

Keeping Ourselves Safe: Frequently asked questions

What is KOS?

Keeping Ourselves Safe (KOS) is a school-based personal safety programme that provides children and young people with skills to cope with situations that might involve abuse. KOS:

- teaches students a range of safe practices they can use when interacting with other people
- encourages students who have been, or are being abused to seek help
- contributes to an overall community prevention programme by making parents and teachers more aware of their responsibilities to help children avoid abuse.

What sort of abuse are we talking about?

The skills that students learn in KOS help them identify, avoid and report physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, family violence and online abuse. All forms of abuse are damaging for the child.

Who is KOS for?

KOS is aimed at students at primary, intermediate and secondary schools. It also includes advice for staff, parents, whānau and other members of the school community.

What does KOS consist of?

KOS consists of two main parts. The first is a whole school planning process for school management. This involves reviewing relevant school policies, establishing a clear procedure for assisting students who report abuse, and consulting with the parent/caregiver community.

The second part consists of teaching activities for use in classrooms at five different school levels, so that at each level of their schooling students learn new skills.

The activities are divided into school years 0–3, 4–6, 7–8, 9–10, and 11–13.

How is KOS implemented in schools?

School Community Officers (SCOs) work with the principal, teachers, Board of Trustees and parents to plan a whole-school approach. The aim is to create a supportive school climate in which students feel safe, and appropriate policies and procedures (for example, on how disclosures of abuse will be handled) are in place. SCOs participate in teacher and parent workshops for the school community. They also work with staff, parents and caregivers to help them recognise and report all forms of abuse.

Who teaches KOS in the classroom?

The classroom teacher delivers the programme. The SCO may be invited to participate in some learning experiences or lessons. The teacher is the person most likely to notice a student who needs help.

What does KOS teach the students?

KOS aims to give students the skills to keep themselves safe in their interactions with other people and encourage any who are being or have been abused to seek help. It teaches them a range of safe practices they can use when interacting with people. They are taught to recognise behaviour that makes them feel unsafe, frightened and uncomfortable, or that is inappropriate. They learn that such behaviour can come from anyone, known or unknown, of any age, background or gender. They

learn that they must report such behaviour. They find out how to ask for help – and what to do if the person they report to does nothing to help.

How was KOS developed?

The New Zealand Police and the (then) Department of Education first developed KOS in the early 1980s. A secondary school component was added in 1995. All materials were written by experienced teachers, health educators, school counsellors, and SCOs, based on education best practice under the direction of research and evaluations by Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs. KOS has been revised several times to ensure that it meets current best practice in education and child abuse prevention.

Does KOS work?

Research, much of it conducted by Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs, has found that KOS has succeeded in helping children and young people acquire the understandings and skills that enable them to avoid abuse. Students who have completed KOS are much more likely to make suggestions for keeping themselves safe than those not involved in such a programme. Children and young people who have been subjected to abuse are seeking help as a result of KOS. The programme has contributed positively to the raising of the school community's awareness of the need to protect its students from abuse.

Will KOS frighten students?

Often this is just the perception of the parents, not the students. Research into reactions of children to KOS revealed no significant negative changes. KOS is taught in a matter-of-fact and positive way, in a safe supportive class environment, and in an age-appropriate manner. Schools and communities also teach students about other potentially frightening concepts such as fire and disaster safety, acknowledging the educational and safety value over any temporary upset these issues may cause.

Doesn't KOS destroy a child's innocence?

Children have the right to be protected from all types of abuse and to learn how to keep safe. Abusers may take advantage of children's innocence and their ignorance about what is inappropriate and reportable behaviour. KOS teaches students safety skills appropriate to their age, in a safe, positive classroom environment. KOS also supports parents and whānau with information to help them protect their children from all types of abuse. Note that KOS is not sex education.

What about 'stranger danger'?

'Stranger danger' is an outdated, discredited and potentially dangerous concept that the New Zealand Police has steered away from since the late 1980s. 'Stranger danger' makes it easier for abusers known to the child (the most common source by far of abuse in New Zealand), because children think they can't possibly be strangers and therefore won't harm them. Furthermore, it lulls parents and caregivers into a false sense of security. They think that if they have told children to avoid strangers they will be keeping their children safe from abuse. They don't think about the possibility that the abuse might come from a family member or someone else known to the child. They also forget that children might need to go to strangers for help in certain circumstances. Rather than concentrating on stereotypical strangers, KOS teaches about the behaviours to avoid and report, no matter whether they come from a person unknown or familiar to the child.

How has KOS been evaluated?

Over the years a number of external evaluations of KOS have been undertaken. The KOS programmes have been consistently revised as a result of these evaluations. These evaluations (and other research into the programme) have included:

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- Education Review Office. (2007). *Pre-service teacher education on child protection: Report to the New Zealand Police*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.
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- Perniskie, L. (1995). *Evaluation of Keeping Ourselves Safe*. MA (Psychology) thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.
- Van Kessel, K. (1990). *An evaluation of the side effects of Keeping Ourselves Safe: A child abuse prevention programme*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Auckland, Auckland.