

Protecting God's Children for Adults



Know the Warning Signs: Just Where Is the Boundary Line? Part 2

Many of the warning signs in the *Protecting God's Children*™ program seem consistent with certain practices that people in children's ministries, historically, have used to foster trust with children and young people. Ministers have developed these practices to create a loving, pastoral atmosphere that encourages increased participation by children and young people. Because they are effective, child molesters use many of the same behaviors to lure children into lurid and damaging relationships.

Some of these behaviors *need* to be changed to help ensure a safe environment for children. If adults in the community will simply modify their behaviors in a way that helps to clarify the dividing line between *appropriate* behavior and *inappropriate* behavior in ministry relationships, sex abusers will have much more difficulty operating undetected.

In Part 2 of this series about the warning signs of potential child molesters, we identify the fine line between appropriate behavior and the risky actions of adults involved in ministry with children. As in Part 1, we will first identify what the warning sign does NOT mean and then clarify how to recognize that the associated behavior *is* risky.

A. Adult gives gifts to young people ... often without permission

By definition a "gift" is:

"anything given; anything voluntarily transferred by one person to another without compensation; a present; an offering." [11](#)

Any gift that is a "voluntary" transfer from one person to another is special—a teacher who brings a treat for her class, a youth minister who brings a prize for a game; a parish committee that provides a gift basket for a family experiencing difficult times—all of these are "voluntary transfers," given without compensation.

Gifts given as a "voluntary transfer" without compensation are examples of generosity and caring. However, gifts given with strings attached are a warning sign. "Strings" attached to a gift to a child or young person come in many different forms—and all of them should raise concerns for the adults in a child's life.

Some attached conditions that should raise concerns are:

- Gifts given on the condition that (or suggesting that) the child keeps the gift a secret.
- Expensive gifts that could leave a child thinking that something "is owed" to the person giving the gift.
- Inappropriate gifts indicating that the adult appears to have a romantic interest in the child or young person.

Children thrive on affection. A child molester uses this knowledge for his or her own purposes. A molester uses gifts, sometimes inappropriate or expensive gifts, given in secret, to lure a child into a relationship that the child would not enter into otherwise.

The keys to deciding whether someone's gift giving crosses the line are found in the circumstances surrounding the gift. Expensive gifts given openly and with the approval of the parents, for example, are less of a concern than a small inexpensive item given on the condition that the child keep the gift a secret.

Noticing the line between a gift freely given and a gift given in order to forge a possibly unhealthy bond between a child and an adult is another way that adults can know when to intervene in risky situations.

B. Adult allows a child to do things that the child's parents would not allow

Some people hear this warning sign and wonder, "What exactly does this mean?" As with many of the other warning signs, this statement does not necessarily mean something bad. The mere fact that a child gets to do something he or she is not allowed to do at home doesn't necessarily mean that the child is at risk for sexual abuse.

Allowing children to stay up late at a youth event, or to make mud pies, or to paint pictures on the wall of a classroom—these may be things a child's parents would not allow, but these behaviors are rarely, if ever, indicative of child sexual abuse. Sometimes children get to do things during church activities that they don't get to do at home—and that's part of the fun of participating.

The alarm goes off when the activities are things that parents would not *permit* children to do or would forbid them from doing. For example, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, smoking, watching movies that are rated R or NC-17, playing violent or "adult" content video games—these are the types of activities that clearly *cross the line*.

Parents must be able to trust those in ministry to provide appropriate entertainment and activities for children. They must be able to trust that any child or youth activity involving church volunteers or staff will be not only legal, but also consistent with Catholic moral teachings as well as a broad range of Christian values and standards.

A potential molester may bait a child with promises of forbidden activities. Any adult who entices a child to go against the wishes of the child's parents and to actually do things that the child's parents would not permit, presents a serious risk to children and should be immediately removed from ministry.

Bottom Line:

There are several common warning signs of a potential child molester, and caring adults should know them all. However, it is also important to know that there is sometimes a fine line between appropriate actions in ministry and inappropriate activities. On one side of the line are the sincere and generous gifts of ministry, and on the other side of the line are behaviors indicating possible steps toward engaging a child in sexual activities that can do irreparable harm. Caring adults should learn about the warning signs and learn to tell the difference.