washington Times
Iris Beckwith, manager of abuse-prevention programs for Childhelp, a national program with offices in Falls Church, teaches youngsters to recognize the difference between "good" touches and "bad" touches. She is carrying the message to area schoolchildren.