

Protecting God's Children for Adults



Know the Warning Signs: Just Where Is the Boundary Line? Part 1

The videos presented during the *Protecting God's Children*™ awareness sessions discuss a number of warning signs of possible child sexual abuse. At first glance, many of the identified abuser behaviors seem to be the kinds of things that have always been associated with *good* ministry techniques. In the appropriate context, these practices have enabled youth ministers to build trust with young people and have created a loving, pastoral atmosphere in which children have thrived.

Although some behaviors need to be changed to ensure safe environments, the most important thing to remember is that there are boundary lines in every relationship. Inappropriate crossing of those boundary lines causes seemingly appropriate behavior to become risky or even criminal. Adults must learn to recognize, respect, and defend these boundary lines.

The purpose of this two-part series is to examine the warning signs of a child molester by identifying the lines between appropriate behavior and the risky actions of adults in ministry with children. We will first identify what each warning sign does NOT mean, and then clarify how to recognize that the behavior is risky.

A. Adult always wants to be alone with children

One of the first warning signs that the videos present is that child molesters always want to be alone with children. Does that mean that nobody should ever be alone with children? No. It means pay particular attention to any adult who *always* wants to be alone with children.

There are times in ministry when children and ministers will be alone. For example, the sacrament of reconciliation requires privacy. Counseling and tutoring sessions are often conducted one-on-one. Occasionally, a child needs the undivided attention of a caring adult.

A responsible adult makes sure that someone knows when he or she is meeting alone with children. A responsible adult meets with children in areas where another adult could walk by unimpeded or where the adult's interactions with children are visible to others. This is possible, even when the privacy of the adult-child conversation must be protected.

Risky behavior is characterized by two specific elements. A potential child molester:

- *Discourages* other adults from participating in activities.
- *Creates* an environment where his or her activities with children or young people cannot be monitored.

These elements are the key to the dividing line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior with children. Committed, caring adults are alone with children from time to time. It is those who actively discourage or dissuade others from participating—and eliminate the opportunity for anyone else to monitor their activities with children—who pose a risk to children.

B. More excited to be with children than adults

Caring about children and wanting to be with them is an important quality for people in youth ministry. Most dedicated children's ministry professionals and volunteers are excited to be with children. They love the children and young people in their programs and relish the time they spend with the youngsters in

their ministries. However, that does not mean that they *always* prefer the company of children to the company of adults.

People in child and youth ministry are definitely committed to young people. They bring their love of children to the ministry they provide, but they are also clear about appropriate boundaries between adults and children. Good youth ministers strictly enforce those boundaries. These adults know that their ministry with children and young people is enhanced when they have a well-rounded and full life that includes healthy adult relationships and a rich life outside of the time they spend with the children and young people they serve.

The key to remember is that child molesters are *more* excited to be with children than with adults. Child sexual abusers always choose being with children rather than adults. When the rest of the adults are craving adult conversation, the child molester will still choose to be with the children. As Roberto in the video says when referring to the person who molested him: “He was *always* hanging around with us.”

A red flag to watch for is people who have outfitted their house with every toy a child could want—regardless of the age and interests of their own children. Also, remember that child molesters have a preference for a particular age and body type of child. So, for example, Ronnie liked having young boys around. He preferred boys who were about 10 years old; and, over time would eliminate other adults and children from having the opportunity to share his time with the boys. This was Ronnie’s way of isolating his victims from other adults. In addition, as Karl pointed out, 90 percent of the pictures in his photo album were photos of little girls—the type he preferred.

These indicators point to someone who is *more excited* to be with children than with adults. Genuine interest in children and genuine commitment to child and youth ministry are not signs of a child molester. Risky behavior—such as repeated attempts to isolate children, or a particular child, from other adults—is a sign of a possible child sexual abuser. If responsible adults pay attention to the little details, then children and those who minister to them will be safer than before.
