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Archdiocese of Los Angeles - Our Lady of the Angels Region

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Protecting God's Children for Adults



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Communicating Your Concerns Matters

By [The VIRTUS[®] Programs](#)

Communicating your concerns is a critical element of the *Protecting God's Children[®]* program. This means we



communicate to the right person or place when we see or hear something that looks suspicious, questionable, inappropriate, unsafe, abusive—or that simply makes us feel uncomfortable. Whether it is inappropriate behavior or suspected abuse, it is important to address concerns—and we should always err on the side of caution to protect children and youth.

Communicating inappropriate adult behavior

There are varying levels of communicating concerns depending on the urgency and seriousness of what is observed or known. The first level of concern involves when we see or hear any of the warning signs of inappropriate *adult* behavior (that you may recall from Step 1 of the *Protecting God's Children* program), such as an adult who:

- Discourages other adults from participating or monitoring.
- Always attempts to be alone with, or isolates, children.

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- Seems more excited to be with children than adults.
- Gives gifts to children, without permission.
- Goes overboard touching, wrestling, tickling, etc.
- Uses bad language, or tells inappropriate or sexual jokes to children.
- Behaves or speaks as if the rules do not apply to them (ignores policy, bends rules).
- Allows young people to engage in activities parents would not allow.
- Tells children to keep secrets from others.
- Takes, posts or shares photos without the parents' or the organization's approval.
- Shows young people sexual content or pornography (*which can also be considered sexual abuse depending on the state*).

With the exception of showing a child pornography, these warning signs of inappropriate adult behavior don't automatically mean that abuse is happening, but they are an issue and need to be addressed.

If you see or hear any of the warning signs above, or any other behaviors that are contrary to the organization's policy, do not hesitate; speak to a supervisor right away. If you continue to see inappropriate behavior *after* you have already communicated a concern, this is a more *heightened* level of concern—that *may not rise to the suspicion of abuse*—but is still concerning, nonetheless. In these situations, take the concern to the supervisor again, or to another person responsible for the program or activity. Keep communicating your concerns to people in elevated positions of authority if nothing seems to be addressed or you aren't taken seriously.

Communicating concerns about the behavioral warning signs an adult might be exhibiting *is not accusing anyone* of being a child abuser—it simply draws attention to behavior that is of concern and gets the information to the right person who can do something about it.

Communicating suspected abuse

There is a more elevated, *severe* level of concern that *must* be reported to the local authorities; there may be times when you *actually suspect* that a child is being, or has been, abused. It's more than a concern about an adult's behavior—having a suspicion of child abuse essentially means that you have observed or heard something that then makes you believe or wonder whether abuse is occurring. If something just doesn't seem right, don't overrule your initial instincts, and always err on the side of caution to protect the child or youth. Any time you have a reasonable suspicion, or knowledge, that a child is being abused, you have a moral and, possibly, a legal obligation to report the suspicion to civil

authorities. You may also need to report *again* depending on the circumstances.

To report suspicions of abuse, contact the child protection agency in your state, or local law enforcement. You can find the phone number for a child abuse hotline through an Internet search or within phone directories. If the suspected abuse involves a church volunteer, employee or member of the clergy, you should *first* contact civil authorities, and *then* also notify a church official designated by your organization's policy.

Communicating potential imminent abuse

If you become aware that a child is in danger of imminent abuse at that moment, this is a *critical level of concern*, and you must call emergency services right away. In most cases—dial 911 immediately. If you decide that it is safe for all of the people in the situation to step in yourself to help, ensure that you still call 911 as soon as possible (or ask someone nearby to do so).

Communicating sexual exploitation online

If you suspect a child or youth is being sexually exploited online, make a report to the *National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's CyberTipline*¹, accessible 24 hours a day. You can also contact law enforcement. For more information about the CyberTipline, [click here](#).²

Conclusion

When it comes to communicating concerns, we must find the courage to speak up, and we must speak up—children and youth depend upon it. No matter what your role is in your organization or community, you can have a pivotal role in protecting children and youth.

Thank you for all that you do to contribute to a safe environment both within your organization, and within your entire community.

References

1 <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline>

2 <https://www.missingkids.org/blog/2022/what-is-cybertipline>

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1) Question: Ken is a fourth-grade art teacher, who you notice seems to always want to touch each student in some way when they are entering the classroom, including giving big bear hugs to specific students. How would you communicate this concern?

- A) Pull Ken aside and let him know that he shouldn't be hugging students.
 - B) Call local law enforcement or child protective services and report him.
 - C) Inform Ken's supervisor about the behavior you observed and your concerns.
 - D) Wait until you see another behavior before saying anything, since it may have just been an "off" day for Ken.
 - E) Ask each student individually if Ken has abused or harmed them in any way.
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