

Championing Child Safety: The Empowering Partnership Between Palos Heights and Childhood Victories

How a five-year partnership between Palos Heights School District and Childhood Victories empowered 1,300 students to combat child abuse, all while giving teachers and parents peace of mind.



Challenge:

One in ten children will experience a form of child sexual abuse before turning eighteen. Ninety percent of those victims will be abused by someone they know. In 2011, author, speaker, activist, and childhood sexual abuse survivor Erin Merryn introduced legislation in her home state of Illinois that would mandate child sexual abuse prevention. Since then, Erin's Law has been passed in 38 states. Palos Heights School District attempted to meet these important mandates through in-house lesson creation, as well as partnering with the local sheriff's department, but these approaches left teachers feeling uneasy, and students feeling confused or scared. Superintendent Merryl Brownlow, recognizing this challenge, knew it was time to partner with an expert in this topic in order to instill confidence and peace of mind in her district's teachers, parents, and students.

Supporting Research:

- One in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys will experience sexual abuse at some point in their childhood.
(Source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#))
- Children who receive school-based prevention programs are more likely to disclose abuse.
(Source: [Crimes Against Children Research Center](#))
- Teachers often feel unprepared to address childhood sexual abuse with students.
(Source: [Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#))
- Parental involvement in education programs increases their effectiveness.
(Source: [Journal of Trauma, Violence, and Abuse](#))

Demographics:

Palos Heights School District Overview:

- Pre-K to 8th grade school district
- About 770 students and growing in enrollment each year
- Suburban district
- 73% White, 17% Hispanic/Latinx, 6% Black, 2% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% two or more races
- 18% free and reduced lunch and increasing each year
- 20% Special education students
- 20:1 student-teacher ratio
- 58% of teachers in the district with masters degrees

Target Outcomes:

1. Adoption of age-appropriate child sexual abuse prevention and body safety instruction that supports a range of grade levels.
2. Reduced anxiety and increased confidence for educators in teaching sensitive material.
3. Increased understanding and awareness of body safety and empowerment to disclose abuse.
4. Enhanced peace of mind for parents and families regarding child abuse.
5. Reduced opt-outs from body safety education.

Implementation:

In 2015, Merryl Brownlow, Superintendent of another Illinois school district at the time, was seeking a better solution for meeting Erin's Law mandates in her schools. While networking with colleagues, she was told about Childhood Victories and the Be Seen and Heard© body safety presentations and curriculum and was encouraged to observe one of their presentations at a nearby school.

I was blown away by the way [Childhood Victories] can take such a sensitive, serious topic and make it engaging and safe for kids. I said, **'I'm in.'**

- Merryl Brownlow, Superintendent, Palos Heights School District

After assuming the Superintendent role at Palos Heights, she brought Childhood Victories' founder, Victor Pacini, and the Be Seen and Heard© body safety curriculum with her. While the partnership has lasted for five years, Brownlow anticipated initial teacher and parent unease leading up to the first presentations. When asked if she had any concerns as to how students and teachers would respond to the Be Seen and Heard© program, she responded, "I knew, with the level of support we were going to provide combined with the transparency and supports [Childhood Victories] was going to provide, that the teachers would welcome it. And they didn't resist it. The team is willing to individually connect with anyone who has a question, a concern — from parents to teachers — he will make himself available for that. I think that's also part of what makes it so successful."

On the note of student and parent opt-outs, Merryl recalled, "one parent opted their child out two years ago, but once that parent heard what other parents were saying, they did not opt their child out the following year." Since then, there have been no opt-outs in Palos Heights.

It's not just parents and teachers who praise the program — students are big fans, too. According to Brownlow, "the kids ask when he's coming back. He brought in another presenter, Deanna, and I went to observe her and she is equally amazing at this. It's such a difficult topic and hard to deliver in an engaging way, but the kids love both of them equally. The connection with kids is instant. Victor and Deanna are so charismatic and they just connect with kids immediately."

Pacini ends presentations by saying, "Don't be voiceless, don't be like me for 11 years." Brownlow shared that there has been an abuse disclosure every single year during their partnership.

It's been incredibly powerful and has opened doors for kids to feel safe. [Victor] helps us realize that we're not alone. He's not just talking about it, he's actually experienced it. The fact that Childhood Victories presenters have had personal experience makes a huge difference in the way they can relate. But they've also been able to overcome those challenges in order to support others. I think that's why the way they present resonates so much with kids.

- Merryl Brownlow, Superintendent, Palos Heights School District

Results:

The partnership with Childhood Victories has led to impactful outcomes for Palos Heights. Over 1,300 students have learned from the Be Seen and Heard© curriculum, resulting in at least one student disclosing abuse each school year. The district continues to partner with the Childhood Victories team and present each student cohort with their grade-specific content, ensuring that students stay engaged and learn something meaningful every year.

Brownlow expressed her commitment to the program, saying, "I just signed another three-year agreement. I sign up for three years at a time, every time, because they're growing so much every year and I don't want to lose them!"



About Childhood Victories

Victor Pacini, a child sexual abuse survivor, founded Childhood Victories to provide essential education on body safety and abuse prevention through the Be Seen and Heard© curriculum. The program aims to empower children to understand and report abuse, while offering support and peace of mind to educators and parents. Victor's personal experience and commitment to making a difference have made Childhood Victories a trusted partner for schools seeking to meet Erin's Law mandates effectively.

