

Parent Alert: Public Persona Does Not Mean a Person Is Safe with Children

The VIRTUS® Programs

Police obtained a search warrant for a woman's home after a man reported seeing pornography on her computer. The search uncovered the pornography and evidence of pedophilia. She was arrested and charged with sexual exploitation of children.

The perpetrator is well known and associated with a national not-for-profit and other organizations. The perpetrator is being held on multiple charges and is accused of transporting a teen girl to Canada where the teen was forced to engage in sexual acts with another individual while being videotaped. Federal prosecutors claim to have uncovered other juveniles who were subjected to similar sexual acts by the woman, as well as witnesses who report seeing her with cocaine, ecstasy, and marijuana.

The perpetrator also sat on the board of directors at Mount Zion Christian Schools. "Anti-Gay Lawyer Arrested for Sexual Exploitation of Children," *www.jdjjournal.com* (Nov. 23, 2012).

One of the most difficult aspects of child protection is that child predators do not fit into one easily recognized category, but one characteristic many do share is the ability to manipulate others into trusting them. This gives perpetrators easier access to children.

In this case, the offender positioned herself as an authority figure in the legal community, in her religious community, in her activist community, and in the educational community with her involvement on the school's board of directors. The school position gave her perceived respectability and easier access to minors.

Parents and caregivers must never assume that a person is safe just because he or she is a person of authority, has the respect of the community, and appears to have the best interest of families and children in mind.

Child predators can be anyone. They are young or old, of all socio-economic classes, educated or uneducated, non-professional and professional, and of any race or gender. Although the great majority of child sexual predators are male, this case demonstrates it is important for parents and caregivers to realize that females also sexually abuse minors. Most offenders are people we think we know, trust, and see often.

The best means for preventing child sexual abuse is evaluating the day-to-day interaction adults have with children. Safe adults must regularly evaluate all adults and adolescents who have contact with children.

In many high-profile child abuse cases, a common thread is the number of adults who may have suspected abuse or actually witnessed the abuse. It is critical, and often a legal requirement, that adults report any suspicious behavior, even when exhibited by someone who seems an unlikely offender.

Although we cannot assume that individuals with certain characteristics are child predators, indicators coupled with suspicious behavior can put safe adults on alert.

Here are some signs to watch for that may indicate a person who is not safe to be alone with a child:

- A person who spends an inordinate amount of time with the child, especially time alone with the child;
- A person who shows an unusual interest in the child, while possibly ignoring other children;
- A person who makes frequent offers to watch the child for the parent or caregiver;
- A person who seeks to take the child on trips away from the parent or caregiver;
- A person who provides the child with special treatment or gifts without the parent's or caregiver's permission;
- A person who makes special efforts to appear trustworthy to the parents or caregivers;
- A person who acts like a child, talks like a child, or does childish things;
- A person who allows a child to ignore or bend the rules of his or her parents or caregivers;
- A person who spends more time with one child in particular than with other children or adults;
- A person who contradicts or demeans the child's parents or caregivers to the child; and/or
- A person who takes pictures of the child or of other children who are not his or her own.

Brought to you through 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 and to help adults become protectors of children and to help communities become safe havens for children.