



HOW TO IDENTIFY AND PREVENT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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“Children are a heritage from the Lord.” (Psalm 127:3a.)

Approximately one in five children will experience some form of sexual abuse before they reach their 18th birthday. Think about that for a minute. How many children live on your block? How many play on your child’s sports team? How many attend your church’s Sunday School classes? Statistically speaking, approximately 20% of the children you have contact with as you go about your daily life will be sexually abused. This is not a problem we as the Church can ignore in our families and in our communities.

Christians need to educate themselves about child sexual abuse so that they can identify signs of possible abuse and work to protect children before abuse occurs. What follows is some information that will assist adults in identifying and preventing child sexual abuse.

What are some of the warning signs that a child has been abused?

People often expect that a sexually abused child will act in a certain way, but the reality is children do not all respond to sexual abuse in one uniform way.

- Some become incredibly withdrawn, like a turtle pulling back into its shell.
- Some act out sexually or in other ways.
- Others resort to self-harm.

In sum, there is no one “right” way for a child to process the harm done by an abuser.

Additionally, you should not expect a child to immediately disclose abuse or to be perfectly honest in his or her first communications about abuse. There are many reasons why a child might want to keep the abuse secret, including (unwarranted) feelings of shame or the desire for self-protection.

That said, an adult, friend, classmate, or sibling who has regular contact with a child is in a unique position to identify signs or symptoms of abuse, such as unexplained changes in a child’s behavior.

- Is there a teenager in your Young Life group who has inexplicably become anti-social or withdrawn?
- Did you notice one of your child’s friends has suddenly started wearing long sleeves and pants year-round, even when it’s 118 degrees outside?

- Has a niece or nephew begun acting out when around a particular relative?
- Does your child no longer want to go over to a friend's house for sleepovers?

These examples are not objective evidence of abuse, but they are examples of subjective criteria that should put an adult or friend on alert that something might be amiss with that child.

How can we identify a sexual predator?

Most perpetrators don't dress up like the ice cream truck man and lure children into a vehicle using a lollipop and a puppy. This is perhaps the image we first think of with predators. But most often the predator is an adult who knows the child personally and likely also knows the child's family. Having access to the child, the predator will look for opportunities to groom the child. "Grooming" simply means that the predator gradually gains the trust and even love of the child over time and then uses that trust for nefarious purposes.

This doesn't mean you should be suspicious of every adult who takes a special interest in your child. However, one red flag you should watch out for is an adult who eagerly seeks out opportunities to be alone with your child. Also, if your child doesn't want to talk about the adult or indicates that the adult swore them to secrecy, you should inquire further. Again, these are not necessarily objective criteria of grooming, but they are signs you should probe further and be on alert for other grooming behaviors.

Where does abuse occur?

Abuse occurs anywhere and everywhere! A recent news account told of a mother and 11-year-old daughter who were shopping at a local Hobby Lobby. While they were preoccupied with craft supplies, an older gentleman was following them around the store filming the 11-year-old girl. This video evidence was eventually discovered after he exposed himself to the child. He had a history of traveling around the country engaging in lewd acts with children.

Yes, it happens in public places, and it also happens in private places – after-school programs, science camps, and even church functions. It can even happen in your own home when you're not watching.

What can parents do to protect their children from abuse?

Here's the good news. Parents can protect their kids by empowering them to speak out before sexual abuse occurs. Train your children to tell you if an adult or another child is doing or saying things that make them feel uncomfortable (e.g., offering them alcohol or access to media with adult content, or having inappropriate conversations with them). We must tell children it's okay to speak out!

Understandably, many Christian parents think the best way to protect their children is to "shelter" them from the knowledge that horrible things like this occur in the world. But you cannot completely shield your kids from all the perversion in the world. They absolutely will run into it when you are not there to protect them. Your failure to engage in this uncomfortable topic with your child advantages the predator and disadvantages your child. Victims who have never had this open dialogue with their parents often feel shame or fear that they will get in trouble or that they did something wrong, especially in the early grooming stages. The only thing your children will have to keep themselves safe is their own voice. Don't parent out of fear; empower your children to speak out when they see or hear or experience signs that a sexual predator has begun the grooming process or that another child has been abused. ("For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." II Tim. 1:7.)

Are there extra precautions we should take concerning the Internet?

In 2020, there was a 98% increase in online attempts by sex traffickers trying to recruit children.

Parents put parental controls on their iPads, and then set their kids down on the couch to watch a show and think their kids are safe. Do you think predators are not also watching Dora on YouTube and looking for ways to post in the comments section? Of course they are. You cannot fully protect your kids from everything that exists on the Internet. But you can give them a voice.

Teach your children not to post details about their home address, school, or other location information online and to never add adults (or adults posing as children) as their new "friends." Encourage them to include you in the process of adding new "friends."

Be careful about which photos and videos you post of your children online. Some of your Facebook friends will not view your children with love and innocence. Be thoughtful about the clothing your children are wearing and the activities they are engaged in before you post a photograph or video.

When should we start communicating about these topics with our kids?

You should begin having these conversations with your children from the first time you begin talking about stranger danger. The conversation should, of course, reflect the age and maturity of your child. I have personally seen abuse of children as young as three years of age. We cannot wait until our children are in junior high to start the dialogue. Think about that 11-year-old girl in the Hobby Lobby. If her mom had been having conversations with her about speaking out in uncomfortable situations since she was very young, her reaction to this situation might be: "Mom, this is the kind of person you've been telling me about, and we spoke up and reported, and he got arrested, and now kids are safe!" How empowered she might feel knowing she had a voice that allowed her to be a hero in that moment!

What can we do to protect other kids, not just our own, from falling victim to sexual abuse?

This isn't just about our kids; it's about kids in our neighborhood, churches, schools, and communities. Phoenix is a hub for child sex trafficking. If you know a child who might be vulnerable to abuse because of, for instance, things going on in that child's home life, invite him or her over for family dinner a couple nights a week. Give them a safe space to feel loved and valued. Without overstepping the parental role, give that child a voice. Let them know you are a listening ear. Perhaps you can be their safe place to report grooming activities so that you can intervene before abuse occurs. If you have concerns about a child's safety, it is better to speak out and be wrong than to stay silent and be right.

You can and should also equip your own children to speak out when they have concerns about their peers.

What should we do if we suspect a child has been abused?

If a child discloses anything about physical or sexual abuse, call the police immediately. Don't spend a lot of time getting lots of details from the child about what happened. That's what forensic interviewers do for a living, and you don't want to interfere with a police investigation.

Aside from calling the police, you can play one other important role in that child's life: tell him or her you believe what he or she is saying. It is extremely rare for a young child to fabricate a tale about sexual abuse. I cannot stress enough how life-changing it is for a child who has been abused to be believed by the first adult he or she discloses to.

How does a child heal from sexual abuse?

God still performs miracles today. He can miraculously heal a victim's mind, heart and soul to bind up the wounds caused by sexual abuse. Seek counseling. This is not a path that anyone should journey down alone.

God also redeems our tragic life circumstances and turns them into good ("As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." Gen. 50:20a.) Someone who has been a victim is often more sensitive to the signs of abuse in children. God might be calling you to be a hero and to save other children from abuse.

Lacy Cooper served 15 years as both a county and federal prosecutor targeting child sexual predators, violent offenders, gang members, cartels, and terrorists. Most recently, she served as the Border Security Section Chief for the United States Attorney's Office for the District of Arizona. She is now Of Counsel with the law firm of Schmitt Schneck Even & Williams where she advises churches how to respond when instances of child sexual abuse are disclosed.

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