The psychosocial intervention team at BASR is intervening for the third year in the public schools of the Bethlehem Directorate of Education in order to raise awareness among school students, their teachers and parents about all forms of abuse: neglect of children with disabilities - physical, emotional and verbal abuse as well as sexual abuse. The objective of the awareness program is to promote the rights of children with disabilities, to sensitize parents and teachers on the effects of abuse on children’s development and to empower children if ever confronted with abuse including sexual abuse.

Awareness raising for children's care givers, child professionals and the public on child protection issues and the rights of children with disabilities supports the community and families...
to expand the protective sphere for children with disabilities, fosters positive attitudes towards them, promotes their inclusion and participation in all aspects of community life and helps these adults develop alternative forms of behaviour to physical and emotional violence and abuse, which in turn contributes to the strengthening of the network of care around these children and improves their life quality. Awareness raising for children with and without disability alike of their rights empowers them and enables them to defend and protect themselves from violence and abuse, which in turn improves their well being and quality of life.

Each year, the awareness program on child protection targets students with and without disability, their parents and teachers in 10 public schools, mainly in the rural areas of the Bethlehem district, using TV spots produced by BASR in cooperation with Al-Harah Theatre.

The targeted school teachers were touched by the issues raised by the TV spots. Some shared their personal experiences and expressed their need to know how to deal with their own children. The TV spot on neglect of children with disabilities raised many debates among the teachers. Some denied the existence of parents who neglect their own children with disabilities, while others contradicted this opinion. As for sexual abuse, there were animated discussions about the way girls should be raised in our Palestinian society: does a less conservative education have an impact on the incidence of sexual abuse? The social workers noticed that some of the teachers were defensive while discussing sexual abuse of children in the sense that it was hard for them to admit the existence of sexual abuse within our society as it is taboo; but all of them recognized the importance of prevention in schools and the necessary role of the school staff in this regard.

As for the awareness sessions for parents, more mothers than fathers shared some of their negative behaviors toward their children, exchanged opinions about the consequences of such behaviors on children and agreed on the importance of finding alternative behaviors to abuse. While discussing the TV spot about neglect of children with disabilities, some mothers
expressed their distress because the spot reminded them of personal experiences with their own children.

When the subject of sexual abuse was discussed, many mothers raised the issue of sexual education and how to answer their children's questions about sexuality; most of them reported that they avoid talking about it and even punish their children if they ask any question concerning these issues. It was hard for them to accept the existence of sexual abuse in the Palestinian society. It was also noted that there was a huge lack of mothers' awareness of sexual abuse and the ways to protect their children from it. Some mothers insisted on the importance of controlling their daughters' behaviors and not allowing them to leave the house in order to avoid their exposure to sexual abuse. Some mothers referred their children to individual counseling after learning about the indicators that parents should take in consideration regarding children’s behaviors.

The school students actively participated in the discussions during the awareness activities and showed real interest in discussing abuse, its types and effects on children. They even admitted that they were often verbally abused and that they also verbally abuse their younger siblings and peers. While discussing neglect of children with disabilities, the program social workers emphasized the abilities and contributions of people with disabilities. They also gave examples of how people abuse children with disabilities and neglect them. Most of the students showed their empathy toward the issue.

The students' attention was focused on sexual abuse. It was noticed that there was embarrassment among the students to discuss sexual abuse; but on the other hand, there was always a clear desire on their part to develop sex related questions collectively rather than individually. In general, the students' questions indicated the importance of introducing sexual education in schools. Many students asked to be seen separately by the program social workers to be intervened with on an individual basis.
This program has been successful thanks to the coordination and the support given by the directorate of education and by the schools. Although Palestinian children are denied their basic rights because of the Israeli occupation, yet prevention on issues related to abuse in all its types must be systematically part of children’s education at home and in schools in order to help them develop in the most positive way and be constructive members of their society when they grow up.