POWER OF PREVENTION SEASON 2, EPISODE 7

Lessons for Every Age: A Unique Partnership with Parents, Schools and the Community to Prevent Child Abuse

Christin D'Ovidio:
Welcome to the Power of Prevention podcast. In each podcast, we will go deeper into the topic of prevention in New Hampshire. We'll share our best interviews with you of people who are working tirelessly for their professions, their families, and their communities to stop something unwanted from happening. In this case, substance misuse. This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and want to make New Hampshire a better place where we all have the opportunity to live, learn, and thrive. We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention.

Julie Yerkes:
Welcome everyone to the Power of Prevention podcast, where we talk about what it takes to create safe, supportive and healthy communities here in New Hampshire. I'm our host, Julie Yerkes, and today we're having a really important conversation about prevention work happening in our schools. You might've seen some of the headlines about the Youth Risk Behavior survey data. It paints a tough picture about what young people are dealing with today, bullying, threats of violence both online and in person, and for some, especially young girls, sexual and dating violence. But today's conversation isn't just about the hard stuff. We're here to talk about hope, action, and the power of prevention. We'll talk about what students are telling us, how communities can take action and what it looks like to teach healthy, age-appropriate relationship skills starting at a young age. We know that prevention matters, and in this episode, we're diving into why it's important for schools and communities to work together to support Youth. Thrive's Survivor Support Center, and other crisis centers across New Hampshire recognized the growing need to reach young people early.

And again, the latest data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey makes it clear why there's an urgent need. I'm thrilled to welcome Elizabeth Rositano from Thrive, one of our amazing community partners who are leading the charge to bring child abuse prevention and healthy relationship education right into the classrooms. So let's get to it. Welcome, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
Thank you so much for having me, Julie. I'm so excited to be here today.

Julie Yerkes:
Well, we're excited to have you. We really appreciate you taking the time. I'm excited to hear about how Thrive's Survivor Support Services is working directly with schools to equip kids and the adults in their lives with the tools they need to recognize, respond to, and prevent abuse. Just to level set for our listeners about your work as a prevention educator, can you tell us about Thrive's prevention work in general, and then talk about the work with schools? And I guess for folks who might not be familiar, what is the Healthy Relationships Project and how'd you get started? What does it look like in action? Tell us about all those things.

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
Of course. So our prevention work in general is what we like to call community-based prevention work. So at Thrive, the type of agency we are is like a community support service agency. We help people navigate systems, but we don't necessarily work within those systems. And the way that we do prevention is really to teach people number one about signs of abuse, signs of abusive behaviors, so that they know what to look for. And so if they ever find themselves in a situation where they may see some sort of red flags happening, they are appropriately equipped to get themselves out of that situation. And then if they have gone through an abusive situation, an assault, something like that, we also do a lot of the work to help connect people with resources to support them on their journey afterwards. On the community partnership side is where we do all of that prevention education work.

And so that is where I focus most of my time and energy. And then thinking about what the Healthy Relationships Project is. It is evidence-based, age-appropriate trauma-informed curriculum that is produced by the Prevent Child Abuse Vermont Organization. So they developed this curriculum where people can get trained in being a facilitator and the curriculum intends to teach children, schools, their families, everybody involved in the community who supports a child, what age-appropriate ways to talk about consent, bodily autonomy, abusive red flag behaviors may be, and then teaches children how to ask for help, how to ask for permission for things, and really equips them with foundational, basic skills that aren't necessarily directly related to any abuses or assault type behaviors, but are really just fundamental skills that we should all have as people. And the idea is that if we have these kind of base level skills, we learn how to ask these questions, we learn how to say no, that if we ever see an unfortunate, inappropriate situation going through our lives, we know where to turn to get help, and we know that those behaviors are problematic the first place.

Julie Yerkes:
Wow. Those are so important for all people to know. And I love how you're saying that you're working with the schools and the staff and families because honestly, as a mother, I don't know if I have the full breadth of knowledge around that to pass that on to my own kids. So thank you for that work that you're doing. Before this interview, you mentioned how the recent YRBS data caught thrives attention. Could you walk us through a bit about what young people are telling us, what's going on in their schools or communities and their lives, and what are some of those risks and those traumas I guess that they're facing? And how does your work with the Healthy Relationship Project respond to that?

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
Absolutely, and that's such a great question. I guess to level set for people who don't know, the YRBS is the Youth Risk Behavioral Survey, and it is a biannual survey given from middle school age, so depending on the year, around sixth or seventh graders may take it in some schools and then all the way up through high school. And the YRBS is an anonymous survey where students are asked a series of questions about substance misuse, about abuse, about risk taking behaviors, and then that data is taken from each school and then they produce a biannual report to give people an idea on the status of youth in the state of New Hampshire.

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
So we can all assess what youth are going through, understand what challenges they have, and see where we as adults in the community can help support our youth and really weave that web of support around them so that all of our youth can thrive.

Some concerning data that we've seen, honestly in any of the risk taking behavioral categories, any number we're going to want to see reduce year over year. We focus a lot of our education on sexual assault, dating violence, just because that is specifically what our agency targets, what part of our mission is. And so unfortunately in our state, we are looking at questions like where students were physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they didn't want to, if they've experienced sexual violence, if they've experienced dating violence, all sorts of things like that. And so we have statewide data, so we get that synthesized data and we can see where all students in the state are.

Some concerning things statewide, about 29% of students reported that someone they were dating or going out with purposely tried to control them or emotionally hurt them one or more times within the past 12 months of when this report was given. And so we don't like to see that. 29%, that's going to be the average. There were some towns in New Hampshire that were all the way to 44% of students in that school. So we're seeing a huge range of data in our community. And just even that 30% is a huge number for students.

Julie Yerkes:
Yeah, it's one in three.

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
Yeah, exactly. And that is, so the one in three number that 29% of students who are experiencing this type of controlling or emotionally manipulative behavior makes me think of the New Hampshire statistic where about one in three men and one in three women report being physically harmed in a romantic relationship throughout their lifetime. And so we're looking at teenagers reporting this emotional harm at about one in three, and then adults in our communities reporting physical harm around one in three. And so we can see that adults and students are going through a lot, and we believe that through prevention work, we can reduce that emotional harm, which in turn eventually will reduce physical harm going forward.

Julie Yerkes:
Yeah, I know. I think about it too as a classroom teacher or as a parent that has a group of friends over. Then you look out at your classroom and you have 21 kids in your classroom, that means seven. Seven of those young people are experiencing that kind of emotional stress.

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Elizabeth Rizzitano:
Around one in 10 ish kids in dating relationships as youth are experiencing either sexual or physical violence, and some people are experiencing both.

Julie Yerkes:
And you've been partnering with schools for a while now, teaching students about what makes a healthy relationship and know that every school and community is different and some are really ready for this kind of work, and others are just starting to have these conversations. What trends or challenges have you noticed over time and how did you know that this particular program was the right fit for New Hampshire?

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
What we noticed when we began on this journey of really trying to get into schools and teach them about this gap in knowledge that they have in their curriculum when it comes to healthy relationships, we saw that there was pushback when it came to us coming in and delivering research-based programming. There is a huge emphasis on evidence-based programming and evidence-based curriculums nationwide. And so after pitching a research-based programming that we already had, we realized that wasn't working. That wasn't what our community was asking for. That wasn't what teachers were comfortable with. It wasn't what parents were comfortable with. And so in order to get this information to students, we changed our approach. And in doing so, we actually fell in line with the curriculum that many other centers like ours use to deliver to schools in their catchment areas. And so adopting this evidence-based curriculum is something that nearly every crisis center like ours in the state of New Hampshire now offers. And so we have gone on this journey altogether to deliver standardized programming to New Hampshire youth.

Julie Yerkes:
I love that you're taking the public health approach with this project. It's not just about reaching the kids, but also making sure parents and teachers and other adults are part of the conversations too. You're giving all students these valuable skills, not just kids that might be at greater risk. Can you share a bit about more how you involve adults in this work and why that's so important?

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
Of course. Adults are kids first teachers really. Before they're even in school, before they're even sitting at a desk, they're learning from all of the adults in their lives. And we know it starts so young. What kids pick up, what they take on, what they put out there, it starts so early. And so in order to reinforce the messaging that we're out here providing, we really needed to get the adults on board. Because if we're going into a school and we're teaching healthy relationships look like respect, they look like communication, it looks like asking just friend to friend, not even in a romantic relationship, it looks like asking, "Hey, can I have a french fry off of your plate instead of taking it?" And then it also looks like, "I don't want my friend to have a french fry on my plate. I'm going to say no, because I respect this person enough that I'm going to be honest with them, and they respect me enough to respect my no, even if it's about something small as a snack."

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
And we want parents to be reinforcing that message. We want other adults in the community to be reinforcing that message. And so the way that the Healthy Relationships project is set up is that there is the opportunity for a whole parent's night where we can go to the schools, meet the parents where they're at, have the opportunity to explain the programming, and have the parents ask questions, have the teachers in their own separate meeting where we go to the schools when it's a good time for them, and we can explain to the teachers, "Hey, this is what we're going to be talking to your students about." Because even if the teachers aren't necessarily in a class where we're facilitating the healthy relationships project, conversations don't happen just in one classroom. They happen in the lunchroom, they happen in the hallways. And if there is a question about anything we've said, we want everyone to be comfortable answering that.

And so that is our general approach. We want the entire community to reinforce the message of what healthy relationships look like, what healthy relationships are. And we also want to dispel any myths. Oftentimes when I talk about my work, I say, "Hey, I'm from Thrive Survivors Support Center. We are an agency that supports survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, human trafficking and stalking." And that stops people because those are big words. Those are scary words. They hold a lot of weight, and they bring up a lot of images and social kind of context to all of that. And so the last thing that I ever want a parent or a teacher to think is that I'm going into the schools and I am teaching explicitly about sexual violence, about dating violence. That I'm even necessarily using those words, can be a red flag for a community.

They don't even want us to say those type of things because it's not appropriate for a lot of ages to hear words like that. And it is not in line with the messaging that they're getting from schools already. And so I have the opportunity to explain to them, I'm not saying the word sex to your kids. When I talk about consent, I'm talking about it in the context of friendship, in the context of snacks. Because again, we start very simply and we build on those skills. So when you have them to talk about something small, you'll also feel more comfortable when you are faced with a big question, a bigger situation.

Julie Yerkes:
Right. That's great. Right. And I mean, it's true prevention, and you don't even have to talk about the outcome because that's it. You're building those protective factors and those skills that are the scaffolding along the way as these young people develop and grow. And having those words that young people don't have those words, they have that language to use to describe situations, is going to be so helpful for them as they try to communicate, as they get older and life gets more complicated and relationships get more complex. So I love that. Thank you.

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
Hundred percent. Yeah. We're going in there. We're reading kids books. We're playing games with them. We are doing it in a developmentally appropriate way that is approachable not only for the student, but for the parents as well. And the entire model is that we go in more than once.

Elizabeth Rizzitano:
We do this, it's a multi-session program. So we lay the foundations for all of these skills and we build on the competencies, and at the end, they have completed the year of sessions. And then ideally, we go in the next year and we continue building on the skills. We can start all the way as young as pre-K, and we can go all the way up into 12th grade.

And so having that reinforcement year over year when they say, "Oh, yeah, I remember you came in last month. I remember you came in last year. Oh yeah, I remember I started this program at a different school when I was in first grade, and now I'm coming in here and I'm in fifth grade and I'm in a different school. And oh, I remember that." That is our dream of how we create a successful prevention education program.

Julie Yerkes:
On this podcast we love highlighting programs that others can bring into their own community. So for anyone who's thinking, "Yeah, this sounds like something we need in our school, or I want in my community," where should they start? What advice would you give them?

Elizabeth Rizzitano: I think the best place to start may be the Healthy Relationships Project website, just because whenever I pitch the program and tell people about it, their first question to me is, "Where can I find out more?" And so on the Healthy Relationships Project website, you can see the breakdown of the evidence that this curriculum is based on. And that is incredibly helpful when bringing it to an administration is when they see how this works, when they can see that the curriculum has been updated over time, they understand that when we get new data, we adjust and we try to meet the needs of our community and understand what they're asking for.

They can see the whole entire breakdown of that on the Healthy Relationships Project website. And you do need a trained facilitator to deliver this programming, so if that's something they're interested in, they can always, always, always reach out to us through our education email, through our outreach email. They can email me directly and we can talk about what the next steps may be. If they're a parent, it's going to look different than if they're a school administrator. And so we can figure out how to approach the situation, bring it to the community, bring it into the school district, and then bring it to the kids.

Julie Yerkes:
Well, Elizabeth, thank you so much for joining us today and for all the incredible work you and your team at Thrive are doing, it's really inspiring to hear how you're making prevention real, meaningful and doable, not just for kids, but for the adults in their lives too, because we know we need it. If you are feeling fired up like I am, check out the show notes for those additional resources where you can find the proven effective strategies like the Healthy Relationship Project that we spoke about today. And remember, prevention doesn't just happen, right? If something that we build together. And thanks for tuning in and we'll see you next time.