



H. 173 – An Act Relating to prohibiting manipulating a child for the purpose of sexual contact

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Thank you for the invitation to speak with the committee today about H. 173, a bill that seeks to address the pattern of behavior used by individuals who commit child sexual abuse.

The Network was pleased to serve on the Committee for Protecting Students from Sexual Exploitation, which was created by the legislature with the passage of Act 5 during the Special Session of 2018. Originally, the charge of this Committee was to examine whether additional laws or statutes were needed to address manipulating behaviors used with the intent of initiating inappropriate sexual contact in a school environment. As the Committee met, we discussed that child sexual abuse and adults using positions of contact, influence or authority to facilitate sexual acts extends well beyond school settings. This broader understanding better reflects the reality of child sexual abuse in our communities.

Sexual abuse and assault is underreported across the lifespan – however, child sexual abuse is even more significantly underreported. Research indicates that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys experience child sexual abuse¹. Like most sexual violence, in a vast majority of cases, child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone who knows the child or their family. Child sexual abuse is considered in the research to be an “adverse childhood experience” which can lead to a lifetime of economic and health impacts for victims. One of the most insidious elements of child sexual abuse is that individuals who engage in this behavior often develop and exploit the trust of children or youth.

Youth in Vermont need healthy, reliable adults in their lives. In 2017, the Vermont Network conducted a statewide youth survey. Vermont’s children and youth identified an array of concerns that cause them stress in their everyday lives—including drug and alcohol use; poverty; sexism and harassment; body shaming and bullying; and homophobia and transphobia. When asked what would help, young people said that the number one solution would be more adults they can confide in in their lives². Children and youth are more resilient to stress and adversity when in meaningful relationships with at least one trusting, affirming adult. This is especially critical for young people working to develop a positive sense of self in a culture that often devalues them based on their identity, ability, background, or status.

When adults use manipulating behaviors for the purpose of sexual conduct, it not only causes great harm to the victim of this abuse, it is also a deep violation of the protective nature of positive and healthy adult relationships with children and youth.

¹ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022](#)

² [Vermont Network Askable Adults Campaign](#)



H. 173 serves an important role in identifying that the harm of child sexual abuse exists far beyond physical acts; it includes a pattern of manipulating behavior undertaken with the purpose of sexual contact. The Vermont Network is supportive of the intent of this bill and looks forward to hearing from, and working with, other stakeholders on potential amendments to strengthen the ability of our systems of response to address manipulating behavior.