



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

Parent involvement is critical to an effective Abuse Prevention program. Parent involvement is critical because: (1) a parent who is educated about child sexual abuse knows the signs and symptoms of abuse and can watch for those signs their own and other children; (2) a parent who is educated about child sexual abuse can talk with their own children about personal safety; and (3) a parent who is educated about child sexual abuse can understand what to watch for in the behavior of adults or older children that could be signals of a potential abuser. This educational brochure gives parents ideas on how to talk to kids about personal safety, and tells parents what to watch for in potential abusers.

Talking to Kids

Talking about child sexual abuse is sometimes uncomfortable for many people, even in adult conversations. Thus, discomfort with the idea of talking to children about the issue makes many parents shy away from such discussions. Yet experts say that parents are one of the single most effective tools in the fight against child sexual abuse. Parents who talk with their children about personal safety can be extremely effective in assuring that their children do not become victims. Here are some tips for parents who want to talk with their children about this delicate subject.

- ***It is not about sex!*** Remember that most children, especially at younger ages, do not understand sexual concepts, so when you talk about this issue, you will not be discussing “sex” with the child. Instead, the focus is on personal safety.
- ***Talk about safety!*** Use opportunities to discuss other kinds of safety issues as a way to discuss this issue as well. There are many times when you talk to your children about looking both ways when crossing the street, what to do if there is a fire, etc. This discussion with your child is simply another low-key opportunity to make sure they understand what they can do to keep themselves safe.
- ***Read to your kids.*** Purchase or obtain a book that addresses the issue in child-like terms. Use this to go over the safety rules with your child. For example, free coloring books are available from SANE Solutions in Boise, along with a parent handbook that explains how to talk with children. Copies of these books can be obtained from the Diocese.
- ***Teach your children.*** Teach your children: (1) to trust their own feelings; (2) that they have the right to say NO when something feels wrong; (3) no one should be able to touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable; (4) places on their body that are covered by their swimsuits are private and just for them, except for when a parent helps them stay clean or a parent or doctor helps them stay healthy; (5) if any touches make them feel uncomfortable, they should tell someone immediately; (6) no one should ever ask the child to keep a secret from their parents, and if that happens, he or she should tell a parent or teacher right away; (7) teach your children the rules of safety in navigating the Internet (avoiding dangerous websites, not giving out personal information, not trusting everything someone says on the web, etc.)

Other Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Abuse

- ***Educate Yourself!!*** Understand the problem so that you are not misled by myths and misperceptions. In last month's parent education handout, a list of websites was provided. Use these references to become informed about the facts of abuse.
- ***Understand the Causes.*** Understand the causes of abuse, so that you are more able to spot potential safety issues with your children.
- ***Supervise Your Children.*** Children who are less supervised are more at risk for abuse. Know where your children are, who they are with, and what they are doing. Understand the supervision being provided, and make sure you know who those people are. Monitor those relationships.
- ***Give Children Permission to Refuse Touching.*** Allow children to say no when they don't feel like being kissed by "Great Uncle Roger." This gives children the idea that they have the right to refuse to be touched.
- ***Let the Children Talk.*** Be approachable and sensitive to your children's need to talk.
- ***Play!*** Observe children play and play with them. This is sometimes the way that children tell you what they are feeling.

Understanding Potential Abuser Behavior

The following information is excerpted from the book *Identifying Child Molesters: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse by Recognizing the Patterns of the Offenders*, Carla Van Dam, PHD, The Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press, 2001. This information is provided so that parents can be more familiar with patterns to look for in those people who interact with their children. This book is an excellent source of information, and a summary of the research to date on the issue of identification of child molesters. It should be read and interpreted with caution to avoid overreaction to any vague similarities some of the information in the book. The following is a brief summary of information about a process called "grooming," which is an organized progressive rapport some molesters try to establish with children to engage a child in sexual activity.

In this summary, the molester is referred to in the male gender given the realization that the majority of child molesters are male.

The "Grooming" Process

Studies show that child molesters go through a "grooming" process, which can sometimes take months or years, in an effort to facilitate molestations. The grooming process generally involves the following elements:

- (1) **Sexual attraction to children:** This may be a pre-existing condition in the molester, and can occur for many different reasons.
- (2) **Justification of interest:** The molester often goes through a psychological process of justifying his attraction to children. This is described further below. This is a process of breaking down the molester's own psychological boundaries to allow the molestation to occur.

- (3) **Grooming of adult community:** Often the molester will go through a process of getting the adult community that surrounds the child to accept and even welcome the molester's involvement with the child. This is also described further below.
- (4) **Grooming of child:** This is a process the molester goes through to break down the child's resistance to sexual activity and to engage the child in the activity.

Justification of interest

- This process of justifying the behavior is sometimes called neutralization. This is the psychological effort the molester goes through to justify the behavior to himself, and to break down any emotional barrier in himself which would prevent him from acting upon his sexual attraction to children.
- Denial of injury: The molester denies to himself, and perhaps to others, that any injury to the child could occur. The molester tells himself things like "This is my way of showing love to the child, I don't want to hurt the child." Many molesters lead themselves to believe that they are helping the child by showing love.
- Denial of victimization: The molester also denies that the child is a victim, instead choosing to view the child as actively wanting to engage in sexual activity.
- Condemnation of dissension: Many molesters actively argue against any societal view that child abuse is wrong.
- More enlightened viewpoint: Molesters will often take the position that their view is in fact the more enlightened view.

Grooming of The Adult Community

Child molesters will often ingratiate themselves with the adult community surrounding the child, and break down any barriers that exist to access to the child. This includes exhibiting behaviors such as:

- Friendliness, often excessive or patronizing of children or their caregivers
- Ingratiating activity such as doing favors, helping out when no one has asked for help, etc.
- Targeting vulnerable families, such as those with alcohol problems, or single mothers

Grooming Children

The child molester will often groom a particular child using techniques which:

- Choose the most vulnerable child (see below)
- Engage the child in peer-like activities (playing with the children, playing games, etc.)
- Desensitization of child to touching (see below);
- Isolating the child (see below); and
- Making the child feel responsible and thus less likely to disclose the abuse.

A Vulnerable Child

A vulnerable child, and thus a child more likely to be a target of abuse, often has several of the following characteristics:

- Needy (and thus vulnerable to positive attention)
- Quiet (and thus less likely to tell)
- Craves attention (and thus vulnerable to attention)
- Younger (less likely to understand or tell)
- Picked on by other children (and thus needing a friend)

- Low self esteem (and thus vulnerable to the positive reinforcement of the molester)
- Trusting (and thus less likely to understand the danger)
- Compliant (and thus vulnerable to an adult telling them it is okay)
- Eager to please (vulnerable to engaging in activity if they are told it is pleasing to the adult)
- A single parent (thus the child generally needs attention and the parent is grateful for the help)
- Unsupervised (and thus vulnerable to the attention of the molester).

Desensitization

The molester will often go through a process of desensitizing the child to the touch of the molester by engaging in the following types of activity:

- Tickling games;
- Wrestling;
- Roughhousing;
- Physical-picking up, carrying child, using this as an opportunity to test the child's reaction to touch;
- Testing child's reaction slowly---if the child balks at the touch the molester will back off and continue the grooming process
- Testing whether child will tell---if the child tells, the molester will know to move to another child.

Of course, there may be very innocent explanations for many of the activities noted above. This list is intended only to generally describe the process of grooming that may be engaged in by a child molester. Such activities should be interpreted cautiously, but with increasing vigilance if observed, and acted upon if repetitious.