

## Protecting God's Children for Adults



### How Can You Effectively Communicate Your Concerns?

Most people who attend a *Protecting God's Children*™ awareness session understand that communicating concerns about risky behaviors directly to the person involved or the person's supervisor is the *right* thing to do. They understand that talking to anyone else, no matter what the justification or reason, is gossip and may cause irreparable harm. They also know that if *they* were doing something that caused concern, they would want to know so they would have an opportunity to correct their own behavior. Yet, we also know that it's difficult to initiate this type of conversation. With that in mind, here are some helpful suggestions.

Communicating to the individual involved or to that person's supervisor is the best way to handle a situation that causes you some concern about any behaviors that potentially place children in harm's way. When asked why people do not communicate directly to the person involved, among the most frequent answers are that the person does not want to risk being wrong about what they saw or heard, and does not want to risk retaliation for coming forward with suspicions. So, simply *knowing* the correct course of action doesn't make your response an easy one.

How do you communicate concerns effectively without compounding the existing problem or unnecessarily upsetting people? There are two important points to remember before you begin:

- What do you want to communicate? Think through the problem before bringing it up.
- Create a context or framework for the conversation.

### **Think through what you want to communicate.**

When we see something that causes us concern or makes us feel uneasy, it is sometimes difficult to find the "right words" to use when we report our concerns. If you tell someone that you are concerned about his or her behavior, but you are not able to clearly describe the behavior, you are putting the other person in an uncomfortable position and likely, will make him or her angry. Before having such a conversation, think through what it is you want to say. Make sure you can explain to the person:

- Exactly what you saw;
- The reasons you were concerned; and,
- Why you are bringing this issue to him or her directly, instead of reporting it to his or her supervisor.

Communicating a concern is not an accusation of wrongdoing. Rather, it is an opportunity to allow someone to see a reflection of how he or she appears to others. By thinking through your communication and being sure about what you want to communicate, you can ensure that your message is clear and unambiguous.

### **Create a context or framework for the conversation.**

It is highly probable that someone will become offended and/or upset upon hearing that you are concerned about his or her behavior with children. While it is impossible to guarantee that someone will not get upset or not be offended, it is possible to minimize the risk of that reaction by creating a framework or context for having the conversation.

Any time you are getting ready to have a serious conversation, it is important to begin by talking about *why* the conversation is necessary. When people understand that the reason you bring up an issue is because of your concern for them, they may be able to hear what you say as a *contribution* rather than a *condemnation*.

Creating a context or framework for the conversation might include explaining that after participating in a Protecting God's Children awareness session, you realized how important it is for all of us to monitor our own behavior, as well as the behavior of others around us who interact with children. You might tell the other person that you have made some changes to your own behavior and that you have observed them engaging in certain behaviors that others might interpret as a warning sign ... and that's the reason for having the conversation.

Take the time to establish the framework for the conversation. Let the person know that you are not accusing him or her of anything. Assure the person that you believe he or she has only the best of intentions, and that your fear is that he or she is engaging in certain behaviors "without thinking," and that those behaviors could place him or her or the children they care about in harm's way.

**Bottom Line:** Communicating our concerns can be challenging for each of us. No one wants to be the "bearer of bad news" or to be perceived as making accusations. However, if we can remind ourselves that *knowing* is better than not knowing, we can have the tough conversations we need to have with our co-workers and volunteers.

Trust your instincts, identify the nature of the concern, think through the conversation, and create a strong framework for the discussion. By thinking before you speak, chances are you will accomplish your goal to protect both the children and the generous, loving adults who work with them.