

A matter of trust: How to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse

There are ways for parents and youth organizations to reduce the chances of children being abused.

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No matter how hard we try to protect our children from abuse, there are no guarantees.

That's a scary realization for Berks County organizations built to help young people, and for the parents who trust them to take care of their children.

But there are clear ways for those groups and for parents to greatly reduce the chances of someone hurting a child.

The nightmarish abuse reports involving Penn State and The Second Mile foundation prove how important those steps are, experts say, and there are already signs of higher awareness.

ChildLine, the state's hot line for reporting suspected child abuse, on average gets 2,300 calls within a typical five-day span.

That number more than doubled in the five days after the scandal broke, with ChildLine receiving 4,832 calls.

"An intolerance for the maltreatment of children ought to be second nature," said George Kovarie, director of Berks County Children and Youth Services. "If that wasn't already the case, this is an opportunity to change the way our community thinks."

What can parents do?

The Berks district attorney's office already has investigated more than 500 allegations of child abuse this year, referred to prosecutors by police, ChildLine, Children and Youth Services, schools, hospitals and individuals.

More than 400 of those reports involved abuse of a sexual nature.

To help reduce those numbers, parents should start talking with their children when they are 2 or 3, teaching them the difference between "good touch" and "bad touch," and those conversations should continue as children get older, said county Detective Sgt. Gerardo Vega, who leads the child abuse unit of the district attorney's office.

"You don't want to interrogate your children and scare them, but just talk to them about their day," he said. "Also look for changes in behavior. If they have any issues, make sure you pay attention."

Susan E. Kraus, a Reading-based psychologist who specializes in treating sexual abusers, said children, like adults, have difficulty talking about sensitive subjects such as touching and sex. Parents should make sure their children know it is OK to speak up if anyone touches them in any way.

The message from the parent, she said, should be: "I want you to tell me. I won't be mad at you."

Parents should play an active role in children's lives, said Dr. Maria McColgan, pediatric adviser for Prevent Child Abuse Pennsylvania.

About 90 percent of sexual abuse cases are committed by a person the child knows, she said. While most youth

organization employees and volunteers are not abusers, it's crucial that parents pay close attention to the groups their children join.

Get to know the staff and ask them about their procedures. Make sure they call you if they suspect a problem. And don't just drop your child off, but get involved so you can observe how things are done.

If somebody is trying to spend time with a child, away from other people and away from the family, the parents should look at that person carefully, McColgan said.

"You need to be very, very wary of whom you allow your child to be around," said April Reed Schmehl, vice president of Children's Alliance Center in Reading. "I think we tend to be too trusting."

Parents should be aware of behavioral signs that might indicate their child has suffered abuse by a particular adult, such as if their child suddenly becomes withdrawn around that person, Schmehl said.

People typically are uncomfortable with confrontation and may hesitate to report possible abuse. That's a mistake, Kovarie said.

"If you get a bad vibe about something, chances are something isn't right," he said. "Listen to your gut. And if you're going to make a mistake, make it in favor of a child."

That means calling professionals trained to investigate such matters - the local police, ChildLine, children and youth services, or the district attorney's office.

What can organizations do?

The first step for youth organizations should be conducting criminal and child abuse background checks on employees and volunteers, even though state law doesn't require those checks on volunteers, said Cathleen Palm of Bernville, executive director of the Protect Our Children Committee of Pennsylvania.

Only 4 percent of sex offenders have criminal backgrounds, so those checks won't weed out all potential predators.

Organizations should train staff and volunteers about the signs of child abuse so everyone is educated and aware the organization is looking out for it, said sociologist David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center in New Hampshire.

The groups should educate children and parents so they know exactly what appropriate behavior is, he said.

Organizations should watch for clues that an adult has an excessive interest in a certain child, such as locking the door when the adult and child are alone in a room or bringing a surprising number of gifts for the child, Kraus said.

Number of cases declining

Cases of child sex abuse have declined greatly since 1992, according to The Associated Press. One study by the Department of Health and Human Services showed a more than 55 percent drop between 1992, when sex abuse cases peaked at about 150,000, to 2009, when there were about 66,000 cases.

The National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, a congressionally mandated study, said the number of sexually abused children decreased from 217,000 in 1993 to 135,300 in 2006, a 38 percent drop.

While some child care advocates are skeptical about those decreases, others say increased efforts to stop abuse are working, and hope the attention drawn by the Penn State crisis will help further.

Adults must remember it's up to them to protect children, who are often too vulnerable to protect themselves, said Anne Bale, spokeswoman for the ChildCare hot line.

"If you see something or hear something, say something," she said. "Don't hesitate."

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