

## Focus on sexual exploitation

### Awareness week declared to inform parents, kids of risks

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It might start with the lure of money, drugs or material things.

Add to that the promise of popularity, parties and freedom from family.

Then throw in guilt, emotional blackmail and alienation from loved ones.

The formula is simple but it works.

Over and over again, recruiters use similar techniques to entice and sexually exploit their young prey.

That's why the provincial government has declared March 8 to 14

Stop Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth Awareness Week.

The 11th-annual initiative focuses on prevention, education and intervention to put an end to the "lure-trust-payback" exploitation cycle.

The Children of the Street Society, a Coquitlam-based non-profit organization, aims to raise awareness about the issue.

Amy Schactman, workshop and facilitator co-ordinator, said sexual exploitation of youth is a problem everywhere, even right here in the Tri-Cities.

In fact, the Children of the Street Society began in 1995 when local mom Diane Sowden, a school trustee, lost her 13-year-old daughter to the sex trade.

"It's so underground. It's impossible to actually know how many youth are affected. But it is a problem," Schactman said.

School trustee Holly Butterfield said parents need to be made more aware of the dangers of sexual exploitation.

"I think there is a misunderstanding that the kids that are targeted are lower socioeconomic, and yet the reality is that's not true. They target the most vulnerable kids, which can be the most popular child or the least popular child, which could come from any home regardless of their socioeconomics," Butterfield said at a school board meeting Tuesday.

"Parents are just really ill prepared to empower their children and be ready for these sorts of things."



CREDIT: Paul vanPeenen, Coquitlam NOW  
Amy Schactman, with the Children of the Street Society, educates local residents about sexual exploitation.

# CHILDREN OF THE STREET SOCIETY

While recruiters for the sex trade are usually in their late teens to early 40s, Schactman said younger youth can also be involved in peer-to-peer sexual exploitation.

"We ask in every class, 'How many of you have ever heard of a situation where a girl needs a ride home from a party and she trades a sexual favour?' and hands always go up. Or trading drugs for sex at a party, that is definitely occurring," said Schactman, who has organized 56 prevention-based school workshops for more than 2,100 Tri-Cities youth since October.

To increase education initiatives during Stop Sexual Exploitation Awareness Week, Children of the Street provided all middle and secondary schools in the district with information packages that included fuschia-coloured ribbons and bracelets.

"Fuschia is the colour for stopping sexual exploitation," Schactman said.

"Fuschia is used because it's a combination of purple, which is violence prevention, and red, which represents the red light district."

Along with the SHARE Family & Community Services Society, the group also hosted a youth art gallery and contest. Some of the winning entries will be used to create public awareness materials for the Tri-Cities Community Action Team.

In the future, Schactman hopes the annual awareness week will be recognized across the country, which seems realistic since Alberta and Manitoba are now onboard.

"This week really recognizes the importance of supporting communities to develop prevention, education, enforcement and intervention strategies to stop the sexual exploitation of our children and youth," she said.

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