

Safe Environment - Online Training For Parents

Lesson 04

Training Yourself to Recognize the Behaviors of an Abuser

(From Virtus.org, August 2004)

Being a good witness can mean having a "good eye" and "good ear" for information. It can mean being "articulate" and "presentable". It can mean being "credible" and "believable". It can mean being "neutral" and "unbiased". And, all of these issues are important to different degrees, depending on the specific role you are playing as a witness. But, when it comes to protecting children from sexual abuse, the first and perhaps most important meaning is, simply, training yourself to look for warning signs of abuse, remembering at least the general details of anything that looks suspicious, and reporting those details to someone who is in a position to investigate, possibly verify your suspicions, and to intervene if necessary.

This is helping you to more easily and effectively recognize the warning signs of a potential sexual abuser. These skills can help you to be more effective in preventing child sexual abuse in your community.

Learning Opportunities

Each of us has multiple opportunities, every day, to practice being a good witness and a good responder to possible child sexual abuse. We suggest using the following opportunities to *train* yourself to be a better witness:

- During your commute -- if you use mass transit to commute to work (but definitely NOT if you are driving).
- When you are walking in an area filled with other people.
- On an elevator.
- In the entryway or lobby of a crowded building.
- At a restaurant, supermarket, convenience store, mall, or other crowded shopping venue.

Recognizing the Major Warning Signs

To recognize a child sexual abuser, adults in the community must develop a healthy suspicion about each and every adult who spends time with children. We must know the behavioral warning signs of a potential abuser, and be alert to the possibility that someone in our community -- our neighborhood, our church, our school, and even our family -- may be a sex abuser.

Those who abuse children rarely fit the stereotype of a suspicious looking stranger who hides in the shadows. Generally, abusers are warm, friendly, and engaging people who -- aside from their sexual attraction to children -- may be law-abiding citizens, responsible family members, and leaders in their respective communities. A person's appearance provides virtually no value in identifying them as a sex abuser. Instead, we must focus on the behavioral warning signs of an abuser, and we must learn to see the warning signs

wherever they present themselves -- regardless of the physical appearance or "identity" of the person exhibiting those signs.

The five major warning signs of a child sexual abuser include, someone who:

- Always seems more excited to be with children than to be with adults and/or always wants to be alone with children.
- Gives gifts to children without permission, and encourages them to keep secrets from their parents and guardians.
- Goes overboard in touching children.
- Thinks rules don't apply to him or her.
- Lets children do things their parents would not allow them to do.

Remember: The typical molester is no easier to identify by sight than the typical doctor, the typical schoolteacher, or the typical parent. Because there is no "typical" child molester, we must look for the behavioral indications that someone is a potential risk to children.

To make the exercise most effective, I recommend selecting a specific warning sign and focusing on that specific warning sign for two or three consecutive days. Every two or three days you should change your "practice" warning sign. Continue to juggle the warning signs until you've spent two or three days of practice observing the behavior of others for each of the major warning signs.

Because each of the warning signs, by itself, can have a wide range of different meanings, you'll simply be using this process to sharpen your ability to collect information about those around you. However, you may begin to notice that certain individuals -- complete strangers, or even close friends and family members -- may exhibit *more than one* of the sex abuser warning signs. Again, it is possible that someone could exhibit all of the warning signs, and still not be a sex abuser. However, the rule of thumb is: the more warning signs that an individual exhibits, the greater the need to observe that person's behavior more closely -- especially when that individual is interacting with children.

Brought to you by the National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc. and its VIRTUS® programs with the goal to help prevent, address, and mitigate wrongdoing in the community of faith. Its programs are designed to help adults become protectors of children and to help communities become safe havens for children. The VIRTUS® programs marshal expert resources to develop, implement, maintain, and evaluate solutions that both embody and incorporate the Catholic Church's moral leadership and responsibility for service.