



ROADMAP TO TALKING ABOUT PERPETRATION PREVENTION

September 29, 2024

Introduction

The recent decision to change the name of our organization to the Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse provides a broadened framework for contextualizing what we do and a template for talking about our work. From its beginning ATSA has always strived to make society safer by advocating for evidence-based assessment and treatment of individuals who have sexually offended to lower the subsequent risk of sexual violence. The new name couches this effort to reduce sexual violence in the broader context of *preventing* sexual abuse and recognizes ATSA's long-standing support of efforts to prevent sexual abuse before it occurs as well as to stop those who have abused from repeating. The overarching mission of ATSA is the prevention of sexual abuse, and the name change captures and emphasizes that dedication.

The name change provides us with an opportunity to reflect about how we contextualize our work and how we talk about it. In small ways and large, the language we use and the approach we take in describing our work can impact the way others respond to how we address sexual abuse. To help us to reflect on our work in this broadened context and to frame for others what we do, the ATSA Prevention Committee has produced for ATSA members the **Roadmap to Talking About Perpetration Prevention**. In the following document there are practical guidelines to help you think about the work you do and recommendations for how you can best communicate your work to others.

Frame: I am working to end sexual abuse

Many of us have experienced the “chill” in the room when we say our work involves working with or treating “sex offenders.” You can almost hear them thinking, “Why would someone work with those monsters?” In fact, some of us may have even heard this said out loud. That is a difficult foundation on which to build meaningful conversation.

When you get the question... What do you do? How do you respond?

Starting new conversations about sexual abuse is not easy. Talking about the work of ATSA members may be even more difficult. Nonetheless, there are ways to share the essence of what we do with others, and it is important that we do so with honesty and openness that is grounded in the best practices of our field. Below are some suggestions about how you can frame your conversation and connect with others in our person and professional networks.

To effectively reach your audience, an option is to start a conversation or presentation with your values and **WHY** you choose to work with adults convicted of a sex offense, or **WHY** you choose to work with adolescents who have acted out sexually, or **WHY** you choose to work with children with sexual behavior problems. By providing insight into your values, you are helping your listener understand that you want to

make a difference. By talking about your shared values, you can begin from a place of connection around the shared goal of “no more victims.” Through your work, you are letting them know that you also add the value, “no more perpetrators.” Through your work you are making a commitment to making your community safer from sexual violence. The overarching goal of *preventing* sexual abuse captures this value.

Once you have established **WHY** you do your work, it is easier to then talk about **HOW** you do your work.

Frame: We work with adults, adolescents, and children who caused or are at risk to cause sexual harm.

We work with the people who cause sexual harm as well as their families. Some people who sexually abuse are adults who are not able or willing to stop harming others, and as a result they may be on probation in the community, or be in prison or in secure treatment settings. Most all individuals, though, ultimately return to the community and often to their families as well.

Our work is to help them understand the harm they have caused and assist them in developing skills and offer opportunities to manage their behaviors. Our work includes helping families and communities see that those who harm others are people. Some of our clients are people who have harmed others, served their sentences, and are now trying to make the right choices. Others who harm are children or adolescents who may have experienced their own trauma and need help navigating complex emotions and sexual feelings. They are adults, adolescents, and children with families, and they are often people we know and care for. Most importantly, when we no longer consider them “monsters,” we are more likely to see and respond to problematic sexual behaviors in our families and in the people we love.

In a conversation, it is always helpful to circle back to your values and why you do this work. At this point, it can also be helpful to acknowledge again the harm and trauma that was caused. It is this reason you engage with these adults, adolescents, and children and work to hold them accountable for what they have done so that any future sexual abuse will be prevented.

Frame: Everything that ATSA does involves Prevention

ATSA’s goal is to prevent sexual abuse BEFORE it occurs and respond AFTER to ensure there are no more victims. To attain our goal of eradicating sexual violence effectively, we work to prevent sexual violence BEFORE anyone is harmed AND respond AFTER the sexual violence to ensure no one else is harmed. ATSA’s name, the Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse reflects this two-pronged approach.

BEFORE anyone is harmed:

We work with children, adolescents, and adults to prevent the development of problematic or abusive sexual behaviors. We also offer interventions and strategies for anyone who may have thoughts and feelings but have chosen not to act on them. Finally, whenever possible, we work with families and communities with higher risks to build in protective factors to prevent the emergence of problematic sexual behaviors.

AFTER someone is sexually abused:

We work to ensure the successful intervention, treatment, and management of children, adolescents, and adults who have sexually abused. Our work is based upon decades of research about what interventions and therapeutic strategies are most effective with these populations. We also collaborate with others to ensure that the resources are available for adults, adolescents, and children who have been sexually harmed.

Frame: The unique expertise of ATSA's membership

Given the decades of work and research with those who have sexually abused, ATSA offers unique expertise in understanding the adults, adolescents, and children who cause sexual harm. The unique lens from ATSA members is preventing the *perpetration* of sexual violence – often a missing piece of the broader prevention strategy. ATSA's unique approach is to interrupt unhealthy, harmful, dangerous, and illegal sexual behavior and replace this with healthy social interactions and relationships.

Emerging research and the focus of our frame is informing our understanding of what puts someone at risk for engaging in sexual abuse and what may prevent the first-time perpetration of sexual abuse, as well as prevent further sexual abuse by those who have already sexually abused. To do this, ATSA's work considers the risks and the protective factors for the perpetration of sexual violence. As stated earlier, the goal and focus for our frame are “no more victims” and “no more perpetrators,” both of which are essential for making our communities a safer place to live.

Frame: ATSA works collaboratively with community advocates to prevent sexual abuse.

Key to stopping sexual abuse is a *comprehensive approach* to prevention. ATSA offers unique expertise, AND we know we can't do this important work alone.

ATSA and ATSA members currently collaborate with many organizations and professionals to prevent sexual abuse. When talking with someone unfamiliar with this approach to prevention, however, it can be difficult to know where to begin or even how to initiate a conversation leading to collaborative efforts.

From those of us who have successfully collaborated at the community level, here are some suggestions:

- Always be sensitive to the space into which you are walking. Many of the people you will work with may have their own trauma history and may also have assumptions about your work and the people with whom you choose to work.
- Be mindful of trauma histories that may influence how individuals perceive your messaging around sexual abuse.
- Acknowledge your own biases, as these can impact the way we communicate and connect with people.
- Consider how to talk about your own values and use that as a starting point for the conversation. (e.g., talk about your commitment to community safety and your belief that all people deserve to be free from sexual abuse and from the fear of being harmed.)
- Finally, choose your language thoughtfully—opt for clear, respectful terms that foster a safe environment for open dialogue.

By keeping these factors in mind, you can create a meaningful conversation around your work in preventing sexual abuse that resonates with the people in your lives.

If they are interested in learning more about the work that you do, speak from a place of hope rather than fear. For example, saying that “sex offenders are everywhere” instills a sense of fear, of monsters lurking in the shadows. Talking about the fact that “sexual abuse is preventable, not inevitable” can focus on the sense of hope in your work. It also leads to the question about **how**. Remember that you have a tremendous amount of expertise to offer, and you are joining with others because they too have a lot to offer and inform our work as well.

Possible Insert:

What can ATSA Members offer to the Perpetration Prevention Conversation?

ATSA members can help by talking about the importance of general rules for behavior that begin to create a safety net around a child, family, and others we care about. These general behavioral rules are often referred to as universal precautions in our work with clients and families. Among the important questions to address are:

- who are the people who have caused sexual harm;
- what are healthy boundaries, healthy relationships, and safety plans for families; and
- what is healthy sexual development in children and teen.

It is essential to create a context in which everyone feels more comfortable talking about behaviors. Once we can talk about healthy, unhealthy, problematic, and abusive sexual behaviors, we are better able to identify boundary violations and problematic sexual behaviors and to intervene when we can.

ATSA members have expertise and direct experience that they bring to the table. You also have the research to guide and support what you do. For example, you know about precursors to sexual abuse, what to look for as well as the tools for intervention (e.g., safety planning).

What YOU can do!

Here are some simple steps you can do (today)!

Talk about it: The next time someone asks you what you do, proudly state you are working to prevent sexual abuse. When they hopefully ask you what that means or how you do your work, you can share either that you are doing the really hard work of stopping sexual abuse before it is perpetrated by working directly with the children, adolescents, or adults who are at risk of sexually harming someone and/or that you work to stop sexual abuse after someone has been harmed, to ensure that the harm doers are held accountable for their actions and learn to live safe and productive lives when they return to the community.

Create partnerships: Reach out to victim/survivor advocacy organizations in your community or your state to talk about creating partnerships and collaborations that are more impactful and be part of a community of prevention and support prevention efforts at all levels. Join your ATSA chapter, engage your local community, your school board, your victim advocacy coalition or other groups. You will be surprised how much you can broaden your reach and enhance your work in unexpected ways.

Share your expertise: The next time communities, churches, schools, or other organizations ask for your input or for a presentation, say “Yes.” Use the ATSA library of materials for ideas, and be sure to end with the hopeful message about the power of prevention. Be sure to share concrete examples of sexual abuse prevention in action and the “success” stories in your work!

Developed by members of ATSA’s prevention committee: Jannine Hébert, Ryan Shields, Joan Tabachnick and Judith Zatzkin.

Possible additional resources built by ATSA staff:

Add resources and links:

- Consider adding appendix of potential examples of frames from members.
- Consider building a list of related research statistics. For example, depending on the audience with who you are talking, you might share what percent of adolescents engage younger children in sexual behaviors to illustrate the value of prevention work and address the issue of why you do what you do. Having research data at your disposal is critical to convince people who agree that everyone deserves a life free from sexual harm but who do not agree that prevention is possible. Support more formal presentations. Provide links to information on prevalence of sexual violence and to data on the success of treatments and what we know to date about primary prevention. (from Amanda)
- Information on “person-first” language: I often encounter people who either understand the idea behind person first language and are nervous they are not using the correct terms or don’t understand what person first means and why to use it. I think linking to ATSA resources around this could be helpful too. (from Amanda)
- Attending prevention events at the conference and community of practice meetings (?) to learn more and keep developing these skills. (from Judith)