

# How Can We Help Control Access to Other People's Children?

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Church is one of the most trusting atmospheres in the world. We welcome everyone with open arms. We even seek out those who are not involved in the faith community and encourage them to join us. This is our charge—expanding the Kingdom of God on earth. But, as we are beginning to see, there is a downside. This trusting atmosphere is one of the primary characteristics that causes child molesters to encourage each other to seek positions in local church communities.

Sex offenders communicate through websites and chat rooms about the places where children are easier to access. They warn each other about environments that are risky for *them*—organizations such as Boy Scouts, the Civil Air Patrol, and Big Brothers and Big Sisters—and they share information about places that are more easily accessible—churches of all faiths.

One of the ways that we, as adults, can help change the perception of churches as preferred targets for child molesters is to take responsibility for controlling access to all children. There are specific actions we can take that will positively and powerfully impact the environment in which our children play and pray.

First and foremost, we can willingly participate in any screening processes implemented for staff and volunteers. Volunteers who for many years have worked with children are often offended by the initiation of new screening processes and the requirement for everyone (them included) to participate. They may view the request for references and a criminal background check, for example, as a slap in the face or an affront to their years of service.

Offenders typically think that *the rules don't apply to them*; remember that this is a warning sign of a possible child molester. If we—as experienced staff members or volunteers—object to a new screening process, we can inadvertently foster an atmosphere where *others* can circumvent the same screening process. So, regardless of our intentions, our obstinacy can open the church's doors to offenders. On the other hand, If we are all willing to be screened—no matter how long we have served as a volunteer—then anyone who objects to the screening process becomes very noticeable, which calls into question the true motives of those who object to the process.

A new or more stringent screening process is not a reflection of whether the church trusts us. Rather, it is a commitment by the church to protect children. When caring adults are able to recognize this distinction, overwhelming participation in the new screening processes is a foregone conclusion. The new process becomes a welcome opportunity for *all* caring adults to be a part of the solution to this problem.

By willingly providing *our* information for the new screening process, we are taking an important step—but, only the first step—in controlling access to all children in the faith community. We must also support the screening of other adult volunteers and staff. In fact, the best practice with a new screening program is for a church or faith community to screen all staff and all volunteers, regardless of their record or years of service.

Let people know that you have been screened and that you think the new procedures are important for everyone. Remind those around you that the Church has made a commitment to creating a safe environment for children. Encourage other adults to participate in the volunteer programs and in the

screening process. This is a critical aspect of controlling access. Through these conversations we let everyone know that creating a safe environment for our children is of paramount importance to us—as individuals and as a faith community.

A stringent screening process is only part of the formula for controlling access to our children. Screening alone will not solve the problem of child sexual abuse.

The most effective way we can control access to our children is to take action when we see something that raises concerns. For example, one of the video sequences used in the Protecting God's Children awareness sessions, shows the mother of a young girl approach a group of girls who are talking with a man in a park. The mother takes her daughter by the hand, walks away, and leaves the other three girls alone with the man.

Participants in the awareness sessions often ask why the mother doesn't take *all of the girls* when she leaves. There is something very valuable for us to see in both the scenario and in our reaction to the mother's actions.

Before seeing these videos, it is likely that many of us would have responded in the same way as the mother in the video. We would have removed our child from the risky situation, but we would have stopped short of intervening to protect the other girls. After all, their mothers are there, too. Why would we tell *them* how to supervise their own children? It is not our place to interfere ... is it?

Unfortunately, this attitude contributed to the scope of the existing problem. Too often, responsible adults saw things that made them uncomfortable, but they did nothing in response. It wasn't *their place*. It wasn't *their responsibility*. It wasn't *their job*. It wasn't *their child*!

If we are committed to controlling access to other people's children and if we want others to be on the lookout for threats to our children, we must be willing to take action—to get involved.

We must be willing to give up the opinion that "It is not our problem."

We must be willing to intrude into any conversation or situation that raises concerns.

We must be willing to interrupt any interaction that seems to be taking a wrong turn.

We must be willing to risk being chastised by someone else for butting in.

In case we forget, children's lives are depending on us!

### **Bottom Line:**

The scriptures say, "Let the little children come." They don't say, "Look out for your own children." When he was 12 years old, Jesus stayed behind in the temple. But, Mary and Joseph were not worried. They assumed that Jesus was safe in the group—safe in the hands of the other adults in the community.

When we are willing to watch out for all the children in the community as well as our own, we are beginning to take responsibility for the mandate we are given in the scriptures. We must control who has access to all the children in our community. To do that, we must submit to the scrutiny of others and take steps to intervene in unsettling situations. We must be willing to participate in any

screening process implemented for staff and volunteers and to take action when we see something that raises concerns.