

Position statement:

Talking about prevention: Framing the picture

*A statement from the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers
Prevention Committee regarding the importance of framing your message*

January 27, 2014



Most of us have experienced the “chill” in the room if we say our work involves working with or treating sex offenders. You can almost hear people thinking, “Why would someone work with those monsters?” To effectively reach your audience, we have found it often is better to start a presentation or a discussion with your values and *WHY* you choose to work with sex offenders or *WHY* you choose to work with sexually abusive adolescents or *WHY* you choose to work with children with sexual behavior problems. Providing insight into your values helps the listener understand that you are not an “offender defender,” but rather that you do this work to make communities safer. Within this context – or frame – it makes it easier to then talk about *WHAT* you do and *HOW* you do your work.

Frame: My work helps keep communities safe.

Here is an easy way to think about this: *WHAT* you do and *HOW* you do your work is the picture, *WHY* you do the work is the frame. A picture tacked to the wall with a piece of tape doesn’t do justice to the artistry of the image in the same way the image looks when thoughtfully matted and framed. The color and design of the frame will draw the eye to specific elements of the painting and can greatly enhance the way in which it is experienced by the viewer. Similarly, the frame we put around our answers to common questions can change the way the audience views and understands the information.

Here’s an example. Supposed you are asked, “What do you do?”

Frameless answer: I provide mental health treatment to convicted sex offenders who are paroled into the community.

Framed answer: I work every day to prevent sexual violence and to keep children and other vulnerable people safe. The way I do my work is by preventing the perpetration of sexual violence. I work with (adults, teens, children, women, kids with learning disabilities, or others) who are at risk to sexually abuse others or who have sexually abused in the past. Through a variety of professional approaches, I work to ensure that no one is sexually abused again. It is difficult work, incredibly rewarding, and my successes mean a safer community.

As you can see, a well-framed answer addresses *WHAT* we do and *HOW* we do our work in a way that incorporates *WHY* and helps our audience see a more positive and complete picture.



Frame: The work of ATSA is the work of prevention.

For a picture frame to do its job well, it needs to be well designed and complete. An incomplete picture frame provides less support to our message. Not only does an incomplete picture frame do a poor job of showing off the picture, it can lead to the canvas falling off the wall and being damaged. Similarly, a complete and well-designed frame will prevent damage to ATSA's message.



What ATSA and ATSA members offer is a unique focus on efforts to stop the perpetration of unhealthy, harmful, dangerous, and illegal sexual behavior. This unique focus is the piece of the larger image that we want our frame to elevate in the minds of the viewer. ATSA's work considers both risk and protective factors for the perpetration of sexual violence. Emerging research, and the focus of our frame, is informing our understanding of what puts someone at risk for sexual violence and what may prevent the first-time perpetration of sexual abuse, as well as prevent further sexual abuse by those who have abused. The ultimate goal, and center point for our frame, is making our society a safer place to live.

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

To truly attain our goal of eradicating sexual violence, we must ensure the prevention of new victims and offenders as well as the successful treatment of existing survivors and perpetrators. The most effective approach to the prevention of sexual violence requires the involvement of a full complement of people, organizations, and approaches.



A solid frame for our work is built upon the involvement of:

- Individuals who live in the community and understand the context of that community,
- Professionals who work on violence prevention,
- Victim advocates,
- Professionals involved in the investigation and reporting of sexual violence, and
- Those who work within victim/survivor treatment and those who work within abuser/offender treatment and their families.

We often ask ourselves: *How can I talk about this issue, especially with victim advocates, survivor services, and other similar organizations?* ATSA and many ATSA members currently collaborate with many organizations and professionals working together to prevent sexual violence. But we also recognize that for many members, it is difficult to know where to begin or even how to initiate a conversation leading to collaborative efforts. In fact, a number of conversations have not gone well because of misunderstandings, differences in language, or a lack of understanding.

To begin that first conversation, build your frame by talking about the values behind your work. For ATSA members, our values are clearly outlined in our strategic plan. Those values are professional excellence, community safety, collaboration, and advocacy. You may want to start a conversation by talking about your commitment to community safety and our belief that all people deserve to be free from sexual abuse and the fear of being harmed.

As you continue the conversation, try to focus your frame on how to instill a sense of hope rather than fear. Look at the following example to see how a change in frame can change perceptions in amazing ways.

Old frame: In the past, we have said that people who abuse are everywhere. They can be in our family, our homes, and our communities. While this is true, it generates a sense of fear that families should never leave their children alone anywhere, anytime.

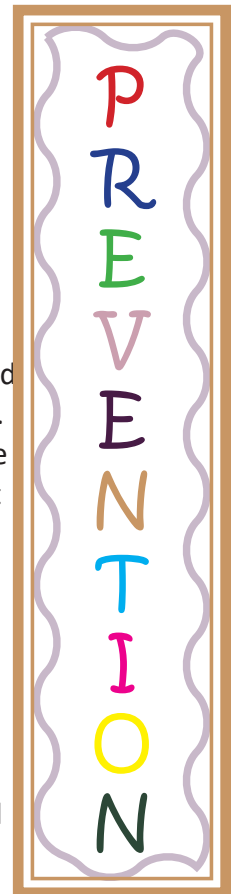
New frame: ATSA members can help by talking about the importance of general rules for behavior that begin to create a safety net around a child, family, and others we care about. These general behavioral rules are often referred to as universal precautions in our work with clients and families. The importance of talking about these issues, healthy boundaries and healthy relationships, safety plans, and understanding healthy sexual development in children and teens helps everyone feel more comfortable talking about behaviors. And once we can talk about healthy, unhealthy, problematic, and abusive behaviors, we are more able to recognize and intervene when we see boundary violations or sexually problematic behaviors.

Frame: Treatment is prevention.

Another question we often ask ourselves is: *What can I do to prevent sexual abuse?* As clinicians, probation officers, and other professionals who work with individuals who have sexually abused others or are at risk to do so, we typically know much more about individuals who have sexually abused others or are at risk to do so than do most parents, guardians, community members, and other professionals. This knowledge changes the way we look at what is happening in the places we live and work. It changes our frame.

For example, in the existing frame when most individuals hear a sex offender is living in their neighborhood, they are bombarded with a picture of the violent predator who starred in the latest TV drama. We know this frame hides the reality of the true picture. A more accurate and helpful frame would include the wide array of clients we have met over the years in our work. From the knowledge that not all people who abuse are the same, we then have a sense of the kinds of questions we want answered in order to think about how to deal with the issues that might emerge around an “offender” moving into our neighborhood. We know that this situation may offer a “teachable moment” to share a new perspective with our neighbors and hopefully reframe the conversation to focus on what we can do to strengthen prevention efforts, enhance community safety, and strengthen the safety net around children in our community.

Ultimately, fear-based solutions may sound good to less-informed people, but fact-based solutions – research and experience – may actually increase our safety. We have the facts and these facts should be part of our frame. Here are some suggestions for drawing positive attention to the prevention agenda and wrapping a new frame around the work we do:



Talk about it: The next time someone asks you what you do, tell them you are working to stop sexual violence. When they ask you what that means or what exactly you do, you then can tell them that you are doing the really hard work of stopping sexual abuse before it is perpetrated by working directly with individuals at risk of sexually abusing others and the children, teens, or adults who have offended in the past to ensure they become safe and productive members of the community.

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 a hopeful message about the power of prevention.

Create partnerships: Consider reaching out to victim/survivor advocacy organizations in your community or your state to talk about creating partnerships and collaborations that foster more powerful and effective legislative advocacy to support prevention.

Learn more

For more ideas, see:

ATSA sexual violence prevention fact sheet

<http://www.atsa.com/sexual-violence-prevention-factsheet>

ATSA Forum articles about prevention

<http://newsmanager.commpartners.com/atsa/issues/2012-12-13/8.html>

<http://newsmanager.commpartners.com/atsa/issues/2012-04-03/6.html>

<http://newsmanager.commpartners.com/atsa/issues/2010-12-15/8.html>

The Prevention of Sexual Violence: A Practitioners Sourcebook developed by ATSA's Prevention Committee and edited by Keith Kaufman (NEARI Press)

<http://bookstore.nearipress.org/index.php/books/featured-products/the-prevention-of-sexualviolence-a-practitioners-sourcebook.html>

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) is an international, multi-disciplinary organization of professionals dedicated to making society safer by preventing all forms of sexual abuse through effective treatment and management of individuals at risk to sexually abuse or who have sexually abused. ATSA encourages prevention through sound research, effective practice, informed policy, and comprehensive stakeholder collaboration.

Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers

4900 SW Griffith Drive, Suite 274

Beaverton, Oregon 97005-4732

Voice: 503-643-1023

Fax: 503-643-5084

Email: atsa@atsa.com

Web: www.atsa.com