

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

By Sharon Doty, J.D., M.H.R.

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 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.

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.

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 the next section we identify the fine line between appropriate behavior and the risky actions of adults involved in ministry with children. 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."[i]
- 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

How Can You Effectively Communicate Your Concerns?

By Sharon Doty, J.D., M.H.R.

Most people who attend a Protecting God's Children™ awareness session understand that communicating concerns about risky behaviors directly to the person involved or the person's supervisor is the right thing to do. They understand that talking to anyone else, no matter what the justification or reason, is gossip and may cause irreparable harm. They also know that if they were doing something that caused concern, they would want to know so they would have an opportunity to correct their own behavior. Yet, we also know that it's difficult to initiate this type of conversation. With that in mind, here are some helpful suggestions.

Communicating to the individual involved or to that person's supervisor is the best way to handle a situation that causes you some concern about any behaviors that potentially place children in harm's way. When asked why people do not communicate directly to the person involved, among the most frequent answers are that the person does not want to risk being wrong about what they saw or heard, and does not want to risk retaliation for coming forward with suspicions. So, simply knowing the correct course of action doesn't make your response an easy one.

How do you communicate concerns effectively without compounding the existing problem or unnecessarily upsetting people? There are two important points to remember before you begin:

What do you want to communicate? Think through the problem before bringing it up.
Create a context or framework for the conversation.
Think through what you want to communicate.

When we see something that causes us concern or makes us feel uneasy, it is sometimes difficult to find the "right words" to use when we report our concerns. If you tell someone that you are concerned about his or her behavior, but you are not able to clearly describe the behavior, you are putting the other person in an uncomfortable position and likely, will make him or her angry. Before having such a conversation, think through what it is you want to say. Make sure you can explain to the person:

- Exactly what you saw;
- The reasons you were concerned; and,
- Why you are bringing this issue to him or her directly, instead of reporting it to his or her supervisor.

Communicating a concern is not an accusation of wrongdoing. Rather, it is an opportunity to allow someone to see a reflection of how he or she appears to others. By thinking through your communication and being sure about what you want to communicate, you can ensure that your message is clear and unambiguous.

Create a context or framework for the conversation.

It is highly probable that someone will become offended and/or upset upon hearing that you are concerned about his or her behavior with children. While it is impossible to guarantee that someone will not get upset or not be offended, it is possible to minimize the risk of that reaction by creating a framework or context for having the conversation.

Any time you are getting ready to have a serious conversation, it is important to begin by talking about why the conversation is necessary. When people understand that the reason you bring up an issue is because of your concern for them, they may be able to hear what you say as a contribution rather than a condemnation.

Creating a context or framework for the conversation might include explaining that after participating in a Protecting God's Children awareness session, you realized how important it is for all of us to monitor our own behavior, as well as the behavior of others around us who interact with children. You might tell the other person that you have made some changes to your own behavior and that you have observed them engaging in certain behaviors that others might interpret as a warning sign ... and that's the reason for having the conversation.

Take the time to establish the framework for the conversation. Let the person know that you are not accusing him or her of anything. Assure the person that you believe he or she has only the best of intentions, and that your fear is that he or she is engaging in certain behaviors "without thinking," and that those behaviors could place him or her or the children they care about in harm's way.

Bottom Line: Communicating our concerns can be challenging for each of us. No one wants to be the "bearer of bad news" or to be perceived as making accusations. However, if we can remind ourselves that knowing is better than not knowing, we can have the tough conversations we need to have with our co-workers and volunteers.

Trust your instincts, identify the nature of the concern, think through the conversation, and create a strong framework for the discussion. By thinking before you speak, chances are you will accomplish your goal to protect both the children and the generous, loving adults who work with them.

Mandated Reporters and Reporting Child Maltreatment

By Robert Hugh Farley, M.S.

National media reports have recently addressed the failure of individuals, institutions, and organizations that serve youth to report suspected child abuse. Following a child's disclosure of abuse or when one suspects that a child is or has been maltreated, how should one go about making a child abuse report, and who is required by law to make a report?

Incidents of child maltreatment exist in a variety of forms:

- Child neglect
- Physical child abuse
- Child abuse homicide
- Sexual child abuse
- Child sexual exploitation
- Emotional or psychological abuse
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Child maltreatment reporting laws vary from state by state. Some states designate specific individuals who are required to make child maltreatment reports. Other states designate that members of certain professions are mandated by law to report child maltreatment. In Oklahoma, state law designates ANY person who has reason to believe that a child is being abused or neglected, or is in danger of being abused or neglected, must report the suspicion of abuse. These "designated persons" are commonly referred to as mandated reporters.

In 1963, Idaho became the first state to require mandated reporting of child abuse to the child welfare authorities. The early state child abuse reporting laws focused heavily on the medical profession treating suspected serious physical abuse. It wasn't until the 1970s that incidents of sexual abuse required mandated reporting.

The circumstances under which a mandated reporter must make a report vary from state to state. Typically, a report must be made when the reporter, in his or her official capacity, suspects or has reason(s) to believe that a child has been abused or neglected. Another standard frequently used is whether the non-professional reporter has knowledge of conditions that one would reasonably believe could result in harm to the child. A child is defined as being a person less than 18 years of age.

In 1974, Congress enacted the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act or CAPTA in an effort to bring uniformity to the nation's child welfare system. The CAPTA legislation mandated that:

- Every state must have a Child Protective Service or CPS agency
- Every state must have statutes that define child maltreatment
- Every state must articulate how CPS will take reports and/or respond to child maltreatment

Recently, CAPTA and most states have expanded the definition of child maltreatment to include children born with and affected by illegal substances or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

If the suspected maltreatment involves a parent or a caretaker situation, one typically must make a report to the local Child Protective Service or CPS agency. In some States these agencies are called:

Department of Children and Family Services or DCFS; Department of Family and Children Services or DFCS; Department of Children and Family or DCF; Department of Human Services or DHS.

The Role of CPS

Many CPS agencies maintain a centralized toll-free telephone number or "Hotline" that operates 24 hours a day and seven days a week. The CPS agency also will retain a database of prior child maltreatment reports. CPS is responsible for immediately screening, evaluating, and classifying all reports of suspected child maltreatment or imminent risk. If the report contains enough information to warrant an investigation, many CPS and the local law enforcement agency will attempt to coordinate their activities by conducting a joint multi-disciplinary team or MDT investigation. The results of the investigation should determine whether child maltreatment has occurred and if so, who is responsible. As part of the CPS component of the investigation, CPS will assess the potential for further risk to the victim and siblings and finally offer follow-up services to the family.

Information for Making the Report

Some states designate CPS as the agency that accepts reports of suspected child abuse, while other states designate the local law enforcement agency. Some states designate both CPS and local law enforcement as the agencies to be notified of suspected child maltreatment.

When one is making a suspected child maltreatment report, one should provide as much of the following information as possible without questioning the child:

Names and addresses of the child, the parents, caregiver(s) or the person with whom the child is living

- Child's age, birth date and gender
- Names and ages of the siblings
- Nature and extent of injury, maltreatment or neglect
- Approximate date, time and the location where the injury, maltreatment or neglect occurred
- The circumstances in which the injuries, maltreatment or neglect became known to the reporter
- Previous injury, maltreatment or neglect of the child or siblings
- Name and address of the person suspected to have caused the injury, maltreatment or neglect and the relationship with the child
- Any action taken to treat or help the child
- Any other information the reporter believes would be helpful

Good Faith - Immunity

A concern often expressed is whether one who reports suspected child abuse might be sued. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Child Welfare Information Gateway, all of the States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands provide some form of immunity from liability for persons who, in good faith, report suspected instances of child abuse or neglect under the reporting laws. Immunity statutes are designed to protect reporters from civil or criminal liability. This protection is extended to both mandatory and voluntary reporters.

If a child has actually disclosed being abused, one should always tell the child that you believe the child and that you are going to contact some people who can help them. When speaking with the child, try not to display horror, shock, or voice any disapproval of the situation. Because the child will be required to tell their story, in detail, to investigating professionals, one does not need to press the child for any specifics. Remember, one only needs to suspect child maltreatment in order to make a report to the proper authorities.

Non-Mandated Reporters and Reporting Suspicions of Child Maltreatment

By Robert Hugh Farley, M.S.

While state law mandates many individuals and professions across the United States to report suspicions of child maltreatment, many individuals in the general public are not mandated to report suspected child maltreatment to the authorities. Nevertheless, if one thinks or believes a child has been harmed, reporting one's suspicion to the authorities as soon as possible is critical to protect a child.

Incidents of child maltreatment exist in a variety of forms:

- Child neglect
- Physical child abuse
- Child abuse homicide
- Sexual child abuse
- Child sexual exploitation
- Emotional or psychological abuse

Across the United States, state laws address reporting child abuse to the authorities when one has a suspicion that a child has been abused. One does not have to prove that the abuse actually occurred in order to make a report to the authorities.

For example, one may suspect child maltreatment has occurred if:

- A child says directly that he or she has been abused.
- A child says that he or she knows a child who is being abused or has been abused.
- A subordinate says that a child has notified him or her that a child is being abused or has been abused.
- A subordinate says that a staff member at a school frequently takes a child to secluded areas at the school for "private" one-on-one talks.
- A subordinate says that a staff member at a school frequently allows children to fish in his or her pockets for candy or treats.
- Direct observation of a child's peculiar behavior characteristics that leads you to suspect child abuse has occurred or is occurring.
- Direct observation of multiple injuries on a child, in various states of healing, leads you to suspect child abuse has occurred or is occurring.
- First hand background knowledge of a child's family life that appears to place children at risk leads you to suspect that child neglect has occurred or is occurring.
- An adult, such as a co-worker or neighbor, says he or she suspects a child is being abused or has been abused.
- Discovery of "troubling" digital images of children or what you suspect is possible child pornography on a computer, cell phone, or electronic device.

- Notification by another person that he or she has discovered “troubling” digital images of children or possible child pornography on a computer, cell phone, or electronic device.
- Suspicion that a troubled child is being “groomed” by an adult over the Internet. In this situation a report can be made to law enforcement from anywhere in the United States, 24 hours a day, by contacting the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Cyber Tipline at 800-843-5678 or www.cybertipline.com

Although this is not an exhaustive list of circumstances under which one might suspect child maltreatment, the list includes common scenarios that authorities across the United States will investigate. An immediate telephone call to the authorities, by a caring adult, will allow child abuse professionals, from a multi-disciplinary team (MDT), to either confirm or refute your suspicion that child maltreatment occurred.

It is not unusual for many adults to be reluctant when their observations lead to a suspicion of child abuse. Because many children react differently when abused, there is no single reaction that can be clearly associated with child abuse. There are, however, a number of possible child behaviors, such as self-mutilation or wariness of physical contact, that have been frequently associated with abuse. Exploring the behavioral indicators of child abuse that are identified in the many articles that are located on the VIRTUS website (www.virtus.org) may help to educate one on these possible indicators.

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Alternatively, an anonymous report can always be made to the authorities. Unfortunately, anonymous reports rarely provide the detailed information required by an investigator for a comprehensive investigation.

It is not the responsibility of the public, a school principal, an agency administrator, or a private attorney to conduct an investigation and decide whether child maltreatment has or has not occurred. Trained child abuse professionals will make that determination, and they are available in every state 24/7. One only needs to suspect child maltreatment in order to make a report to the proper authorities.