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## QAnon and the Hard Work of Preventing Sexual Abuse

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According to Wikipedia, “[QAnon](#) is a far-right conspiracy theory alleging that a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles is running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against US president Donald Trump, who is fighting the cabal. QAnon also commonly asserts that Trump is planning a day of reckoning known as the “Storm”, when thousands of members of the cabal will be arrested. No part of the conspiracy claim is based in fact. QAnon supporters have accused many liberal Hollywood actors, Democratic politicians, and high-ranking government officials of being members of the cabal.”

As scientists, practitioners, and academics, the authors have continued to marvel at the fact that QAnon has gained so much traction. They command an audience in the absence of evidence and when there is so much evidence that they could turn to if their aim really were to prevent child abuse (and we have no evidence of that, either). This raises significant questions about the role and significance of research, evidence, and expert knowledge in the world currently. [Tom Hanks](#) and [Hillary Clinton](#) and others may be a lot of things, but calling them pedophiles detracts from the very serious work that at organizations such as ATSA and Stop It Now! (to name only two) are involved in.

In a recent [blog](#) post, [Marty Klein](#) stated that QAnon is “*replacing child protection groups – who should blame themselves.*” This comes as a surprise to many organizations committed to preventing abuse, who have mostly read about QAnon in the headlines. To our knowledge neither interest in their work nor their support from charitable foundations and concerned individuals has changed very much. Marty Klein actually only mentions two organizations, Save the Children and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), about which he had blogged in [2017](#). His argument is that, in particular, NCMEC has created the very conditions that allow QAnon to thrive by what he refers to as its scare tactics and “used statistics in a cynical fashion—with concepts like “at risk for exploitation,” “potential victims,” and “children gone missing.” While we are not defending NCMEC (and



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We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

[The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers](#) is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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they can defend themselves), we believe that not every prevention-oriented organization is the same, and that the vast majority do so ethically.

In another [blog](#), Jeremy Malcolm of the [Prostasia Foundation](#) offers very different insights, beginning with a description of the evolution of the origins of many of QAnon's statements and beliefs. Malcolm also takes issue with NCMEC, noting for instance, that "A NCMEC figure that QAnon sources commonly quote is that [800,000 children go missing each year](#). Less often acknowledged is that in over [99% of those cases the child returns safely](#), often within hours." Malcolm's blog for Prostasia also examines the panic around Satanic cult abuse (which many readers will remember) from the mid-1980s into the 1990s. In the end, when we visited to NCMEC's website in preparing this blog, we did not turn up any wildly inflated facts, although its aims are clear. We have concluded that there are many points worth noted in these blog posts, and while we may differ in some key areas, we respect the authors' work very much.

What can we take away from these passionate disagreements? While there is no shortage of overt disinformation in QAnon's efforts, everyone in these debates appears to agree that the sexual victimization of children should be prevented. That might be a place to start.

In our view:

- It's important to examine the evidence base in deciding what directions we take in any course of action. We need to make sure that people with deep knowledge of the issues are at the table and being listened to. This leads to the question of how we can best "reframe" or "relaunch" expertise in a way that captures the imagination of individuals who are more susceptible to conspiracy theories?
- Conspiracy theories are not helpful in preventing abuse, especially when so much credible evidence about effective approaches already exist.
- Accusing people of child abuse has a deep and long-lasting impact; even when the accusation is withdrawn afterward or no proof is being offered, the suggestion will linger for a long time and will remain a stain on someone's reputation.
- Groups like QAnon are making the work of preventing abuse more difficult for all of us through their spreading of information for which there is no evidence.
- Individuals and groups that focus passionately in one specific area are at risk for not taking other perspectives into consideration.
- Missing from many mainstream and social media accounts is that child abuse is preventable, that many people have developed and tested ways to prevent it, and that knowledge about prevention is there for the taking.
- A fact that often goes missing in these debates, especially among organizations, is that ordinary individuals can play a powerful role in preventing abuse.
- Ultimately, all people will be able to prevent abuse most effectively when they are in possession of high-quality knowledge and are willing to speak up and speak out about abuse prevention.

In the end, we need to reaffirm that sexual abuse is an individual, interpersonal, community and a societal level issue; which means that we all need work collectively to prevent sexual abuse and the existent of conspiracy theories undermines this collective working.