

## Child and Youth Advocacy: Importance of Listening to Youth to Help Prevent PSB

**Speaker 1:**

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**Bruce Moody:**

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today we'll talk about the importance of listening to youth to help prevent problematic sexual behaviors. We have a full house today, three guests all from Oklahoma. Joining us today we have Andrew Monroe, Clifford Sipes and Shel Millington. Welcome to the three of you. Let's give you a chance to each introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about what you do. Andrew, let's start with you.

**Andrew Monroe:**

Yeah, thanks for having us, Bruce. I'm a licensed clinical social worker, and I work as part clinician and part training director for the National Center on the Sexual Behaviors of Youth here in Oklahoma at the Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

**Bruce:**

All right, and Clifford, welcome.

**Clifford Sipes:**

Thanks for having me. My name's Clifford Sipes. I'm the facilitator of the Youth Partnership Board at the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, and I'm also a stutterer, so I'm really grateful to be here and to be able to talk about this.

**Bruce:**

All right. Great to have you with us. And Shel, welcome.

**Shel Millington:**

Thank you. My name is Shel Millington. I'm a licensed professional counselor. I was a trainer and clinician with the programs that Andrew spoke about before leaving to be a part of Oklahoma's Juvenile Justice Agency. But what brings Clifford and Andrew and I together is we all facilitate the Youth Partnership Board with the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth.

**Bruce:**

All right. We're talking about youth. What is the age range of the children that you are typically working with?

**Andrew:**

When we think about our clinical programs, for me, I'm the only one who's currently working with our programs on the podcast today, and it's anywhere from the age of seven-ish to 18 or 19. But when we think about the youth voice we're talking about here, it's really about our Youth Partnership Board, which is typically kids 16 or older that we're working with.

**Bruce:**

Now, do you work with youth before or after an incident of problematic sexual behavior has occurred or both? How does that work?

**Andrew:**

I'm going to give a little bit of a plug of one of our previous podcasts that we did where we talked a little bit more detailed about this. But I do, really simply, when we think of typical, we're thinking of things that are age appropriate where most experts would feel like these are appropriate and typical things that we would see in kids of a certain age. When we think of problematic is typically there's differences in ages, there may be some level of force that's involved, or things that just cause it to be problematic or more of a problem, simply.

**Bruce:**

How can professionals speak to either youth and or parents in a way that encourages them to listen?

**Andrew:**

I think what we typically hear from our teens and our board members, as well, is a couple of key things. And we have some tip sheets that we've done in the past that talk specifically to professionals, but the highlights for me are how important it is to really listen to what's going on in their lives, making sure that you're genuine when you're having those conversations with them, taking a little bit of time to build trust. Don't expect a kid to just come to you the first time they meet you and just spill everything to you. You got to take a little bit of time to build that trust. It's also so important that we are modeling those skills to them, so we're making sure that we're showing them how we listen and we're showing them that we truly care. These are just some of the key things that we've heard from our teens.

**Clifford:**

Another thing that we hear from youth is that they know why they're there, the professionals know why they're there, and it's still difficult to talk about. And so, as

Andrew said, that trust is so important. And so, the youth have said that they need to have that trust built with their professional before they feel comfortable disclosing, opening up and being honest. And so, building that relationship is so vital and so important to this process.

**Bruce:**

OK. Building that relationship, trust, you mentioning that. In what ways can professionals help to ease a child or a parent's anxiety over seeking treatment after problematic sexual behavior has occurred?

**Clifford:**

As I said already, there are a lot of youth that go in, they're really anxious, they don't want to be there, they have gone through the court process, through the adjudication process, there has been a lot that has happened. But one of the things that we hear consistently is really two things. The first one is that at the time their parents are calm and are willing to do this, and later on they look back and say, "My mom, my dad, my caregiver were just as stressed out, just as anxious as I was. They didn't want to do this either, but because they were calm, I was able to be calm." We hear a lot of things like that.

Another example is I remember one youth that we got to work with, he said, "Because my dad was willing to take me in there, I was willing to go, and I couldn't have done it without him." And so, there's this need of support because oftentimes they feel alone, they feel by themselves. Having that caregiver support is so vital. The second thing we hear a lot is there's something about the clinician or the professional when they meet them the first time, that if that professional is prepared and ready, engaging, thoughtful, authentic, they recognize that and that trust, which is really difficult to build, it may not happen right away, but it starts being built right there if that professional comes ready, if they come prepared and they come ready to meaningfully engage with them. But also, if more importantly, they understand where that young person is coming from and the things that they have recently experienced and the very intense thoughts and emotions that are going through their mind at that time.

**Bruce:**

How important is it for caregivers to be involved in the treatment of their child and why?

**Andrew:**

I think for me, I can speak from the treatment perspective, and I'll leave the Youth Board's thoughts to Clifford and Shel, but what we see in research and practice clinically is that just working with the kid, we can give some supports, we can give some help, but you just don't get the same outcomes as you do when you have the caregiver participate in treatment. And for me, if you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. Typically, for us, we're seeing a kid for maybe an hour, maybe two hours a week, and their caregivers are with them the majority of the rest of their time. And it just makes

sense that if we can help the caregiver and their environment changes well and get the supports that they needed, outcomes are just that much better for families.

**Clifford:**

Again, two thoughts come to my mind. The first one is that one of the things that I hear consistently is this idea of, “My parents or caregivers found out what happened and what I did, but they chose to still love me. They chose to still be with my parents in spite of this,” and they talk about how important that is to them. The second one is there’s another young man that we got to work with, and what he said was after the group sessions, him and his dad would talk about what they learned in group that week. And he always said that those conversations, they were really heavy, they were really difficult. It was about the things that they just learned that week.

But later on, as the conversation went on, they would then transition to things that were going on at school, things going on with his friends, things that he was into, movies, video games. And what he said was those conversations about the heavy stuff, but then also the other stuff that was just as important to him was really, really meaningful to him and made the difference because it made him feel normal. And he would go on to say that he was facing these big, unbelievable, life-altering situations, but because of those conversations, it made him feel normal. And he said that that’s really what made the difference between him and his parents.

**Bruce:**

That’s really powerful. How can professionals help caregivers to better understand their child?

**Andrew:**

I think, really, even what Clifford’s already talking about is helping them to remember what they went through when they were that age. Giving them their child’s perspective is remembering those issues that maybe seem small as an adult were just so important and powerful when we were kids, and that we have to remember that a lot of those moments are really impactful for our kids, so we have to make sure that we’re helping them to shift their perspective and understand what their kids are going through and putting themselves in their kids’ shoes for a minute to help them gain that perspective.

**Bruce:**

Got it. Regarding, though, just the power and the impact of listening, how can listening to what youth have to say help to prevent problematic sexual behaviors?

**Shel:**

Youth are truly the experts. They’re the population that we need to be heard when attempting to find avenues of prevention. And across the years, youth have shared a key of prevention of problematic sexual behavior, are honest conversations about sex and sexuality. When we leave youth to their own ability to find answers, they find inaccurate

messages. We need to remember that open discussions with youth help create accurate messaging.

**Bruce:**

Why are youth sometimes conflicted about approaching their parents about these subjects?

**Clifford:**

A quick little story. I have a really good friend and she is what we call a prevention education expert. She goes around to schools, communities, really anywhere and everywhere to train on consent and body autonomy, teen dating, violence preventions. She talks to youth, she talks to professionals, so she's this expert. And so, she has three teenage sons, high school age sons, and they absolutely know this stuff like the back of their hand because she has taught them. But her three teenage sons don't come and ask her questions, but all of their friends do. All of their friends will come to her and ask her questions.

And the reason why is because that's their mom. The expectations that they have for their mom are very different than, let's say, their friends' parents, or the cool aunt or uncle, or a cool teacher, or someone that they identify as safe and trustworthy. I think it's really important to understand that we may play multiple roles in a young person's life, but each one of those roles has a different expectation that that young person has for that. An example would be, there are young people that I work with in my profession, but then when I go home, I'm a caregiver and a parent. Those are different expectations, and those young people, rather they're my children or not have different expectations for me. And so, I think it's important to understand that.

**Bruce:**

How can parents approach these hard conversations with their children in a way that makes their children feel that they're being heard?

**Andrew:**

I think some of this Clifford talked about earlier when making sure that we're creating an environment where our kids feel like they're being listened to. For me, so much of it is, how do we show that we're listening? I always remember that I have two ears and one mouth for a reason. I should listen twice as much as I talk. But making sure that you're using some active listening skills. Looking at the person, if you're in an environment where that's safe, making sure that you're hearing it, and so potentially rephrasing what you've heard to make sure that you understand exactly what they're saying. And ultimately, just trying to be genuine and open with your kids. I think for me, if we really know that we want what's best for our kids, and we know it's important to hear what they're saying, that energy can just be seen and felt by our kids.

**Bruce:**

Do children want their parents to just listen or are they really looking to them for solutions to their problems?

**Andrew:**

I think for me, it's a mixture. I think for some kids, they're really just wanting their parents to hear them, see what's going on, vent about their days. But when we see research and we look at even if our kids are starting to focus more on their friends than they are on their family, for those really important decisions in life, they still look to their parents for guidance and seeing what they're doing in those situations, as well as coming to them to ask questions about what they should do.

**Bruce:**

I know that we're touching on a topic that is of real interest to families, and I really appreciate you being with us today, and I just welcome you to share any final thoughts on this topic. Andrew, let's begin with you.

**Andrew:**

There's a couple of things that are those take-home messages for me, that one is a recognition that for our families especially that are a part of our military community, there is stress all around. And it may feel like this is adding one more thing to your plate, but what we're hoping is that this can really help you just take a couple of key things away to make sure that you're able to hear your kid in whatever situation that's going on, and that you're able to give them the support that they deserve from you.

And, for me, some of the things that are really important is trying to make sure that you can put yourself in someone else's shoes and gain your teen's perspective, and then just as best as you can, show them how much you genuinely care about them. Because I think for me, I see tons and tons of different families every week, and the one thing that I know without hesitation is how much the caregivers I work with truly care and love their teens and their kids. And so, just making sure that that genuineness is coming off in what you're doing for your kids.

**Bruce:**

Wonderful. Clifford, what would you like to share?

**Clifford:**

I would say for me, for parents or for any adult that has a young person in their life that they deeply care about, especially with topics like this, with prevention and educating on these really sensitive topics, the first one is never pass up an opportunity to educate. If there's ever an opportunity to have a meaningful conversation, never pass it off. Don't put it off, just do it right then and there.

Another thing I would add to it, too, is these conversations should never be casual. It's awkward, it's uncomfortable. Just embrace that, because it shows that it's important and that you value them and their safety. And so, if you're willing to embrace that awkwardness, it communicates that these are important topics.

And the last thing I'll share is that there are times where I've seen when youth want to talk and they're ready to talk and to listen to you, it's not always the exact time whenever the parent or the adult is ready to talk and to listen. And so, there's times when you want to have the conversation, but they may not be quite ready or want to yet. And so, let's say at the dinner table, you bring it up and they're just like, "I don't want to talk about right now." But then as you're getting ready for bed, they come to you and they're say like, "OK, I want to talk to you there." And you're sleepy, you're tired. I'd say, just try to find all the opportunities that you can for when they come to you with questions. Just always embrace those.

**Bruce:**

Wonderful. And Shel Millington, we're going to give you the last word.

**Shel:**

I think what Andrew and Clifford said are beautiful to summarize our takeaways. The only thing I would add is that you matter. Youth have consistently shared the importance of being genuine, regardless of who you are and what that relationship is like. A takeaway for me that I hope that you can leave with is the more we can embody genuine connections, the more we are equipped to be a catalyst of comfort and growth.

**Bruce:**

Well, thank you to the three of you for being with us today and going over this very important topic, and we have a lot more information in the program notes. Go and check them out. Links to other podcasts on this topic, just a wealth of information, and we really are so grateful for you being with us today.

I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we want to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes, and you can send us a question, a comment or an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you get your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.