

New Hurdles to Communicating

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It is not surprising that adults often have a difficult time communicating concerns about suspicious behavior to other adults in their environment. It can be difficult to believe that anyone we trust could harm our children. As a result, some may excuse, minimize, and sometimes even justify inappropriate or risky behavior to dismiss these concerns. And, if we do recognize these concerns, there are considerations that can influence the decision of whether to speak up.

Among the considerations we have discussed in the past are:

1. The fear that we are “wrong” about the person’s intentions and, therefore, raising the concern will embarrass both of us unnecessarily,
2. The fear of retaliation either through legal action such as slander or libel lawsuits filed against us or through retaliatory actions taken against us or members of our family by the adult in question in reaction to the communication of a concern,
3. The anxiety that it is not our business and we shouldn’t to be in the middle of a situation that does not involve us or our children, and
4. The fear that others in the family or group will now see us as troublemakers and react by ostracizing us in some way.

According to social workers and others providing support to adults who have serious concerns about unsafe behaviors seen in another, a new “reason” for not communicating concerns is raising its ugly head.

In today’s tough economic climate, families sometimes find themselves depending on other members of the family for financial support. In addition, those that still have jobs are often living in fear of losing their job. With double-digit unemployment and no real improvement to the job situation in sight, adults with jobs are focused on how to keep them, and those who have lost jobs are working to find a job and support their families in the meantime—including relying on financial support from other family members.

If the person whose behavior raises concern is a boss or someone with control over job security or a family member who is providing financial support, there is a real fear that speaking up can threaten that support. The choice some are facing seems unthinkable. The choice, as they see it is, either communicate and make clear a commitment to the child’s safety realizing there can be dire financial consequences that also threaten the child’s safety and well being, or keep quiet and risk turning a blind eye to potential child abuse.

If facing this situation, it is important to remember that these are not the only options available. The answer may be somewhere in between the two ends of this spectrum. It may be possible to protect the child without risking other negative consequences.

VIRTUS® and the *Protecting God’s Children*® program teach us that there are many ways to communicate our concerns without confronting someone. Creating family or organizational rules that establish an atmosphere of openness and limit one-on-one access to children by adults conveys a message to others about the importance of safety.

It is also possible to let others know that you pay careful attention to any children in the environment and keep an eye out for anything that might appear risky or threatening to them. Letting other adults know that they are being monitored can serve as a deterrent to inappropriate behavior.

If these alternative methods of dealing with the concern do not affect the way the adult interacts with children, a more direct approach will be necessary. In the event that you believe that a child is being or has been abused, as always, there is only one acceptable action— report the suspected abuse to your state child protection services. We have both a legal and moral responsibility to interrupt abusive situations and protect children from adults who prey on them.

However, when the adult's behavior is such that it causes concern but there is no evidence that a child is being or has been abused, finding ways to intervene in the situation that protect children and point out risky behavior can help alleviate the concern and, at the same time, create a safer environment. After all, preventing harm is the goal.

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