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Know the Warning Signs: Just Where Is the Boundary Line? Part 1

The videos presented during the *Protecting God's Children*™ awareness sessions discuss a number of warning signs of possible child sexual abuse. At first glance, many of the identified abuser behaviors seem to be the kinds of things that have always been associated with *good* ministry techniques. In the appropriate context, these practices have enabled youth ministers to build trust with young people and have created a loving, pastoral atmosphere in which children have thrived.

Although some behaviors need to be changed to ensure safe environments, the most important thing to remember is that there are boundary lines in every relationship. Inappropriate crossing of those boundary lines causes seemingly appropriate behavior to become risky or even criminal. Adults must learn to recognize, respect, and defend these boundary lines.

The purpose of this two-part series is to examine the warning signs of a child molester by identifying the lines between appropriate behavior and the risky actions of adults in ministry with children. We will first identify what each warning sign does NOT mean, and then clarify how to recognize that the behavior is risky.

A. Adult always wants to be alone with children

One of the first warning signs that the videos present is that child molesters always want to be alone with children. Does that mean that nobody should ever be alone with children? No. It means pay particular attention to any adult who *always* wants to be alone with children.

There are times in ministry when children and ministers will be alone. For example, the sacrament of reconciliation requires privacy. Counseling and tutoring sessions are often conducted one-on-one. Occasionally, a child needs the undivided attention of a caring adult.

A responsible adult makes sure that someone knows when he or she is meeting alone with children. A responsible adult meets with children in areas where another adult could walk by unimpeded or where the adult's interactions with children are visible to others. This is possible, even when the privacy of the adult-child conversation must be protected.

Risky behavior is characterized by two specific elements. A potential child molester:

- *Discourages* other adults from participating in activities.
- *Creates* an environment where his or her activities with children or young people cannot be monitored.

These elements are the key to the dividing line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior with children. Committed, caring adults are alone with children from time to time. It is those who actively discourage or dissuade others from participating—and eliminate the opportunity for anyone else to monitor their activities with children—who pose a risk to children.

B. More excited to be with children than adults

Caring about children and wanting to be with them is an important quality for people in youth ministry. Most dedicated children's ministry professionals and volunteers are excited to be with children. They love the children and young people in their programs and relish the time they spend with the youngsters in their ministries. However, that does not mean that they *always* prefer the company of children to the company of adults.

People in child and youth ministry are definitely committed to young people. They bring their love of children to the ministry they provide, but they are also clear about appropriate boundaries between adults and children. Good youth ministers strictly enforce those boundaries. These adults know that their ministry with children and young people is enhanced when they have a well-rounded and full life that includes healthy adult relationships and a rich life outside of the time they spend with the children and young people they serve.

The key to remember is that child molesters are *more* excited to be with children than with adults. Child sexual abusers always choose being with children rather than adults. When the rest of the adults are craving adult conversation, the child molester will still choose to be with the children. As Roberto in the video says when referring to the person who molested him: "He was *always* hanging around with us."

A red flag to watch for is people who have outfitted their house with every toy a child could want—regardless of the age and interests of their own children. Also, remember that child molesters have a preference for a particular age and body type of child. So, for example, Ronnie liked having young boys around. He preferred boys who were about 10 years old; and, over time would eliminate other adults and children from having the opportunity to share his time with the boys. This was Ronnie's way of isolating his victims from other adults. In addition, as Karl pointed out, 90 percent of the pictures in his photo album were photos of little girls—the type he preferred.

These indicators point to someone who is *more excited* to be with children than with adults. Genuine interest in children and genuine commitment to child and youth ministry are not signs of a child molester. Risky behavior—such as repeated attempts to isolate children, or a particular child, from other adults—is a sign of a possible child sexual abuser. If responsible adults pay attention to the little details, then children and those who minister to them will be safer than before.

Next month, in Part 2 of this series, we will further discuss how to recognize when the behavior of an adult who interacts with children has crept across the boundaries of an appropriate ecclesiastical relationship.

1) Based on what you've learned through the Protecting God's Children program, who from the following list has exhibited the most risky behavior?

- A) A 17-year boy in the youth program who was seen kissing a 16-year old girl in the back of the bus during a recent youth retreat.
- B) A kindergarten teacher who hugged a crying child after the child fell from a swing and skinned her knees.
- C) A Sunday School teacher who decided to become the personal minister to a troubled 14-year-old boy and, by himself, has been transporting the boy to and from every church service and youth activity for the last four months.
- D) The father of a 7-year-old boy who volunteers with the children's program and insists on making sure a particular group of six underprivileged children are fed a good breakfast each week prior to Sunday School.
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Know the Warning Signs: Just Where Is the Boundary Line? Part 2

Many of the warning signs in the *Protecting God's Children*™ program seem consistent with certain practices that people in children's ministries, historically, have used to foster trust with children and young people. Ministers have developed these practices to create a loving, pastoral atmosphere that encourages increased participation by children and young people. Because they are effective, child molesters use many of the same behaviors to lure children into lurid and damaging relationships.

Some of these behaviors *need* to be changed to help ensure a safe environment for children. If adults in the community will simply modify their behaviors in a way that helps to clarify the dividing line between *appropriate* behavior and *inappropriate* behavior in ministry relationships, sex abusers will have much more difficulty operating undetected.

In Part 2 of this series about the warning signs of potential child molesters, we identify the fine line between appropriate behavior and the risky actions of adults involved in ministry with children. As in Part 1, we will first identify what the warning sign does NOT mean and then clarify how to recognize that the associated behavior *is* risky.

A. Adult gives gifts to young people ... often without permission

By definition a "gift" is:

"anything given; anything voluntarily transferred by one person to another without compensation; a present; an offering."^[1]

Any gift that is a "voluntary" transfer from one person to another is special—a teacher who brings a treat for her class, a youth minister who brings a prize for a game; a parish committee that provides a gift basket for a family experiencing difficult times—all of these are "voluntary transfers," given without compensation.

Gifts given as a "voluntary transfer" without compensation are examples of generosity and caring. However, gifts given with strings attached are a warning sign. "Strings" attached to a gift to a child or young person come in many different forms—and all of them should raise concerns for the adults in a child's life.

Some attached conditions that should raise concerns are:

- Gifts given on the condition that (or suggesting that) the child keeps the gift a secret.
- Expensive gifts that could leave a child thinking that something "is owed" to the person giving the gift.
- Inappropriate gifts indicating that the adult appears to have a romantic interest in the child or young person.

Children thrive on affection. A child molester uses this knowledge for his or her own purposes. A molester uses gifts, sometimes inappropriate or expensive gifts, given in secret, to lure a child into a relationship that the child would not enter into otherwise.

The keys to deciding whether someone's gift giving crosses the line are found in the circumstances surrounding the gift. Expensive gifts given openly and with the approval of the parents, for example, are less of a concern than a small inexpensive item given on the condition that the child keep the gift a secret.

Noticing the line between a gift freely given and a gift given in order to forge a possibly unhealthy bond between a child and an adult is another way that adults can know when to intervene in risky situations.

B. Adult allows a child to do things that the child's parents would not allow

Some people hear this warning sign and wonder, "What exactly does this mean?" As with many of the other warning signs, this statement does not necessarily mean something bad. The mere fact that a child gets to do something he or she is not allowed to do at home doesn't necessarily mean that the child is at risk for sexual abuse.

Allowing children to stay up late at a youth event, or to make mud pies, or to paint pictures on the wall of a classroom—these may be things a child's parents would not allow, but these behaviors are rarely, if ever, indicative of child sexual abuse. Sometimes children get to do things during church activities that they don't get to do at home—and that's part of the fun of participating.

The alarm goes off when the activities are things that parents would not *permit* children to do or would forbid them from doing. For example, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, smoking, watching movies that are rated R or NC-17, playing violent or "adult" content video games—these are the types of activities that clearly *cross the line*.

Parents must be able to trust those in ministry to provide appropriate entertainment and activities for children. They must be able to trust that any child or youth activity involving church volunteers or staff will be not only legal, but also consistent with Catholic moral teachings as well as a broad range of Christian values and standards.

A potential molester may bait a child with promises of forbidden activities. Any adult who entices a child to go against the wishes of the child's parents and to actually do things that the child's parents would not permit, presents a serious risk to children and should be immediately removed from ministry.

Bottom Line:

There are several common warning signs of a potential child molester, and caring adults should know them all. However, it is also important to know that there is sometimes a fine line between appropriate actions in ministry and inappropriate activities. On one side of the line are the sincere and generous gifts of ministry, and on the other side of the line are behaviors indicating possible steps toward engaging a child in sexual activities that can do irreparable harm. Caring adults should learn about the warning signs and learn to tell the difference.

1) Three of the four gift-giving circumstances listed below are inappropriate and should be viewed as possible warning signs of potential child sexual abuse. One of the four circumstances is not a warning sign. Which one is NOT a warning sign?

- A) Gifts given in the presence of the child's parents with the full knowledge and approval of the child's parents, and without any strings attached.
- B) Gifts given on the condition that (or suggesting that) the child keeps the gift a secret.
- C) Expensive gifts that could leave a child thinking that something "is owed" to the person giving the gift.
- D) Inappropriate gifts indicating that the adult appears to have a romantic interest in the child or young person.

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Step I—Knowing the Warning Signs—Remember, Revisit, Reexamine

By Sharon Womack Doty, J.D., M.H.R.
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Editor's note:

This series of articles presented over the next six months in *Protecting God's Children for Adults* readings will cover the Five Steps we must follow and implement to create safer environments for children. The articles will review and reinforce the Five Steps as well as provide new information to make you better protectors of children.

From time to time, it is good to stop and reexamine the warning signs that indicate someone is a potential risk to children. In order to be alert to these signs all the time, a careful review of the behaviors that should give us pause is important.

We begin this review with a reminder of the basic warning signs that should raise concerns with adults and trigger an effort to interrupt the behaviors. In the *Protecting God's Children for Adults* program, there are several warning signs identified to watch for as we create a safe environment for children and the adults who care for them. First among them are behaviors that are easily observed by other adults in the environment. This article will remind us of these particular signs and how we can recognize and interrupt them.

- *Always wants to be alone with children.* Notice not only the people who seem to separate children from others by inviting them to go off alone with the adult, but also those who schedule times to provide support or service to children only when they can be alone and isolated with the children. Predators also convince adults that the time alone with children is appropriate and warranted. For adults, it is important to be alert to the efforts of all other adults to separate children from others for any reason—and interrupt the effort.
- *Would rather be with children than adults.* There are times when most of us enjoy the company of children. The opportunity to be carefree and childlike is a delightful break from the serious, significant obligations of adult responsibilities. However, for many parents, an adult willing to "play" with the kids for a while is a welcome respite. Pay attention and take note of those who *always* offer to take responsibility for the children. Make sure that everyone takes a turn at managing the children. This simple practice can thwart any effort by a potential predator to isolate children from adults and safety.
- *Discourages other adults from participating or monitoring.* This warning sign can be subtle. Potential predators can seem to be generous and accommodating as they offer to take full responsibility for monitoring the child or suggest that the lesson or conversation is best held in private. Although privacy can be an important element of some interactions, oversight and observation are critical for safety. Pay attention to the people who demand time alone, unsupervised and unmonitored with children and respectfully decline to allow that to happen.
- *Goes overboard touching.* There are many occasions for adults to have their hands on children and most are just fine. Holding hands or playing games with children that remind them of the joy of life are magical moments. Adults need to be able to draw the line between touch that is nurturing and caring and that which can be characterized as "overboard." Adults who wrestle and tickle children that are not their own should be stopped. Call attention to any touch by an adult that could result in intimate contact. Be sure adults are aware that you are watching their physical contact with children and young people and that anytime it strikes you that they have stepped over the line, you will intervene.
- *Thinks the rules do not apply to them.* Although this warning sign may not be as obvious, observant adults will likely take notice of people who always seem to think they do not need to follow the rules. For predators—policies and procedures will only be honored when it is convenient, and they will often ignore social amenities. Failure to obey obvious rules is easy to identify. Ignoring social amenities may be more difficult to identify. Notice, for example, people who are chronically late and think the group should catch them up or start over, and those who refuse to turn off cell phones and pagers upon request. These adults are among those who deserve special attention when they interact with children.

These basic warning signs are not the only risky behaviors that potential predators exhibit but they are among those that predators tell us are part of the process. Paying attention to these behaviors and interrupting them anytime they are present can make a real difference in the health and well being of children in our environments.

Other warning signs are not as visible to a casual observer. Attending to these warning signs will take something more. We will discuss them in a separate article.

1) Cathy and Steve are enthusiastic about their son's new interest in soccer. It is the first time Jake has expressed interest in a sport, and he seems to have a real talent for it. They support his interest and want to encourage him to continue to build his skills. The coach has offered to work with Jake one-on-one after school but says he can't do that until 4:30—after everyone else goes home at 4:00. Steve thinks it is okay to accept the coach's offer, but Cathy is not so sure. Steve is relying on the fact that the coach has been there for years and the soccer teams have done well. He does not see any downside. Cathy has an uneasy feeling about it but can't put her finger on why it bothers her. Should the offer be a concern?

- A) No, the coach has a good reputation. Surely if there were a problem, someone would have mentioned it.
- B) Yes, the "uneasy feeling" should not be ignored—no matter what.
- C) No, there is no reason to believe this is anything but a generous offer to help.
- D) Yes, there is no good explanation for the coach taking time just with Jake. There could be a problem.

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Step I, Pt. 2—Knowing the “Other” Warning Signs

Editor's note:

This series of articles presented over the next six months in Protecting God's Children for Adults readings will cover the Five Steps we must follow and implement to create safer environments for children. The articles will review and reinforce the Five Steps as well as provide new information to make you better protectors of children.

In the previous article, which reviewed the warning signs of potential predators, we were reminded of the behaviors that are visible to a girl and older man an attentive observer. In this article, we will look at those warning signs that are not so easy to see in public interactions. Noticing these warning signs will take more than casual observation. It will be important to identify triggers that can raise awareness about these additional warning signs.

Among the signs that are less visible are the following:

Allows children to engage in activities their parents would not allow. In order to recognize that an adult is doing this, parents and other caring adults need to pay close attention and listen carefully. Often children will give away the fact that they were allowed to do something against or outside the “rules” Mom and Dad have established. For example, a child might suddenly be familiar with a movie the parents refused to allow the child to see, or they may make a comment about seeing someone at the mall during a time when they were not allowed to go. Other adults may observe children somewhere and suspect the parents did not approve. In any case, take time to gently inquire about what happened. If you see something you think might be against the rules set by the child's parent and the parent is not around, call and ask. Check it out. In many ways, in today's high tech environment, it does “take a village” to raise and keep a child safe.

Uses bad language or tells dirty jokes to children. Many times the inappropriate or bad language used by a potential offender makes its way into the vocabulary of children. Once again, listening becomes important in the effort to create safe environments. Parents often talk to their children about bad or dirty language and jokes, and they let their children know that this is unacceptable. As a result, children may be left with the concern that if they tell what happened or what they heard, they will be in trouble. Parents and caring adults should let children know that if someone else uses this language around them or tells them dirty jokes, it is okay to tell parents; reassure your children and let them know they will not be in trouble. Children need to know that it is the adult who behaved badly and the adult who will have to answer for the bad language and jokes.

Shows children pornography. Again, it is unlikely that a parent will see a potential perpetrator showing any child pornography. Therefore, parents must work hard to keep the lines of communication open and consistently remind children that just because someone shows them something the child should not see does not mean the child is in trouble. Let children know that the adults who offer or show them pictures or video, that they know they are not supposed to see, are not their friends and that parents need to know what is happening so they can protect the children from harm.

Keep photo albums, journals, and/or mementos. Pay attention to adults who seem to be taking photos of other people's children all the time. Note and interrupt anyone taking pictures of your child without your permission. Listen when your child tells you that someone has an “awesome” album with everyone's picture in it. Most perpetrators keep a record of their “conquests.” The record often includes a photo album or journal. Taking note of those who are collecting these mementos can help you identify the risky adults in the environment.

Never forget that a perpetrator can be anyone—someone you know well, someone with whom you are barely acquainted, or a stranger. Never take for granted that the risky behaviors exhibited by adults in the environment are simply errors in judgment. Intervene and interrupt. Be proactive in creating safe environments by remaining alert and never ignoring any inconsistencies.

Knowing the warning signs is the most important aspect of protecting our children. Perpetrators show up in all areas of life. If you know and trust the warning signs, you will keep children safer.

1) Chris and Karen are wondering how to talk with their children about something every parent needs to talk about—“adult materials.” There comes a time in every child's life when the subject of adult movies, magazines, games, and pornography must be addressed. Now is that time. Chris and Karen have never really seen any of this kind of material but they know that predators show it to children to trap them in secrecy. What should Chris and Karen tell their children?

- A) Explain that they should stay away from materials labeled “adults only.”
 - B) Let them know that if someone shows them adult materials or pornography, they can tell you without being in trouble for looking.
 - C) Explain to children the difference between pictures that are suggestive in nature, such as many images used in advertising, music videos, and video games, and “adult” material or pornography.
 - D) A and C only
 - E) A, B, and C
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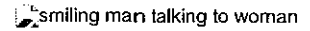


VIRTUS[®]Online

Step II: Controlling Access through Screening

Editor's note:

The series of six articles presented in Protecting God's Children for Adults will cover the Five Steps we must know and implement to create safer environments for children. The articles will review and reinforce the Five Steps as well as provide new information to make you better protectors of children.



Controlling access to our children is often translated into monitoring activities or paying attention to the physical environment and space. For example, many people think of "controlling access" as equivalent to the level of security that an organization has in place and the guidelines for getting in to see children. In the VIRTUS[®] programs, however, "controlling access" is something much more basic.

Controlling access means establishing and implementing an application and screening process for employees and volunteers that helps preserve the safety of children. As one facilitator said years ago, our Church screening process is like being aware that the parish is surrounded by a big fishnet with a few holes in it. Some perpetrators have slipped through those holes and some children have slipped out. To control access, we need to weave the holes closed with a screening process that assures, to the best of our ability, that we have made every effort possible to eliminate those who are a risk to our children.

As a reminder, a comprehensive screening process includes five steps.

1. **Criminal background checks:** Fingerprint checks are the most effective tools for determining whether an applicant has a criminal history as a sex offender or has been convicted of a crime that could exclude him or her from approval to work with children. Criminal background checks at only the state level can leave an organization vulnerable.
2. **Use a standard written application:** Staff and volunteers need to formally apply to work with children. A standard application gives the Church a clearer picture of the person requesting to work with the children. Never waive the filing of the written application. The application should include a history of the applicant's work with children. If the person applying cannot write or speak English, use an interpreter to complete the information and then have it read back to them to confirm the accuracy of the information provided.
3. **Check references:** The time and cost of calling references encourages some people to skip that part of the process. Potential predators know that this happens, and they count on it. The risk to children is too high. Never skip checking references and always remember to ask the reference whether the person is safe working with children. No one has a "right" to work with children. Being allowed to participate in programs is a privilege. Remember this and do the work to make sure you create the safest possible environment for all concerned.
4. **Conduct face-to-face interviews:** Even if it seems like the time required to conduct these interviews is more than you can fit into your schedule, do the interviews. Interview everyone. Staff and volunteers need to be interviewed. Create a team of professionals to help if needed. Do not skip this step.
5. **Communicate the Church's commitment to keeping children safe:** Letting applicants know that there is a real commitment to honor policies and procedures and to do everything possible to keep children safe is crucial to a proper and complete screening process. Potential offenders, when confronted with the degree of the Church's commitment, will often give up on their intention to harm children. Fear of being monitored is a real risk to a potential offender and can interrupt his or her plan.

At this point in the Church's effort to create safe environments, screening employees and volunteers has become a matter of course. However, a careful review of the entire screening and application process will point to any gaps in the process that place children, adults, and the Church at risk. Take the time to insure your process is up to the standards laid out in *Protecting God's Children*[®].

1) After the staff meeting at Immaculate Conception Parish, Carey, the Human Resource Director, sat in her office trying to take in all that she had just heard. The most significant piece of information was the need to eliminate staff positions in youth program development and, at the same time, beef up the volunteer base to support an increasing number of children and teens participating in parish programs. Carey is faced with recruiting and placing over 25 volunteers in positions involving "regular contact with children." Given the size of the task, what elements of the staff application process can be skipped if she is only screening volunteers?

- A) None of the elements can be skipped. Both staff and volunteers who work with children need the same scrutiny.
- B) Most but not all. Calling references is not really necessary for people who are only volunteering.
- C) Most but not all. A written application with an employment history is not going to provide any real information for assessing volunteers.
- D) Most but not all. It is not really necessary to personally interview every volunteer face-to-face.
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Step III—Monitor all Programs—Now What?

Editor's note:

The series of six articles presented in Protecting God's Children for Adults will cover the Five Steps we must know and implement to teacher and children create safer environments for children. The articles will review and reinforce the Five Steps as well as provide new information to make you better protectors of children.

At this point in the safe environment process, many parishes and dioceses have established policies for monitoring programs that include pre-screening proposals that describe the programs and identify the resources necessary to run them. You have put into place some monitoring practices like drop-ins by administrators, windows in doors, and managing building key distribution in a way that promotes safety. Now what? How do we keep expanding safe practices in a way that continues to create a safer environment? Are there new ways to monitor programs to promote safety for all people involved in sponsored programs and ministries?

Let's step back and take a new look at the *Monitor All Programs* step from a broader perspective. For example, what new obstacles have arisen over the years? Have new problems been created by implementing new policies? How do we apply the "continuous improvement" model to this area of prevention?

What new obstacles have arisen over the years?

For some parishes, there are two new obstacles that have become apparent. First, the resources needed to sustain programs with new policies, procedures, and standards can stretch the available time, talent, and treasure. Second, the availability of Internet access in parish programs and schools has created a new avenue of potential access for predators and therefore, a real need to monitor this activity now exists.

In addition, evolving technology has posed some new problems for parishes and schools. Procedures and policies about taking pictures of student, for example, must now be reevaluated based on the fact that most cell phones feature a camera. Expanding technology will continue to create new challenges that must be addressed by those responsible for the safety of parishes and/or schools. It is becoming increasingly important to stay ahead of the game by keeping up with advancing technology.

Have new problems been created by implementing new policies?

One of the biggest problems parishes and schools are facing is the need for additional volunteers to adequately support programs. Whatever the reason, the shortage of volunteers and resources requires thinking and acting creatively to find new ways to manage the challenges. It may involve limiting the number of programs or limiting participation in programs. It may involve educating adults about their responsibility for the success of programs and the need for partnership in having it all work. In addition, parishes may want to be more public in the effort to address budget needs and make it clear what resources are available and how they will be used. Maybe have a "town meeting" with adults in the parish to talk about limited resources that encourage creative brainstorming approaches to how to do more with less.

How do we apply the "continuous improvement" model to creating safe environments?

In regard to "Monitor All Programs," applying the continuous improvement model means evaluating existing policies, procedures, and practices on an annual basis to determine their effectiveness. Take time, as a staff and as a parish, to identify any new issues that came up during the year and/or new obstacles that showed up in your efforts to create safe environments. Look for new tools to protect all those involved and make necessary adjustments in policies, procedures, and practices to help everyone monitor programs and create safe environments.

Refresh and renew your commitment to monitor programs! This attitude will make a real difference.

1) Anne and Jerry are the VIRTUS® coordinators for the parish and, in that role they presented the children's programs to all the religion classes and the Youth Group. As part of the high school presentation, they sent the kids on a scavenger hunt to find places on the premises that could be used by a predator to gain access to children and young people in parish programs and activities. The students created a rather comprehensive list of potentially risky items including broken sidewalks, burnt out light bulbs in dark hallways, and unused schoolrooms. This was a project to educate children about what to look for in the environment. What, if anything, should Anne and Jerry do with the information gathered?

- A) Go over the list with the students to make sure they know why they identified each unsafe issue as a risk to a safe environment.
 - B) Evaluate the list of issues and determine which items are real safety issues.
 - C) Report the findings of the students to the pastor, principal, and/or Parish Council.
 - D) A and C only.
 - E) A, B, and C
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Step IV—Be Aware: What More is Needed in Today's Environment?

Editor's note:

The series of six articles presented in Protecting God's Children for Adults will cover the five steps we must know and implement to create safer environments for children. The articles will review and reinforce the Five Steps as well as provide new information to make you a better protector of children.

 old man in library

Upping the ante on our communications with the children in our lives is an important step in the effort to create safe environments. The first three steps, "Know the Warning Signs," "Control Access," and "Monitor all Programs," help us identify risky people and situations before they become a danger to our children. "Be Aware" is a reminder that regardless of the good efforts we make to eliminate risky adults from our lives, sometimes predators slip through the obstacles we impose. As a result, we need to keep our guard up at all times. We need to know what's going on with our children and maintain and expand our communication with them.

Being aware of what's happening with our children has been defined as listening to them, talking to them, and observing them. With the development of technology, this step takes on an expanded role in the effort to maintain a safe environment.

Talking with, listening to, and observing our children is no longer just about the traditional definitions of those terms. Being aware now includes such activities as:

- Monitoring Internet activity;
- Monitoring texting;
- Overseeing the use of Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, and other similar sites;
- Talking with kids about social networking communications and the permanence of putting something on the Internet;
- Creating social contracts about electronic communication and checking in with kids periodically to make sure they are honoring the agreements
- Cell phone photos and the danger of sexual exploitation and bullying; and
- Learning about new technologies such as vanishing texting and vanishing email and how to retrieve information that appears to be deleted from the computer.

There are still plenty of opportunities for parents, guardians, and children to talk to each other about issues that arise. However, there are many more openings for communication between peers. These opportunities can also lead to other sinister communications between teens such as bullying that can be devastatingly cruel and sexting between teens that subjects them to criminal actions in addition to posting a photo on the Internet that remains permanently.

Being aware of what's going on with your children requires an ever-expanding role for parents, guardians, and caring adults. There is a new vocabulary to learn that includes phrases like "bff," "lol," "bbfn," "AVS/L," and many more. These Internet shortcuts in communication can leave an adult wondering and confused.^[i]

In many ways, communicating with children has become more challenging in this high tech world. Expanding the definition of listening, talking, and observing can help responsible adults keep up with new communication as technology continues to grow.

[i] A dictionary of Internet Acronyms is available online at www.virtus.org.

1) Sarah and Mark trust their teenagers, and they are also responsible parents. They know that children can make bad decisions as they grow up. Therefore, at least once a week, they monitor the text messages on their children's phones. In addition to reviewing the Internet history, they also monitor their 14- and 16-year-olds' Facebook pages. It's their experience that the kids are texting all the time, but tonight when they looked at the phones, there were almost no texts. They are wondering what has happened and how to deal with the missing texts. They're wondering if the kids have loaded software that eliminates the text history on to their phones. What should Sarah and Mark do?

- A) There is nothing parents can do when children download a "vanishing text" application and clear their phones.
- B) They can take the phone to a professional to determine how the children have eliminated their text history.
- C) Parents can learn about and download applications that help them keep track of the texts that their child is attempting to delete.
- D) Talk with your children about what's happening to the texts, and find out what, if anything, he or she did to delete the information.
- E) B, C, and D.

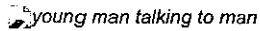
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Step V—Communicate Your Concerns

Editor's note:

The series of six articles presented in *Protecting God's Children for Adults* will cover the Five Steps we must know and implement to create safer environments for children. The articles will review and reinforce the Five Steps as well as provide new information to make you better protectors of children. 

Speaking up when you see someone whose behavior could put a child at risk is still one of the most difficult things for an adult to do. Predators count on adults who have difficulty communicating concerns. They know that the reluctance to speak up or speak out provides them the opportunity to escape detection when their behavior raises suspicions. Adults must be willing to speak up to interrupt risky behaviors exhibited by others and to report suspected abuse to authorities.

In order to assure adults that these actions are necessary, address every situation appropriately. Of course, if you suspect that a child is being or has been abused, there is only one course of action—report it to the civil authorities. This does not mean talk to the parents first or discuss the situation with others to verify your suspicions. It does not mean investigate to make sure your suspicions are accurate or try to resolve it yourself by talking to the alleged perpetrator. It means exactly what it says: *If you suspect that a child has been or is being abused, report the suspected abuse to the civil authorities.*

How do you know that a suspicion is "reasonable?" Many times suspicions are raised because a child discloses something to you. Perhaps they tell you what's happening to them. Sometimes, however, they frame their disclosure as if it is happening to a friend of theirs. In either case, the simple fact of disclosure to you is enough to warrant a call to the Child Abuse Hotline or 911. Remember that your job is not to judge the veracity of the allegation—it is to report to civil authorities so that they can investigate.

Sometimes you see the consequences of suspected abuse. Bruises, burns, and other physical evidence are sometimes visible. In other situations, you witness dramatic changes in a child's behavior that indicates that something is really wrong. Report these suspicions and allow the professionals to sort out what is or is not happening. It is their job. They are trained to do it. It is up to you to give them the chance to protect a child by reporting suspected abuse as soon as you see it.

There are other situations that do not warrant a call to child protection services but do raise concerns. These are the situations in which you observe an adult who is behaving in a way that raises concerns or places the child and/or the adult at risk of harm, abuse, or accusation.

It is never easy to tell an adult that his or her behavior is raising concerns, but it is important to do so. Think of it as offering the person an early warning. If you were the one whose behavior was causing concern, you would want to know. You would want to be able to make adjustments in the way you interact with children to ensure that your work with them was above reproach. Most people who work with children and young people want to know if they might be placing the children and possibly themselves at risk. It may be a little awkward to bring up your observations, but nearly everyone appreciates being told.

Start by telling them that you are hesitant to bring it up, but you realized that if it were you, you would want someone to tell you so you could correct the situation and alleviate concerns. Then, tell them exactly what you saw and why it raised concerns. Offer to assist them in finding a way to accomplish the ministry goal they are pursuing without raising concerns about their interactions with the children and young people. Let them know you want to help.

It is never easy to raise concerns about an adult's behavior; that is why it is so important to remember that the ultimate goal is a safe environment for children. The safety and well being of our children must outweigh any issues we might have about speaking up. Remind yourself that a child's safety is worth the discomfort we experience. Be gracious and generous in your communication, and your goal to create a safer environment for everyone will be achieved.

1) Margaret has worked with the parish's Mother's Day Out program for the past five years as a teacher's aide. In that time, she has observed many teachers and has come to recognize the ones who genuinely love the job of caring for the children. Paula is just such a teacher. She goes beyond what is required to care for children and supports them when they are struggling. However, Margaret has noticed that Paula tends to promise the four-year-olds things that she should not promise them. For example, if the child says that their mom or dad does not like them to eat snacks, Paula suggests that it just be a secret school activity. Paula is doing nothing else that causes concern, and Margaret wonders whether this is really an issue she should bring up. She suspects that mentioning her concerns will upset Paula.

- A) Margaret should keep an eye on Paula and see if anything else occurs that might be of concern and then report it to the head of the program.
- B) Margaret should call the child's parents later and let them know that their child was given snacks.
- C) Margaret should let Paula know that encouraging children to keep secrets from parents can raise concerns about her real intentions.
- D) Margaret should just let it go. Paula is a good teacher and clearly not a child molester.

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Tips on How to Effectively Communicate Concerns

"I am hesitant to talk to her because I don't want her to think I am accusing her of something."

Two concerned women reading a paper

"What if he gets angry and starts saying things about me?"

"I am afraid to say anything—I don't want to ruin someone's reputation."

These are examples of the kinds of reasons, or justifications, that adults have for not communicating concerns about the actions of other adults who work with children in our parishes and schools. It is important to trust our instincts *and* communicate our concerns in order to create safe environments for children.

In his book, *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals that Protect us from Violence*, Gavin De Becker, urges all adults to trust their intuition—that "uneasy in the gut feeling" that tells us that something is just not right. That instinct, or intuition, is an early warning signal for us and, if we listen to it, it can serve us well.

However, all too often we second-guess that little voice telling us that something is not right. We think, "But he seems like such a nice guy!" Or, "She has been working with children for years, so she must be okay." Or, "I am just being paranoid."

When we suppress our instincts in favor of our "better judgment," the consequences can be serious.

Effectively communicating concerns begins with trusting our intuition when we sense that something is just not as it should be. Listening to and respecting that sense of anxiety or that instinctive concern is one of the first steps each adult can take in the effort to create safe environments for children.

When we see or hear something that raises concerns, it is important to communicate that unease to someone who can do something about it—either the person who is behaving in a way that concerns you, or that person's supervisor. Your decision about who to approach depends on the nature of the concern and the level of comfort you have in talking with the person involved.

For example, if your church or school has a policy that two adults work together to transport children and you notice that the new soccer coach is offering to take home an individual child after practice every day, you could talk to her directly. Let her know about the policy and remind her of the Church's commitment to safe environments for children.

If the person responds appropriately and alters her behavior, the situation is handled with a minimal amount of upset for everyone involved. However, if she does not respond well or becomes outraged, it is important that you stand your ground on this issue. Express your concerns to a supervisor. Remember that your first priority is the safety of children.

If you feel uncomfortable approaching the coach in the first place, or if the situation is a serious concern that you think is better addressed by the supervisor, you should talk to the person in charge and express your concerns. Don't let your fear of being wrong or of upsetting someone stop you from protecting children.

Whether you talk with a supervisor first, or wait until after your conversation with the person you have concerns about, be prepared to tell the supervisor exactly what happened that raised your concerns. Be clear about what you saw or heard and the nature of your concern about it.

Remember that communicating a concern is not an accusation. Communicating concerns does not ruin reputations. Communicating concerns does not destroy people. But, if you talk to anyone other than the person involved or that person's supervisor, you run the risk of doing all three. How? Because talking with anyone other than the person involved or their supervisor is *gossip*—and gossip destroys reputations and damages the lives of good people. Conversations about your concerns with other parishioners, schoolteachers, religious education teachers, or parents undermine the good name of someone who deserves the opportunity to address and resolve your discomfort.

Bottom Line:

It is critical that each adult communicate concerns about the behaviors of adults who interact with the children in our communities. Don't be the one who never spoke up about a concern until after something terrible happened. Protect children and the good name and reputation of those who work with children by communicating your concerns to someone who can do something about it—the person involved, or that person's supervisor.

1) After a few days of volunteer work with your Church's youth group, you begin to suspect that Martin, the parish's 34-year-old youth minister, is spending considerable time alone with Sheila, a 17-year-old member of the youth group. You're relatively new in this parish and don't know the pastor, Fr. Nick, very well. However, Martin, Sheila, and both of their families have been active in the parish for many years. And everyone else tells you that Fr. Nick runs a "tight ship." To whom should you initially express your concerns about the amount of time Martin appears to be spending with Sheila?

- A) Sheila
 - B) Martin and Fr. Nick
 - C) Sheila's parents
 - D) Your Sunday School class
 - E) The police
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