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How to Talk Productively With an Adult About Inappropriate Behavior With A Child

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It is one thing to be able to recognize the adult behavior that triggers concerns about inappropriate behaviors when it comes to the people who are with your child. But, what will you do if, and when, another adult's conduct actually appears to be a potential risk of harm to children? You must have the words ready to confront what you see; without the right conversation, your valuable knowledge simply won't help you protect children. This short article walks you through how to put into action what you know about child sex abuse. Before you read on, however, remember these two basic points:

- *Know the characteristics of perpetrators and abusive conduct.* At VIRTUS Online™, we discuss many factors that should raise red flags as possible abuse. If you haven't already, review VIRTUS Online™ to make sure you know what to look for.
- *Know when to go straight to authorities.* Any time you suspect that abuse has already happened or a child is at risk of such abuse, go straight to authorities. If you are unsure how to report a concern, link to VIRTUS Online™ for specific advice. Investigations of child sex abuse are handled by each state's child protection agency. VIRTUS Online™ has the telephone numbers to call to report child welfare concerns to your own state's protection agency.

Regardless of how important it is to intercede, it is still tough to do. What would you do if you found yourself in this uneasy situation? Perhaps thinking through this hypothetical—but realistic—set of facts will help:

Imagine taking your preschooler to the first day of a new camp program. You watch the first hour with some discomfort, as the several men leading the session are unusually physical with the kids—"Come sit in my lap while we sing," "Good job; let me give you a big hug." In particular, one of the staff members makes a point to hug and cuddle each child as he meets them for the first time. Moreover, the adults don't seem interested in meeting the parents, the grandparents, or any of the other adults who came. They are focusing entirely on the kids. Consider the following steps you might usefully take:

First, talk with your child. On the way home from camp, talk with your child about his or her camp experience, "Did you like the class?" "Did you like the teachers?" "Who did you like the most?" "Was there anything that you didn't like?" From this natural conversation, you may get some useful information before you speak to any of the adults involved. For example, your child might say that she doesn't like hugging the teacher.

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Always respect privacy. At the start of the next session, arrive early and bring some help to manage your child. Find the individual you're concerned about or one of the supervisors and ask to speak with him or her privately for a few minutes.

Retell the facts. Set the tone for a serious conversation—e.g., “I want to tell you about several things that happened yesterday that worried me...” Then run through the behaviors you witnessed and explain that you were uncomfortable with your child getting lap seats, hugs, and cuddles. Try to remain as factual as possible, and include any reactions from your child like, “My child said on the way home that he didn't like the man who had given the cuddles.”

Tell the adult where you are coming from. If I were engaged in a conversation like this one (and, I have had a few of them!) I stress that I do a lot of work as an attorney to prevent child sex abuse, and as a result, my radar is highly tuned to behavior that can indicate a problem. You may not be a child abuse professional but, by virtue of your participation in the Protecting God's Children® program, you can offer something like, “I have just participated in a program to help parents recognize the signs of possible child sexual abuse. The program helps keep kids safe from sex abuse.”

Make it clear that you do not believe anyone has committed abuse, but stress the other important reasons to be concerned. Be explicit. Tell them that you certainly do not think anyone at the camp is a child abuser and that they all seem like great folks. Follow-up that there are other reasons, however, to worry about what you saw: You should stress that you are trying to teach your kids about the adult behaviors that send up a red flag. Thus, you want all the adults who are with your kids to model appropriate behavior. For example, you might say, you want your kids to be suspicious when an adult, who they have never met before, touches them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. You should stress that the teachers at this camp could really help you—through their conduct—to help the children understand these precautions. Second, stress that you want to help keep each of the wonderful people who work with your kids out of trouble. On several occasions, I have told adult caregivers the following story from our family to make the point.

About a year ago, I introduced some basic child sex abuse safety rules to my then-three-year-old son. One of the things I told him was that if anyone ever touched his penis or his bottom I wanted him to tell me right away. Those places are private, I told him, and only very special people like mommy should touch those places and for only very special reasons like baths and going to the potty.

Later that same day, my three year-old ran to me squealing, “Mommy, it happened! It happened! My bottom...” I swallowed hard before I asked him about the details. As it turns out, his then-two-year-old brother had gotten angry and smacked his bottom. I had to keep from smiling as I told my son that I was glad that he had done just the right thing by telling me and that he should always tell me when someone touches his private parts.

This story reveals how easy it is for a child to misconstrue even the best of intentions. Given this, all adults have to adhere to the highest of standards. You can wrap up by telling the supervisor or staff member that you want to make sure that your children, or any other children, never have a reason to tell a story about one of their staff members that could be misconstrued. To that end, your advice about sitting on laps, and hugs, and cuddles may help keep them above suspicion.

Request follow-up, if necessary. If you are not speaking directly to the person whose behavior worried you, you will want to make sure your concerns are understood by all involved. “Will you speak with the teacher involved? Would you mind presenting the issues I have explained to the staff? Will you have had enough time to accomplish

this before we meet again next week?" "Great. Maybe you can tell me how everyone responded..." Adding that last part can create some accountability.

Perhaps take the opportunity to do any homework you haven't done yet. In addition, a conversation like this one might be an excellent time to get any additional information you need about who operates the organization and how it is run: "By the way, what sort of background screening do you conduct on your staff and volunteers?" Hopefully, you'll hear about all the essential steps they follow like criminal searches, state central registry searches, and references.

Say thank you. Wrap up your conversation by thanking the individual for visiting with you, and by saying that you appreciate his or her willingness to take protecting children from sexual abuse seriously. Stress that one of the best ways to keep all kids safe is for all adults to engage in this sort of introspection of their own conduct.

And there you have it, an outline for how this kind of conversation should go—usefully, productively, and without creating an overly emotional display. Such a conversation will surely still be stressful. But, as parents and caring adults committed to children's ministry, we have agreed to bear the stress of keeping our kids safe. And, some of the best protection for our children is to let everyone who works with children know that interested, caring adults are watching and are willing to help make kids safer.

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