

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.”

“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.

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