



---

# RICK GUNDRUM

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 58<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## Testimony on AB 156/SB 171

Hello, members of this Joint Public Hearing. Thank you for allowing me to testify on Assembly Bill 156 and Senate Bill 171, a bill that would require school boards to provide age-appropriate instruction in child sexual abuse prevention. It's also known under the name "Erin's Law."

This instructional program will be provided to individuals starting in 4K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The general topics it will include: age-appropriate facts about sexual abuse, how to communicate incidents of sexual abuse to trustworthy adults, how to set and respect personal boundaries, and information about giving and receiving consent.

These necessary measures will help to ensure that children learn to protect themselves from this type of abuse as well as give them the tools and resources needed to speak out. Additionally, included in the bill is a notification process for parents so they are aware of this program, when it will be taught, and allows parents to opt their child out of the instructional program if that's what they think is best for them and their child.

When this bill was brought to my attention, I learned of a daunting statistic: one in four girls and one in six boys have been sexually abused before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. In many of these cases, these victims of child sexual abuse will continue to live their everyday lives without telling someone about their abuse. This is due, in large part, to the unfortunate reality that a majority of child sexual abuse victims know their abuser – whether it's a teacher, caregiver, or even a family member.

This bill is definitely needed. I am grateful to Erin Merryn – whom the bill is named after – for helping to bring this legislation forward and share her own personal story. I ask for your support on AB 156/SB 171, and I look forward to answering any questions.

STATE SENATOR

JESSE



JAMES

23<sup>RD</sup> DISTRICT

May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Representative Snyder, Chair

Senator Wanggaard, Vice-Chair

Representative Penterman, Vice-Chair

Members of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families

Members of the Assembly Committee on Children and Families

**Testimony on 2025 Senate Bill 171**

***Relating to: requiring child sexual abuse prevention education. (FE)***

Thank you, Chairman Snyder, and members of both Senate and Assembly committees for listening to my testimony today. Part of our job as adults is to protect our children, and although we may try our best, sometimes we can't always ensure their safety.

Sexual abuse of a child is unfortunately more common than people believe. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at least one in four girls and one in 20 boys in the United States experience child sexual abuse. About 90% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the child or child's family members. Experiencing this type of trauma can have short and long-term effects on a child's physical, mental, and behavioral health. Helping these children can be difficult because many children will wait to report or will never report their abuse. In a majority of these cases, the child does not even fully comprehend what is happening and that what is being done to them is wrong. This is why educating our children on what is considered abuse is such a crucial element to identifying wrongdoing.

This bill requires that school boards provide age-appropriate teaching in child sexual abuse prevention to students from 4K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This will help children learn to protect themselves from this abuse, as well as give them the resources needed to speak out. This bill also adds a notification process for parents so they know when this programming will be taught, and allows them to opt their child out of the programming if they so choose.

This legislation has passed in 38 other states across the country. We have named this bill 'Erin's Law' after Erin Merryn, a survivor and advocate for childhood sexual assault victims. Erin is here today to share her story and her journey of getting this legislation introduced and passed nationwide.

We're never going to stop every perpetrator, but we can better equip our children with knowledge and resources on how to report or stop these crimes sooner. Thank you all again for your consideration of this bill.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jesse James'.

Senator Jesse James

23<sup>rd</sup> Senate District

[Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:Sen.James@legis.wisconsin.gov)





May 7, 2025

**Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children & Families  
Assembly Committee on Children and Families**

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony  
2025 Assembly Bill 156 / Senate Bill 171**

Thank you to Senate Chair James, Assembly Chair Snyder and members of the Committees for the opportunity to testify today. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) is providing testimony for information only on Assembly Bill 156 (AB 156) and Senate Bill 171 (SB 171), regarding requiring child sexual abuse prevention education, also known as Erin's Law.

AB 156 and SB 171 would mandate that public schools provide sexual abuse prevention instruction to students from grades 4K through 12. We would like to engage this committee as well as the bill authors in a conversation about how to respect the policy goals of this proposal, name where we already meet these policy objectives in statute and practice, delineate how the instructional topics are most appropriate for 4k – 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and highlight the need for funding, time, and support when mandating new requirements.

The department understands the goal of this legislation is to promote the use of evidence-informed curricula, encourage flexibility in local implementation, and support parental involvement through opt-out provisions and educational materials. The bill aims to strengthen student safety through structured child sexual abuse prevention education, align with broader child welfare efforts, and promote consistency across districts.

Many requirements of this proposed law exist under current statutes. [Wis. Stat. Sec. 118.01\(2\)\(d\)\(8\)](#) states it is the responsibility of school staff to teach elementary students about recognizing and preventing child abuse, sexual abuse and child enticement. Additionally, [Wis. Stat. Sec. 118.01\(2\)\(d\)](#) requires an instructional program that includes knowledge of the human body and [Wis. Stat. Sec. 118.019](#) requires instruction in human growth and development with information on sexual anatomy and healthy relationships. We ask the authors to review these areas and eliminate redundancies.

The bill requirements fit best at the 4k-5<sup>th</sup> grade levels. The instructional topics detailed in the bill are most appropriate for the early grades. By middle school, and particularly high school, the topics in many prevention curricula shift from talking about body parts to internet safety, teen dating violence, and human trafficking prevention.



AB 156 and SB 171, as currently written, do not provide the funding, time and support this new mandate would require. The unfunded cost, additional time pressures, and lack of support for this activity would likely cause districts to be forced to accommodate the new requirement with the following impacts:

- Adjusting schedules for instruction, professional development for staff on instruction delivery, compensating teachers for training outside contract hours and potentially hiring additional staff.
- Purchasing or licensing a prevention curriculum for each grade, and costs for printing or digital access for students, parents, and educators.
- Administrative costs for policy development, oversight, and tracking program outcomes to meet state requirements, which will require staff time.
- Developing and distributing educational materials and hosting informational sessions.

Staffing levels, educator and staff capacity, funding, and professional development needs would vary from district to district. Without financial support, this unfunded mandate will create inequities in implementation across Wisconsin, especially those already facing budget constraints. Schools are tasked to do far more without the necessary funding, time and support, and ultimately this hurts students, educators, and communities.

It is the role of the DPI to provide guidance to schools on these topics. For example, the DPI provides several resources to schools, including information on protective behaviors training and curriculum. The agency and its training partners also promote best practices that include teaching students about their rights under Title IX and pupil non-discrimination laws, an understanding of dating violence, human trafficking, healthy relationships, giving consent, power and control dynamics, online safety, and how to seek help for self or others. In addition to resources, we collaborate with district leaders and work in partnership with student service staff such as counselors, school social workers and school psychologists. We also encourage school leaders to consult with local sexual assault service providers on abuse prevention programs.

Additionally, if the goal of this legislation is to ensure all Wisconsin students benefit from the protections this bill aims to address, all schools should be included in this mandate should this legislation move forward. There is no public policy justification for leaving them out.

The DPI would like to thank both committees for the opportunity to testify today, and we are happy to answer any questions you may have. If you have questions that arise after today, please direct them to Andrea Gugel, Policy Initiatives Advisor, at [andrea.gugel@dpi.wi.gov](mailto:andrea.gugel@dpi.wi.gov).

## **Public Hearing Testimony**

Date: May 7, 2025 12:00PM

Name: Carolyn Ewald

**RE:** Joint Public Hearing: Assembly Committee on Children and Families + Senate committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families.

- **2025 Assembly Bill 156** - Relating to: requiring child sexual abuse prevention education.
- **2025 Senate Bill 171** - An Act to create 118.018 and 121.02 (1) (L) 1m. of the statutes; Relating to: requiring child sexual abuse prevention education. (FE)

By Representatives: Gundrum, Snyder, Dittrich, Behnke, Donovan, Kitchens, Kreibich, Moses, Mursau, O'Connor, Piwowarczyk and Subeck; cosponsored by Senators James, Jacque, Cabral-Guevara and Spreitzer.

---

My name is Carolyn Ewald and I am a 37 year old City of Waukesha homeowner, commercial insurance agent, dog Mom, and Auntie to 3 children. I am also a childhood sexual abuse survivor.

While my parents were away on vacation, they thought it was safe to leave my sister and myself under the care of my Grandma and Step-Grandpa. As a young 5 year old girl, going to Grandma's house was supposed to be about eating extra ice cream, playing on her typewriter, and watching TV before bedtime. My Step-Grandpa had other plans for that stay. He molested me in their living room; immediately taking away my innocence and changing the trajectory of my life.

I am testifying today on how pivotal it could have been to my development to attend a school where a child sexual abuse prevention program was implemented. If I had learned about safe and unsafe touch at the age this bill proposes, I could have learned the communication skills to tell him to stop touching me and to stop making me touch him. I could have learned how to talk to a trusted adult about what my Step-Grandpa had done to me. I had no idea how to put words to what had happened to me at the time. I felt it was my fault. Please understand that the problem with not talking about childhood sexual abuse is that the victim typically believes it is their fault and are burdened with the shame.

After the abuse, I grew up extremely shy, void of self-confidence, and never shared my feelings with anyone. In high school and college, I turned to alcohol to numb myself and blackout on a regular basis. After graduating college, I would continue to drink in isolation for 10 years to the brink of my own death. Thankfully my story did not end there. By the grace of my Higher Power, I voluntarily entered a 30-day treatment program on April 22, 2022 and got sober. That was just over 3 years ago and I have remained clean through my commitment to my recovery, attending therapy every 2 weeks and working a 12-step program.

In my recovery journey over the last 3 years, I have learned that not talking about difficult issues does not make them go away. The only way to deal with the darkness is to bring it to the light. It is heartbreaking and maddening to share with you that a strong percentage of the people I've met in recovery are individuals who were sexually abused as children. Addiction, in its many forms, and childhood sexual abuse are so closely related. It is important to not ignore this correlation.

If we can reach children with this education at ages when they are most vulnerable and continue to annually instruct them with the age-appropriate curriculum, it will literally save the lives of children. I consider myself lucky for making it out of my active addiction, but many are still suffering from the pain of their abuse. I hope by sharing my story, you can see how much this abuse can fundamentally change one's future. It is our responsibility to protect our children with the knowledge, communication skills, and respect for personal boundaries and consent that this education could provide.

Thank you to the representatives and senators who introduced and cosponsored this bill and for hearing my testimony. Your consideration of these matters is deeply meaningful to me. Please vote yes to Assembly Bill 156 and Senate Bill 171 to require child sexual abuse prevention education in Wisconsin. Thank you.

05/07//2025

**Public testimony on Erin's Law  
AB156/SB171**

**Assembly and Senate Committee Chairs and Committee members of the Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, and the Committee on Children and Families,**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of AB 156/ SB171- Erin's Law today. I am in front of you, most importantly, in my capacity as a Wisconsin voter and taxpayer and a mom raising children with autism and other neurodiversity.

As many of you may know, for the past 10 years, I have been appointed by the Governor to serve the Wisconsin Council on Mental Health and as a Co-Chair of the Office of Children's Mental Health. While these committees are responsible for advising YOU as legislators on how funds from SAMSHA and grants should be spent, they are limited because those millions of dollars cannot be used for PREVENTION.

I am here to advocate for cycle-breaking, tangible change to the system to protect all children from abuse and to empower future generations of children to break the silence that harm of abuse thrives within. Our young people need to be listened to when they report abuse. They need proper vocabulary and clear boundaries of personal safety to build their foundation of self-determination upon. According to data from the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Report, Wisconsin's children report sexual abuse yet their voices go unheard and the crime is deemed unsubstantiated because they don't provide enough information to convict their abusers. [Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Report 2023](#)

Children with different abilities are easy targets for abuse. Children with disabilities' care and support needs are dependent on the care from healthy adults. They are much more vulnerable and reliant on others for their care. Children with different abilities often have to be bathed by caregivers or hired staff, have their restroom needs handled by hired staff, often left alone with "trusted" adults. This is the ideal opportunity for abuse to occur and thrive. Those with disabilities are often the least able to recognize danger, the least able to protect themselves, and the least able to articulate exactly what happened to them to police.

If Erin's law is passed, our most vulnerable students will be taught personal body safety, boundaries, and recognize abuse and how to report abuse. We also need to teach and empower the mandated reporters in our schools on what abuse looks like and how to report it.

Real change happens when we think about how many survivors of childhood sexual assault go on to become addicted to drugs and alcohol to numb themselves in adulthood, or to commit unspeakable harm to others. How many people in our criminal justice system are perpetrators of generational abuse? Think about all the long term effects of ACE scores have on us. Think about all the money in court fees, trial costs, and attorney fees. The true victims that could have benefited from Erin's law, if it was passed 10 years ago? We could help change the trajectory of so many lives if Erin's law is passed. I am reminded by the quote, "It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken men" Frederick Douglass.

In April we had Child Abuse Prevention Month and in May we celebrate Children's Mental Health Awareness Month. I cannot express the importance and great impact of Erin's law would have on the next generation of children. Please vote in favor of AB 156 / SB171.

Thank you,

Kimberlee Coronado

## **Testimony of Amy Bobber – In Support of Assembly Bill 156 (Erin's Law)**

*May 7, 2025 – Wisconsin State Capitol*

**"My son asked for help—and they punished him for it."**

Good afternoon. Thank you all for allowing me to speak.

My name is Amy Bobber. I'm a mother of four, a former educator, and a resident of Menomonee Falls. I'm here today with my youngest son, Zach, who was harmed—not by just one person, but by nearly every system in Wisconsin that was supposed to help and protect him.

I'm speaking in strong support of **Erin's Law**, because the prolonged abuse and sexual assault Zach endured should never happen to another child—especially not in a public school.

Zach is 16. He has autism and an intellectual disability. For nine years, he thrived in general education—happy, included, and connected with his peers, with zero incidents. Then in 2023, the district removed him from that setting—**illegally**—and placed him in a self-contained special education classroom full time. They stripped away everything he loved about school: his schedule, his peers, his independence, his dignity. And when he tried to advocate for himself, they ignored and punished him.

Zach began showing signs of serious distress. He started hitting, crying, swearing—behaviors he had never shown before. He became withdrawn, confused, and afraid. His mental and physical health collapsed. Numerous incidents went unreported; being found **naked** in a classroom with a teacher. Escaping HS several times attempting to kill himself in traffic, daily imprisonment secluded for months, deprived food, given no education, stopped breathing for 35 seconds and more daily incidents of horror he experienced in fear unreported. There were no detailed reports. No investigations. No calls home. No medical provided. No calls for 911 or CPS.

Staff documented this for months, and yet—he received no meaningful help. No protection. No trauma screening. No suicide assessments. Not one of the **25 HS staff reported what was happening**.

Let me be absolutely clear: **Zach was reporting abuse and sexual assault by a teacher**. Through his words. Through his actions. Through his trauma. A teacher was torturing him calling him a vagina. I reported to concerns to HS, the mandated reporters around him, ignored, denied, and scolded me, maybe either didn't recognize it— or worse, chose not to. Instead of being protected, Zach was punished, labeled, and locked away—until he could no longer function.

Zach now has **Complex PTSD, dissociation, and multiple trauma-related diagnoses**. He can't attend school. He's been medically homebound since 4/5/2024. On 4/6/24, I received a 25 page document of incidents with 25 mandated reporters, who never reported and resulted in Zach's severe injuries. If Zach had been taught body



safety, had more words, tools in his belt—if staff had been trained to recognize the signs of abuse and trauma—maybe someone would have believed him. Maybe someone would've reported it. Maybe this never would've happened.

**Erin's Law is not optional. It's urgent.** We need action now—not after another child suffers.

Our teachers need training.

Our children need body safety language.

And our systems need accountability. Sexual assault has been reported all systems failed and refuse to interview or investigate. Federal OCR complaints have been filed and I hope Zach receives the justice he deserves.

Because when a child asks for help, they should be heard—not punished.

Thank you.

Amy Bobber

W158N8326 Apple Valley Dr. #204

Menomonee Falls, WI 53051

414-722-6041 – acbobber@gmail.com

Anonymous statement for hearing on Erin's Law, May 7th 2025

Good afternoon,

I am writing this statement today in favor of Erin's Law. First, I would like to thank you for your work on this extremely important issue. And I want to commend Erin on her exceptional bravery in bringing this issue to the forefront.

Next, I would like you to understand where I am coming from, I would like you to understand my lived experience. I'm a military veteran, a former federal law enforcement officer. I've worked with victims of domestic violence, which very often includes sexual assault, child abuse, and child sexual assault. I currently work in education. I have dedicated my life's work to my country and to my community in service to others. I have also been a victim of DV, SA, and child sexual abuse and I have witness my children's repeated abuse as well. I have worked tirelessly to protect my children and every single one of my efforts have been in vain. Why? Because of the systems' complete and utter failure to live up to their part of the social bargain.

No doubt, there will be testimony from experts today, or at least I hope there will be. Common stats are that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 7 boys will be sexually assaulted or sexually abused before they turn 18, and these numbers are thought to be an underestimate. I want to remind you that for disabled children, the most vulnerable children, the statistics are even more dire. For most disabled boys the statistics equate to it not a matter of if but a matter of when and for disabled non-verbal girls it's not a matter of when but a matter of how many times. These numbers should absolutely sicken every one. But even more disturbing is who is doing this to our children. Some studies show that most probable, as in over half of perpetrators being figures in the home, dads, stepdads and the like.

Many people assume, including those who work in the system, that if a parent needed to protect their child from a perpetrator in the home that they could "just" simply go to family court where the judges and lawyers would "do the right thing" and protect the kids. But did you know that is rarely the case? A DOJ study by Meier et al published in 2020 found that in family court only 1 in 51 children were believed, even when there was evidence, and in most cases were still forced into contact with a person who sexually assaulted them. And if that wasn't shocking enough, in 86% of family court cases those kids were even taken from their protective parents given to the perpetrator primarily or solely. And this is in stark contrast to the studies that show that the vast majority of allegations are true. It's hard to comprehend that level of cruelty. Imagine being the child in that situation, being brave enough to report and then the system hands you over to your perpetrator. Imagine being the protective parent in that situation. Its a torture that can not be explained in words. Are you nauseous yet? This is the lived experience of countless children and protective parents in this state.

My children have been repeatedly victimized by their other parent. This is why my statement is anonymous. It is far FAR too dangerous to my children for me to speak publically. It's been over a year, there are medical records and witnesses who heard the person admit to penetrating one of my children, a child who can not speak. My children have exhibited significant signs of distress. Yet the police, CPS, and the courts turned their back on us. They

chose to ignore the risk, ignore the evidence, and ignore their very own policies. I also tried to get the bare minimum for my kids, that being therapy to help them cope. The clinic, who by the way specializes in serving victims of sexual assault confirmed that my kids were eligible and needed the service but they refused to provide even basic therapy services. Why? Because the perpetrator wouldn't allow it. Imagine being a rape victim and being denied even therapy because your rapist said no to it. Its horrific, its beyond cruel, it's real, and it's how Wisconsin treats far too many of its child victims.

This leads to my only criticism of this bill. That is, it doesn't go far enough. I still support it, but it doesn't do enough. The school I work in already does an annual lesson with students that covers the topics proposed in this very necessary bill. Every year it is led to good discussions and multiple reports of sexual abuse by the kids. And every year, every single one of the kids that reported was then failed by the system. The protective parents cant help these kids, and then the teachers are forced to hand these kids over to the very person who harmed them. Teachers care and watching these kids be failed repeatedly takes a significant toll on them. Studies are clear, when the systems that were supposed to protect victims fail it seriously exacerbates the effects of trauma and hinders healing.

Please pass this bill. But do more. Your work is not done. Please think of all the children, including mine, who this very evening are being sent home to their rapist, alone.



Anonymously provided in favor of AB 156/ SB171

I am putting this together quickly, I can try checking my email at work today but no promises. I do give you permission to share this at the hearing today. I'd love to hear how it goes.

My ex-husband was sexually abusive in our relationship, he raped me, stalked me, and is addicted to porn. I reported this in Winnebago County. I've later learned, my report didn't even get sent to the DA. We had two children together, now ages 12 and 13, one girl, one boy. In 2020, we went through our divorce, I ended up homeless and then losing custody because I didn't have housing. I lost my housing after being attacked. For the next 4 years we went through family court. During COVID, I lived with him and my two children to home school them. During this time, my son wouldn't go in the bathroom with his dad because he said Dad takes naked pictures of him in the bathroom. I reported this to CPS, it wasn't enough to investigate. I confronted him, he strangled me. The police said it was not enough to arrest. He has isolated me away, the school, teachers, and my children are fooled and blinded in this situation. As he continues to have power in my life, I fear this abuse is running rampage as I stepped away to seek treatment. He is breaking the relationship as Mom, I need schools to know, this is going on, my children are in danger, I pray they recognize signs and my children will know how to say something, if something happens.

Thank you,

Anonymous #2

## In Support of Bill 156/Erin's Law

In Fall of 2021, my daughter, a Junior in High School, spoke in front of 200 students, sharing her story. She did this for all those who have had their innocence taken away, who have not been heard or believed, and finally to spread awareness and to help students. Her bravery inspired others to share their traumatic experiences of sexual abuse and assault. This pivotal moment marked the day that she and her two friends started collaborating with the Sun Prairie Area School District, implementing Sexual Assault Awareness programs in their schools. Their goal was to lift the veil of secrecy, challenge the stigma associated with sexual assault, and enhance support for victims. Their message was strong and impactful: *"You are Not Alone, We are Not Alone."*

**It's time to break the silence on childhood sexual abuse and effectively make an impact for kids by mandating age-appropriate sexual abuse education in Wisconsin for K-12 students to provide prevention, resource awareness, and support for survivors.**

Childhood sexual abuse is one of the most underreported crimes. Why? The reasons are deeply rooted in the complex layers put on children. The abuser will threaten or bribe their victims to remain silent. They carry the heavy emotions of shame, confusion, and guilt. Some are too young to know that sexual abuse is not appropriate – especially when it's done by someone they know and trust (Why Kids Don't Tell, 2023). That's why I am here today to support Bill/Erin's Law. School districts providing a safe place for kids by teaching them how to speak up if they are experiencing abuse and to

teach them about personal body safety. This law is enacted in 38 states. Wisconsin is one of the 12 states that have yet to pass this legislation (Erin's Law, 2023).

When children are given the opportunity to break their silence, the abuse ends, and it's the first step in moving forward with healing their lives. It has been since 2008, when Erin decided to intensify her efforts to protect children nationwide by contacting state lawmakers. It is now 2025, that is 17 years that Wisconsin has been one state that has not even considered this bill. One of the reasons is that child sexual abuse is a taboo topic, making it difficult for some people to talk openly about it (Stop it Now, 2022). It is crucial to continue having conversations about sexual abuse to begin normalizing it. Stated best by Dr. Daniela Ligerio, Chief Executive Officer of Together for Girls, "Silence enables predators, keeping them safe in the knowledge that society is too afraid to hold them to account. For too long, survivors have been silenced for fear of not being believed. Shame thrives in silence, and the scars it leaves on survivors last a lifetime. But it does not have to be this way. Just by talking and listening, we all have the power to fight stigma and ensure survivors do not feel alone. This starts with creating safe spaces for children – and adults – where stigma and shame are left at the door" (Ligerio, 2023). Survivors of child sexual abuse often wait years, if not decades, before finding the strength to come forward, as they were never provided a safe environment to speak up. The average age for reporting child sexual abuse is 52 years old (Child USA, 2020). Delaying the disclosure presents years of the survivor living in silence, carrying around the emotional scars and burden, and most likely closing any door for justice on the perpetrator.



Who are the perpetrators? The perpetrators are not frightening, strangers, instead, they are usually respected members of the community or someone that the child knows, including family members. Many groom their victims by establishing a trusting relationship with the family and child. Examples of perpetrators who are respected community members who groomed the children they abused include clergy and faith leaders. In April 2023, the Wisconsin Department of Justice launched the Clergy and Faith Leader Abuse Initiative. Over two years, they have received 248 reports of sexual abuse. This initiative has provided support to survivors, along with charges and arrests related to these cases. One survivor stated, "Speaking up shatters the wall that offenders hide behind. Prior to my report, I had little hope for any form of justice. Unlocking my secrets and sharing them with a professional that I could trust proved to me that what happened matters. Sharing changed me in ways I didn't anticipate. It opened windows, releasing a deep heaviness I carried for decades." Another survivor shared, "I suffered in silence for fifty years, thinking no one would hear the pleas of a 9-year-old boy" (WI DOJ, 2023). These survivors, like Erin Merryn, knew their perpetrators and remained silent because they were never provided with sexual abuse education and awareness.

Childhood sexual abuse infringes on the basic rights of a human being. Sexual experiences should happen at the appropriate development time and within their control and choice (Hall, 2011). That choice has been taken away, and it is something that can never be given back. It can affect their inability to trust others and may have an impact on their experience of future healthy relationships. According to a Georgia State University study, the effects of child sexual abuse include the risk of severe mental,

physical, and behavioral health disorders (Cataldo, 2021). Helping Survivors, a non-profit organization, describes those who have been impacted by sexual assault and abuse as a “traumatizing event that can go on to negatively impact nearly every aspect of a person’s well-being.” It not only causes fear and distress, but it also leaves lasting psychological scars that can persist long after the abuse has ended. Long-term psychological effects include depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the most common psychological side effects of childhood sexual abuse. This will usually manifest in adulthood and includes reliving the events through flashbacks, intrusive memories, heightened fear, and difficulties with sleep and concentration. In addition to psychological distress, sexual abuse can lead to a variety of behavioral issues such as eating disorders, substance abuse, and sexual risk-taking.

Telling is the first step to healing. Fewer than 1 in 12 victims will disclose their abuse, according to the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape. Most child sex abuse victims know their abuser, who is most likely a member of their immediate or extended family (Henshaw, 2021). Danielle Palermo, the Director of counseling at Safe Berks, explains that victims of abuse often remain silent due to fear of not being believed or they struggle with feelings of guilt or shame related to the abuse. Due to the stigma associated with sexual abuse, victims may feel uncomfortable or afraid to talk about their abuse. She went on to say “There is a lot of power and healing in talking about it. That’s what makes counseling and other forms of treatment so important” (Henshaw, 2021).

Providing children the opportunity to tell someone they can trust about their experiences of sexual abuse in a safe environment requires the implementation of age-

appropriate sexual abuse education in Wisconsin for grades K–12. This approach has been proven to be an effective strategy, successfully reaching children across the nation at an affordable cost. The states that have enacted Erin's Law require that staff members in K-12 public schools will receive training on understanding the effects of sexual abuse, how to discuss sexual abuse prevention with children, and complete mandated reporting training. Each state has developed a comprehensive guide outlining the objectives for every grade. For instance, kindergarten through second graders will learn to identify trustworthy adults, that certain body parts are private, and grasp the "No, Go, and Tell" principle. Third to fourth-grade students will discover ownership of their bodies, recognize unhealthy and unsafe behaviors (such as bullying and abuse), and learn how to seek help in these situations. Fifth and sixth graders will learn the importance of respect, online safety measures, and how to establish personal boundaries while respecting those of others. Seventh and eighth graders will be able to differentiate between positive and negative relationships and will gain an understanding of manipulation and lures. Finally, students in high school will comprehend the risks of sending, requesting, or sharing inappropriate content. They will also understand consent, and know how to seek help from professionals, such as counselors and help/abuse lines (NY St Edu, 2020).

Erin's Law or similar legislation will also provide an education to Parents. An Assistant District Attorney, Jill Starishevsky, in New York City has prosecuted thousands of sex offenders since 1997. She has dedicated her career to seeking justice for victims of child abuse and sex crimes and has made it her mission to protect children. She published an article titled *"10 Reasons Parents Don't Discuss Child Sexual Abuse"* in



2014. She stated, "I have heard all the reasons why parents don't discuss child sexual abuse prevention with their children." One of the reasons was that some parents might think that sexual abuse education will scare their children. Jill said, "When handled properly, children find the message empowering and are not frightened." Other parents said they do not let their children go near strangers. She responded that "93% of all child sexual abuse occurs at the hands of someone known to the child and trusted by the parents. Even if a child is never around strangers, he or she could be victimized by a neighbor, a coach, a religious official, or a family member." Finally, she has heard parents say that they do not need to discuss child sexual abuse prevention because it won't happen to their child. Jill stated "If one were to ask any parent whose child has been sexually abused if they thought their child would ever be sexually abused, I can guarantee each one would say no. We need to stop denying that it could happen and recognize that there are ways to prevent it from happening. Decide to talk to your child about sexual abuse prevention. It could be the greatest gift you ever give them" (Starishevsky, 2014). Parents and guardians will also have access to educational materials in the states that have laws similar to Erin's Law. Information will be provided on the behavior warning indicators of children being sexually abused as well as available resources. Some parents who were initially apprehensive about child sexual abuse education in schools found reassurance after reviewing the content and lessons being taught.

Although school-based child sexual abuse intervention programs should not be considered as the only answer to a social problem as complex as child sexual abuse, it has been effective (Collin-Vezina, 2013). A 2015 survey of 79,644 Texas public school

staff revealed that the implementation of Erin's Law in 2014 led to a 283% increase in child sexual abuse reporting (Merante, 2022). Countless children have come forward to report sexual abuse in the 38 states that have Erin's Law. In the Spring of 2021, After a one-hour sexual abuse prevention presentation at an elementary school in New York, Erin shared "Nine kids in that school came forward saying they were being sexually abused. These nine kids were all pointing their fingers at the same man, not the stranger, but the principal. The principal had been abusing these kids in his office at what he called his lunch buddy program. This went on for seventeen years to multiple children. The number from nine kids that one day has now exceeded more than 30 kids being abused by that principal. This is just one example of how one hour of education made the difference of no more children being abused and stopping this predator who is now behind bars" (Merryn, 2023). In Virginia, two children (9 and 10-year-old girls) came forward, telling police they were victims of sexual assault after watching a video in school about appropriate and inappropriate touching. Two people were arrested and charged: a 28-year-old male family member and a 17-year-old male (Inside Nova, 2016). In January 2023, a 41-year-old man was sentenced in Boone County, IL, for predatory criminal sexual assault. His victim reported the abuse after a presentation on Erin's Law. Erin Merryn used this most recent story as an example of Erin's Law Convictions. Erin stated, "These are the stories that motivate me to never give up on Erin's Law being passed in every state. It feels good to take monsters off the street by giving kids the education I so wished I had given to me" (Merryn, 2023).

It's time to focus on protecting our children, which is the responsibility of lawmakers, community members, parents, and teachers. By mandating age-appropriate

sexual abuse education for K-12 students in Wisconsin, we can provide prevention, raise awareness of resources, and support survivors. We will begin to *Break the Silence on Childhood Sexual Abuse*.

Sexual abuse is an issue that has been prevalent in our world; it has been affecting community members around us, and it's something that we can't see, but it's something that scars us emotionally and physically. People suffer from it for the rest of their lives. The school system can do something right now for students to set them on the right path and get them the help they need. If we could even help one child feel safe, get them the support they need, heal those scars, and get justice, that makes it all worth it.

Please support Assembly Bill 156.

Sincerely,

Candice Duffek

Sun Prairie, WI 53590

## References

- Blad, E. (2014, April 1). New state laws require more sex abuse training in schools. *Education Week*.  
<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/new-state-laws-require-more-sex-abuse-training-in-schools/2014/04>
- Collin-Vézina, D., Daigneault, I., & Hébert, M. (2013). Lessons learned from child sexual abuse research: Prevalence, outcomes, and preventive strategies. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 7, 22. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3720272/>
- Committee for Children (2014, December 29). *Sexual abuse should not be happening to our kids*. [Video] Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJ1X0pGAhCM>
- Committee For Children. (2023). Why kids don't tell. *Early Open Often*.  
<https://www.earlyopenoften.org/get-the-facts/why-kids-dont-tell/>
- Erin's Law. (2023). Erin's law. <https://www.erinslaw.org/erins-law/>
- Erin Merryn. (2017, November 29). *Erin Merryn Founder of Erin's Law*. [Video] Youtube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y4Scon4xxk>
- Faust, M. (2023, August 30). *Proposed legislation would require child sexual abuse prevention be taught in schools*. [Radio Broadcast]. Wisconsin Public Radio  
<https://www.wpr.org/education/proposed-legislation-erins-law-child-sexual-abuse-prevention-taught-schools>
- Kosmides, K. (2023). *Long-term effects of child sexual abuse. Helping Survivors*.  
<https://helpingsurvivors.org/child-sexual-abuse/long-term-effects/>
- Henshaw, S. (2021, August 19). Child sexual abuse thrives in shame and secrecy, experts say. *Reading Eagle*. <https://www.readingeagle.com/2020/06/14/child-sexual-abuse-thrives-in-shame-and-secrecy-experts-say/>
- Ligiero, D. (n.d.). *It's time to break the silence on childhood sexual violence*. Al Jazeera. Retrieved April 21, 2024, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/4/19/its-time-to-break-the-silence-on-childhood-sexual-violence>

Merryn, E. (2023, August 21). *Erin's Law Facebook*.

<https://www.facebook.com/ErinsLaw/videos/warning-actual-recorded-abuse-heard-in-this-video-please-watch-help-me-educate-o/1543450126440380/>

Merryn, E. (2017, November 29). *Erin Merryn Founder of Erin's Law*. [Video] Youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y4Scon4xxk>

NBC New York News. (2021, April 15). *NY Elementary School Principal Charged with Sexually Abusing 9 Students*. Crime and Courts. <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/ny-elementary-school-principal-charged-with-sexually-abusing-9-students/3002160/>

NYSED. (2023). *Erin's law*. New York State Education Department.

<https://www.nysed.gov/standards-instruction/erins-law>

RAINN. (2020, July 10). *Grooming: know the warning signs*. sexual assault.

<https://www.rainn.org/news/grooming-know-warning-signs>

RAINN. (2022, July 30). *Leave no trace: child sexual abuse Boy Scouts of America*.

<https://www.rainn.org/news/leave-no-trace-child-sexual-abuse-boy-scouts-america>

RAINN. (2023). *Children and teens: statistics*. child sexual abuse is a widespread problem.

<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens>

Sheridan, D. (2017, October 27). *The long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse*:

<https://www.therealbathurst.org/single-post/2017/10/27/the-long-term-effects-of-childhood-sexual-abuse-melissa-hall-and-joshua-hall>

Starishevsky, J. (2016, August 13). *10 reasons parents don't discuss child sexual abuse*. [Post].

Linkedin. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/10-reasons-discuss-child-sexual-abuse-2016-jill-starishevsky>

Stop It Now! (2023) *What keeps us from talking about sexual abuse*. <https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-keeps-us-from-talking-about-sexual-abuse>



del Valle, L., Dolan, L., Tebor, C. (2023, April 20). *Boy Scouts of America will begin to compensate sexual abuse victims from a \$2.4 billion trust after emerging from bankruptcy*. CNN.

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/20/us/boy-scouts-sexual-abuse-compensation-trust/index.html>

WI DOJ. (2023, April 17). *Attorney General Kaul Releases Update in Advance of Two-Year Anniversary of Clergy and Faith Leader Abuse Initiative*. Wisconsin Department of Justice.

<https://www.doj.state.wi.us/news-releases/attorney-general-kaul-releases-update-advance-two-year-anniversary-clergy-and-faith>