

Talking About Prevention: Sometimes it's not the Picture, it's the Frame.

Frame: My work helps to keep communities safe.



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 them thinking, “Why would someone work with those monsters?” To effectively reach your audience, we have found that it is often 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,” rather that you do this work to make communities a safer place. With this context, it makes it easier to then talk about **HOW** you do your work.

Here is an easy way to think about the reframing of these questions:

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 that 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 understands the information. Here's an example:

Q: 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. I care deeply about community safety and keeping children and other vulnerable people safe. The way I do my work is through preventing the perpetration of sexual violence. I work with [name population – adults, teens, children, women, kids with learning disabilities, etc.] 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.

Frame: The work of ATSA is the work of Prevention

A three sided picture frame is incomplete. Not only would it do a poor job of showing off the picture, it would likely lead to the canvas falling off the wall and being damaged. Similarly, 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:

- those who live in the community and understand the context of that community,
- professionals working 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.

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.

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.

See ATSA's Sexual Violence Prevention Fact Sheet for more information at:
<http://www.atsa.com/sexual-violence-prevention-fact-sheet>

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

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 (See ATSA's strategic plan for a full listing of values: <http://www.atsa.com/pdfs/ATSAStrategicPlan.pdf>). You may want to start this 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 we should never leave our 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 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, etc. we typically know so much more about those who sexually abuse than most parents, guardians, community members, and even other professionals. This knowledge changes the way we look at what is happening in the places we live and work. For example, in the existing frame when we hear a sex offender is living in our neighborhood, we are bombarded with a picture of the violent predator that starred in the latest TV drama. We know that 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 kind 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 it may be a "teachable moment" to share a new perspective and hopefully move 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 (i.e. research, 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 that 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 hopefully ask you what that means or what you do, you can then tell them that you are doing the really hard work to stop sexual abuse before it is perpetrated by working directly with the children, teens, or adults who have offended in the past to ensure that they are 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 the 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.

For more ideas, see:

- The sexual violence prevention fact sheet (<http://www.atsa.com/sexual-violence-prevention-fact-sheet>),
- 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-sexual-violence-a-practitioners-sourcebook.html>