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Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Begins With Adults

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When we confront the real danger of child sexual abuse in our society, we frequently find ourselves focusing on children. How can we protect them? How can we communicate the risk to them without causing excessive fear? How do we teach our children to protect themselves?

Each of these is an important question—and educating parents about these issues seems the logical place to start to prevent child sexual abuse. However, it is unrealistic to expect a small child to outwit or outmaneuver a seasoned child molester. In many cases, we can help create appropriate awareness for parents who are also trapped in the child molester's grooming process and, in doing so, we can help lift the burden of sex abuse prevention off the tiny shoulders of children.

Dr. David Finkelhor, one of the world's leading authorities on child sexual abuse, published *Child Sexual Abuse: New Theory and Research* in which he defined the preconditions that must exist for child sexual abuse to occur. According to Dr. Finkelhor, there are four elements necessary for sexual abuse to take place. These elements are:

1. There must be a person who has a desire for sexual contact with a child.
2. This person does nothing to inhibit or restrain the desire.
3. There must be an opportunity for the offense to occur without being observed by others.
4. The offender must be able to overcome any resistance offered by the child.

For at least 15 years we have been teaching children to say “no,” run away and tell someone if an adult approaches them sexually in schools, organizations, or in our homes. It is important to keep up this effort to empower children to resist the advances of a would-be child molester. But, for far too long, we have placed the primary responsibility for preventing abuse in the hands of young children.

Adults must concentrate their efforts on learning how to prevent child sexual abuse. Remember that over 60 percent of child sexual abuse is committed by someone known and trusted by the child and the parents. The primary method these molesters use to gain access to children is through grooming—grooming of the child victims and grooming of the victims' parents.

Our best opportunity to intervene and stop child sexual abuse before it happens is to eliminate the opportunity for abuse to occur—item three from the list, above. To be successful, we must:

- Learn to recognize the behavioral warning signs of someone who is a risk to children,
- Control who has access to children,

- Monitor all programs involving children and young people.

Teaching our children how to overcome the overtures of a potential child molester is an important aspect of a comprehensive approach to preventing child sexual abuse. Learning how to communicate with our children about these issues is crucial to that process. However, the first order of business for adults is to be trained to recognize the signs of someone whose interest in children is unhealthy. Simultaneously, we must create environments where there is no opportunity for abuse to occur.

Prevention means taking action before the abuse occurs. For too long the “prevention” efforts have been left to children. It is *our job* to keep them safe. It is *our job* to protect them. It is *our job* to know what to watch for and to take the steps necessary to stop abuse before it happens.

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