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Somewhere over the Waterfall: A Fable

Once upon a time (as all good fairy tales should begin), the local community services, the school system, and the state and federal youth-serving agencies were all walking through the woods—not together, of course.

The cries of young children brought these groups together on the banks of a swiftly running river. All stood gasping at the site of a child caught in the current and plunging over a waterfall.

Quickly, the physical education teacher from the local school system—under direct supervision of the departmental chairperson, and after careful consideration from the building principal, who first received administrative approval from the superintendent—jumped into the river to rescue the child.

An intervention occurred. A precedent was set.

The child was brought to the shore, and it was apparent to all that he was not breathing. All the children gathered around and screamed, “Do something!”

The nurse from the community service agency knelt by the child's side and prepared to administer artificial resuscitation. The school principal quickly stepped up and said, “Hold it right there. I believe that the child is in our jurisdiction. We rescued him, and now he is our responsibility.”

The nurse, bewildered, stopped what she was doing.

The principal looked around and asked, “Is there any school staff member who knows how to perform artificial resuscitation?”

No one responded. All was still.

Just then, there was a loud shriek from the children: “Look! Look! Come quick! Another child is about to go over the waterfall!”

Before anyone could say anything, the physical education teacher was back in the water, dragging another child to shore. Everyone in the crowd moved to the banks and, together, carried the next boy to safety.

Fortunately, he was still alive.

Time passed, and all the adults were formally ensconced at the bottom of the waterfall, positioned and ready. They were amazed at the number of children who were going over the waterfall. Fortunately, there were many adults, representing many organizations, who cared. They all wanted to do something.

Precedent was established and, under the school's jurisdiction, the physical education teacher was able to rescue about 50 percent of the children—at first. But she got tired, and then he was busy preparing to teach a new requirement—AIDS education—to the children, and so he was unable to respond as quickly as he had responded before.

The federal people said that they would bring him money and tried to help the exhausted teacher out, if the state would plan an appropriate response.

Benefits and Challenges of Primary Prevention

A committee was formed.

State workers met for months, conducting open forums with many agencies and systems, and decided that the long drop over the waterfall was decreasing the chances of the children's survival. They said that an adequate and appropriate response should begin at the top of the waterfall, before the children reached that spot.

And so the governor decreed, through official proclamation and with much fanfare, that everyone had to move to the top of the waterfall and “wage war on this scourge, which is killing our children.” The federal agencies came forth with money but with the stipulation that the private sector contributes 75 percent toward the cost of the program. State agencies were responsible for channeling the federal monies but they had a stipulation that “strongly encouraged” all the agencies to develop a coordinated response.

Meanwhile, back at the riverbank, the children continued to plunge over the waterfall, and the physical education teacher was far behind in teaching the required AIDS curriculum.

More adults began to gather on the bank. A grass-roots organization of parents stepped forward and asked the agency professionals if any of them were going up to the top of the waterfall to stop the children from going over the edge.

The people from the school board said that they had been rescuing the children for a long time and were too overloaded with other demands, like educating children. They could not go up to the top of the waterfall.

The people from the community service organization said that they could not do it alone but would go up to the top of the waterfall with the parents.

Together, the parents and the community service people climbed to the top of the waterfall, where they began to rescue the children still coming downriver. The current was very fast at the top of the falls, which made rescue very difficult and dangerous. Still, the parents and the community service group worked very hard and rescued more than 50 percent of the children. The school people pulled out many of the remaining children, who had gone over the falls.

Of course, most of those children had already drowned.

After some time, the school people, seeing the success of the group at the top of the falls, offered to coordinate their efforts. They hired an administrator and a staff to oversee the program. The parents were delighted that they did not have to be involved anymore. The community services people were thanked for their efforts and told that they were not needed anymore.

But more and more of the children were still going over the falls, and the school people were getting tired of pulling so many out of the river.

As luck would have it, the students began to talk with the school system. They said that there was a spot up river where the children were entering the river.

“Wouldn't it be most helpful to stop the children from going into the river in the first place?” one child asked innocently.

“It is very far upriver to that spot, and we don't know if that would work. Besides, we are too busy here pulling the children out of the river,” a school person answered.

“Oh, please—do something!” cried one of the children. “So many of our friends are being lost.”

Hearing the children's pleas, a group of parents, the community services organization, and a group of the children, along with a group of caring teachers, set out on their own on a journey upriver. The children showed the adults where their friends were entering the river.

Together, they all worked to prevent more children from entering the river. From that point on, no more children went over the waterfall.

That is primary prevention.