

## **Child Abuse**

**Essential question:** How can we prevent child abuse in our community?

School: Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, Philadelphia, PA

Year of project: 2002-2003

It's a Thursday night and the school gym is packed with students, their parents, young children, and other members of the community. Tables line the walls, staffed by representatives of social service agencies. Adults are gathered around the tables, picking up literature and talking with the experts.

In another corner of the large space, 8th grade students are supervising games for younger kids – football toss, pitty pat, pop the balloon. A child dips his face into a sticky cloud of purple cotton candy. A local DJ provided entertainment.

Meanwhile, in the school's auditorium, a crowd has gathered to watch student-created public service spots about preventing child abuse and listen to poetry, delivered with a sense of passion and purpose.

This was Grover Washington Jr. Middle School's Family Night and it was conceived, planned and promoted by 8th grade students at the school. The students were prompted to organize this event to promote child safety and protection after reading about the physical abuse suffered by 6 year-old Vincent Sireci in August of 2001, a story graphically described in the Philadelphia Inquirer. They decided parents and the surrounding community needed to know more to help prevent the cycle of abuse.

The students were supported in their work by Vincent's aunt Mary Alice Brancato, who cared for Vincent after he was severely burned and who inspired the students with her story when she visited their class. A DJ from Philadelphia's WJJZ Radio offered tips on creating a powerful message through the media, and well known recording artist Ursula Rucker helped the students with the poetry they wrote and later presented at Family Night.

In addition, the students received assistance from Women Against Abuse, Women in Transition, Supportive Child Abuse Network, and Health Partners.

I think we did a good job of helping Vincent's aunt bring back the faith in people and bringing families together and making sure the little children are safe."

-- 8th grade student

“Something that touched me about last night was when Vincent’s aunt told us that we touched her and she couldn’t believe we were just in the 8th grade. It makes me feel like all my effort paid off.”

-- 8th grade student