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Protecting God's Children for Adults



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Being Attentive to Children and Youth

By [The VIRTUS[®] Programs](#)

One method in which safe adults can help be protectors of children and youth is to simply be attentive to them. Through the



Protecting God's Children[®] (PGC) Program, being attentive to children and youth involves a two-fold process. First, we need to be attentive to concerning behavioral cues that children might exhibit when experiencing abuse. Second, while it is the primary responsibility of adults to protect children and youth, there are also elements we need to teach youth on how to partner with us for their safety when they aren't in our immediate care.

Being attentive to concerning behavioral cues

Children and youth may not always verbally disclose when they are being sexually abused—which means we cannot rely on any child to *tell us* about the abuse they're experiencing. Instead, we might need to pay careful attention to their behavior, as they often exhibit one or more behaviors that something is not right.¹ In the PGC Program, we refer to these as *behavioral cues*—meaning, they are a cue or indicator from a child or youth that something is happening to them.

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The VIRTUS[®] Programs

In the PGC Program, version 4.0, Michael Hoffman shares his journey as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. He explains, "*Kids don't always disclose. I exhibited multiple red flags through my behavior and body language, and with the way that I said some things and also in the way that I avoided saying some other things... I was desperate for people to know that something was wrong, that something was happening to me...*"

A child may be experiencing sexual abuse or exploitation by an adult or another child if:

- There is a sudden change in behavior relating to likes or dislikes, health problems or eating habits,
- They appear increasingly moody or aggressive, withdrawn or depressed,
- They lose interest in school or there is a sudden shift in grades or school activities,
- They become secretive or defensive, including with technology or online activities,
- They become fearful, anxious or *uncomfortable* around certain people,
- They bathe excessively, or stop taking care of personal hygiene, and,
- They have regressive behavior such as bed-wetting, or thumb sucking.

Note that sometimes behavioral cues could be perceived as a negative change in behavior *or a positive change*. For example, when a child is being abused, their grades or school activities may suffer and trend downward. However, there are situations where children may suddenly have better grades, may seem to pay more attention to school, show more effort and become "model" students. Recall what Deborah mentioned in the video, "If only I had been a better student, this wouldn't have happened to me." Sometimes children are terrified that others will find out about the abuse, and so they will work harder at school to appear to have everything under control. They might also be attempting to avoid certain people or tutoring environments, if that type of environment is unsafe for them. In this way, there is a "positive" perceived change in the behavior of the child—this is why the language is "sudden shift" in grades, school activities or behavior.

Another example of a behavioral cue could be a youth complaining about one of the adults in his or her life at home, or a youth trying to find reasons to miss practices for his or her sports team (or any activity previously enjoyed). Although these behavioral cues don't necessarily mean that a child is being, or has been abused, they are indicators that shouldn't be ignored.

Just because a child is exhibiting a behavioral cue does not mean that they are being sexually abused—but, it could be abuse, or another serious problem or concern, and must be addressed.

Tips on starting the conversation when concerned

If we become aware a child or youth is exhibiting one or more of the behavioral indicators, or if it seems as if they're avoiding or questioning the value of an activity they previously enjoyed—utilize it as an opportunity. Children may often make a statement or ask a question to "test the waters" and see how an adult reacts before fully disclosing abuse. Children send out this "test balloon" question or statement that they could easily retract based on how the adult reacts. If the adult is sensitive and carefully answers calmly, it is an opportunity for the child to continue with a disclosure and get help.

The best course of action is to typically begin an open dialogue with the child or youth, with open-ended questions to determine what could be causing the behavior or concerns. Listening to them with patience and compassion will usually allow the story to come out. These questions can differ depending on the age and maturity of the child. Ask:

- What is something that makes you feel really happy? What about sad?
- Who is a kid you really like to spend time with? What about an adult?
- Big feelings are Ok to have—is there anything you've been wanting to share about your feelings?
- What is something that makes you feel sad or uncomfortable?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable or unsafe with a person? Who? (Conversely, consider listing a specific person's name.)
- Has anyone ever tried to make you, or a friend, keep an unsafe secret?
- Has anyone ever tried to touch your private parts?

Partnering with children and youth for their safety through regular, ongoing conversations

Apart from the times that we are concerned regarding the welfare of a child, there are also the regular, ongoing conversations to have with children to partner with them on their safety. This is important because there will come a time when children are outside of your care, and partaking in regular, proactive conversations about sexual abuse, personal boundaries and healthy relationships can only increase the youth's safety. As safe adults, it is important to teach youth age-appropriate information, such as:

- The proper names for their private body parts.
- The personal boundary safety rules, such as, if someone asks to see or touch their private parts, shows them their private parts, or tries to force the child to touch their private parts, the youth should say words that mean "no," try to get away as soon as possible, and tell a safe adult right away.
- Information about healthy boundaries, that they have a right to be safe, and that it's okay to speak up when they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Understanding that online activities are never private.
- To never engage in sexualized conversations or share nude or sexual images with anyone, especially with people they have "met" online.
- When and where it's appropriate to share personal information online—i.e., certainly we would need to share personal information with legitimate banking websites to access our accounts, but, we wouldn't share personal information with anyone we "met" online—or even with people we believe we know.
- That being victimized is never their fault—regardless of any circumstances.
- That as a safe adult, you will believe them and will do everything you can to keep them safe.

No matter what your role is in your organization or community, you never know if you might be the adult whom a child or youth trusts enough to reach out for help—either through their actions or their words. Thank you for all that you do to contribute to a safe environment both within your organization, and within your entire community.

Reference

¹ Please note, children do not always exhibit any behavioral cues that they have been, or are being, abused. Some children do not exhibit any behavioral cues at all.

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1) If you notice a child or youth is exhibiting a behavioral cue that something is not right, what action should you take?

- A) ☐ Begin a dialogue with the child or youth, asking open-ended questions and listening with patience and compassion, to see if they have anything they want to share with you.
- B) ☐ Immediately calling the police and reporting the behavioral cue(s).
- C) ☐ Talking to as many colleagues as you can about what you noticed and getting as many opinions as you can.
- D) ☐ Ignoring it and seeing if you notice any other behaviors later on.
- E) ☐ A and C only.

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