

How Can We Prevent Sexual Abuse If We Don't Know Who is Doing It?

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Dr. David Finkelhor, a leading child sexual abuse expert, states that there are four conditions necessary for child sexual abuse to occur.

1. The offender has the desire for sexual contact with a child.
2. The offender does nothing to inhibit the desire.
3. There is an opportunity to offend without being stopped by others.
4. The offender is able to overcome the resistance of the victim.

All four conditions must exist in order for abuse to occur. As adults, our best opportunity to intervene is at step three—interfering with a potential abuser's plans by prudently supervising and carefully monitoring children and their programs.

Child molesters seek to spend time alone with children. Because they need privacy, they aggressively identify places where they can take a child without being noticed. There are several ways that caring adults can interfere with this aspect of the sex offender's plan:

1. Tour church and school buildings and identify secluded areas where an abuser can isolate a child from others. Designate these areas as "off limits," and routinely check these areas for signs that someone is or has been using the area. To assist in this endeavor, install motion sensitive lighting and simple alarm systems designed to alert those "in charge" when someone is present.
2. Let children know where they can and cannot go, and enforce those rules.
3. Never meet individually with a child in a secluded area. Adults who meet individually with children must do so in an open area where others can see them or could walk in unannounced.
4. Conduct frequent, random spot checks of children's programs to ensure compliance with the child safety rules.
5. Establish and enforce policies and procedures regarding interactions between adults and children, such as:

Physical contact with children should occur (a) only when such contact is nonsexual and otherwise appropriate, and (b) never in private.

At least two adults must be present when transporting children to and from church- or school-related activities.

Clergy should not allow individual young people to stay overnight in the cleric's private accommodations or residence.

Staff and volunteers should not provide shared, private, overnight accommodation for individual young people including, but not limited to, accommodations in any Church-owned facility, private residence, hotel room, or any other place where there is no other adult supervision present.

In rare, emergency situations, when accommodation is necessary for the health and well-being of the child or youth, the clergy, staff, or volunteer should take extraordinary care to

protect all parties from the appearance of impropriety and from all risk of harm. Use a team approach in emergency situations.

There is virtually nothing that adults can do to impact an offender's desire to have sexual contact with a child or to take the necessary actions to inhibit that desire. However, offenders will get the message that any attempt to abuse a child will be discovered if you limit their opportunities to commit abuse. Heightened awareness, random spot checking of programs, and keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings can prevent irreparable harm to a child, a family, and the entire community.

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