

Penn State Scandal: Can We Trust Coaches with Our Kids?

By Bonnie Rochman Thursday, November 10, 2011

As Penn State reels from a sex-abuse scandal that led Wednesday to the ousters of Joe Paterno, the winningest coach in major college football, and university president Graham Spanier, parents are left wondering whom to trust.

We're pondering what to say to our children about the X-rated details and how to say it. We're uneasy because every day, we cart our kids to soccer practice, to Little League, to gymnastics, leaving them in the hands of adults we often don't know very well but assume have our children's best interests at heart. In theory, they do.

PHOTOS: Riots Rock Penn State After Firing of Paterno

In a report on Paterno's dismissal on Wednesday, TIME's Sean Gregory plucked a salient quote from *Paterno By The Book*, the coach's 1989 autobiography. "Coaches have the same obligations as all teachers," wrote Paterno, 84. "Except that we may have more moral and life-shaping influence over our players than anyone else outside of their families."

As Gregory noted, "no one fumbled" that moral influence worse than Paterno, by failing to report to the authorities alleged sexual abuse by a former Penn State defensive coach, Jerry Sandusky. Kids are taught to respect authority figures like Sandusky, who more than 30 years ago launched The Second Mile, a charity for troubled children. Sandusky is accused of molesting at least eight boys he met through the program.

Ironic? Hardly. It's the modus operandi for most sex offenders, who purport to assist, nurture and advise children. The mission of The Second Mile, according to the grand jury that indicted Sandusky on 40 counts of sexually inappropriate encounters with minors, is to "help children who need additional support and would benefit from positive human interaction." First sexual predators gain the trust of children and their parents. Then they take advantage.

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If coaches teach hard work, perseverance and discipline, then it's up to parents to teach equally complex lessons — about what kinds of touches are appropriate (yes to high-fives) and which are not (no to pats on the posterior — or worse). A simplified standard: no touches where your bathing suit covers. Yet many parents are reluctant to start a conversation for fear they'll scare their children.

There's no need to hype worst-case scenarios, says Alison Feigh, community safety specialist for the National Child Protection Training Center. Instead, talk with older children about acknowledging

their "gut instinct" and with younger children about how to recognize their "uh-oh feeling." If a touch makes them feel uncomfortable, it's worth informing a trusted adult. "Use teachable moments," says Feigh. "You're not going to bring up Penn State with a 3-year-old. But we know it's older kids, 12-to-17-year-olds, who are more at risk. So don't stop talking about personal safety when your kids get out of elementary school."

If you raise the subject matter-of-factly, emphasizing that most people in this world aren't out to harm children, most kids will take it in stride, says Lenore Skenazy, who writes Free-Range Kids, a popular blog about raising fearless, independent children. "A story like the Penn State guy reminds us that we can let our kids go out in the world and yet we should also teach them what to do if they are ever harassed," wrote Skenazy in an email. "Teaching them, by the way, does not have to freak them out any more than teaching them to 'stop, drop and roll' makes them constantly afraid that some day they'll catch on fire. It's just a prudent thing we do, like teaching kids how to safely cross the street."

In recent decades, rates of sexual abuse have actually plunged. Child molestation by casual acquaintances and sexual abuse by caregivers decreased 61% from 1992 to 2009, according to the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

David Finkelhor, the center's director, credits the decline to increased awareness, better prosecution and school-based prevention programs. "Parents are much more vigilant than they used to be," says Finkelhor, who advises parents to stay aware of what's happening in a kid's environment. That means thinking through a situation thoroughly before letting your child be alone with an adult you don't know well. Many youth sports leagues have gone a step further, establishing protocols for preventing inappropriate contact by requiring multiple adults to be present at practices.

"If your league doesn't have rules about this, it's a problem," says Bob Cook, who writes Your Kid's Not Going Pro, a youth sports blog on Forbes.com. Just as schools do with volunteers, says Cook, sports leagues should conduct background checks on coaches. Yet even Cook, who has coached all four of his kids' sports teams, wonders whether doubting coaches' integrity could backfire. "It's a fine line," he says. "You can't go and assume everyone who deals with your kid is a child molester."

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In fact, the reality is that the people most likely to harm your child are members of your own family and close social network. "You can't tell a sex offender by looking at them," says Feigh. "There isn't a red 'S.O.' on their shirt." It's their curious behavior that's often a tip-off — lavishing gifts on children and wanting to spend more time with your child than you do. Says Finkelhor: "Uncles and grandfathers and mothers' boyfriends are much more frequent abusers than coaches."

Along those lines, Sandusky's former daughter-in-law is taking no chances. The mother of Sandusky's grandchildren — ages 5, 7 and 9 — obtained a court order Tuesday prohibiting Sandusky from unsupervised visits with his grandchildren and barring overnights at Grandpa's.

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