

ONE CHILD INTERNATIONAL

SPEAKING OUT FOR THOSE
WHO CAN'T - CHILDREN

Best practices for the safety of children and those who work with them

Children, left alone with adults who are not their parents, run the risk of sexual abuse. How do we protect them?

As with medical professionals dealing with infectious diseases, standard precautions are the best option by treating everyone as though they are at risk. It protects the child and the adult working with them.

Let's first define what a child is.

Under State and Federal laws a child is anyone under the age of 18. That includes infants, babies, small children, pre-pubescent children, post-pubescent children and teenagers. That's quite a range of development when you think about it. Every single age-group is at risk for sexual abuse from those who view them as sexual objects.

History has amply demonstrated that allowing a child to be alone with an unsupervised adult is the single greatest risk. Clergy, sports coaches, therapists, teachers, doctors, dentists, babysitters, adolescents; you name the occupation, and you will find it has been used as a gateway to the molestation of children.

Protection policies

Parents are responsible for the safety of their children. They should make themselves aware of the child protection policies of the sports, social, cultural and religious groups that their children are involved with. And make it their business to ensure that they are followed to the letter.

Chaperoning is the first line of best practice in this area. Children who go on any organized trips need to be chaperoned by parents in addition to the trip organizers. Chaperoning requires a minimum of two designated parents to be present; more are better. This includes sports events, sports training, excursions, school trips etc.

For professionals who see children the onus is on them to remove the risk. For example, responsible doctors who see children have a nurse or parent present - they are never alone. Similarly therapists have parents wait in an adjacent room, and should record every session on video. Others ensure that they see the child in an area where there are other adults present.

This won't work for every child as many children do not live with their biological parents and this is where we find gaps in child protection.

Take, for example, foster care. It is riddled with loopholes allowing access to children as are ancillary services. The child has to be alone with the foster parent; they live there after all. As such they are at risk, not only from the foster parents but anyone else that the child comes in contact with; case workers, neighbors, the extended foster family, family friends and volunteers. We cannot assume that foster homes and foster children are not magnets for sex offenders; for some they are, as are the professions that have contact with them. Even the best pre-screening and on-going monitoring cannot stop a determined offender. Not allowing unaccompanied access to the child can.

Likewise volunteers or child advocates who deal with children should never have time alone with a child. Their visits should be witnessed by another adult. "Witnessed" means another adult is present in the room or meeting area, visible to the visitor and child, and out of earshot to ensure privacy for the child. Their names should be noted in the visit records.

Some argue against this pointing out that it may diminish the opportunity the child has to talk freely with the visitor. Handled sensitively that should not be the case. Consider this: what if a child, following an unsupervised or un-witnessed visit, makes a complaint of sexual abuse (verbal, touching, molestation, rape or sexual suggestion) against the

visitor? At a minimum a criminal investigation will take place to determine the validity of the complaint.

If the person's time with the child was un-witnessed, how can they truly defend themselves against an accusation if it is false? They can't unless the child admits to a false report. Law enforcement proceedings aside, the incident will be recorded in the volunteer's or case-worker's file, both of which are open to public scrutiny regardless of the outcome.

Sex offenders do get into the child care system and many, perhaps most, are never caught. They know how to use the system and their authority within it to their advantage. Some molest children because they think they love them and see nothing wrong with what they're doing. Jerry Sandusky for an excellent example. Background checks of staff or volunteers only bring a result if there is a record to begin with.

Allowing a child to be alone with an adult creates huge liability for any child-caring organization. Organizations know in advance that opportunities to offend will present themselves yet some continue to deny the risk and allow opportunities for an adult to be alone with a child. This single issue could destroy an otherwise valuable organization.

One Child International's Standard Precautions for Child Protection.

1. Children should not be alone with an adult outside the immediate family. Ensuring this is the parent's, legal-guardian or care-giver's responsibility.
2. Any organization or individuals who have contact with children should have a chaperoning policy written into their by-laws or manuals that should be strictly adhered to. This is the parent's and organizations responsibility.
3. Visits to children in foster care by case-workers or volunteers should always, without exception, be witnessed by another person or recorded on camera.

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