

Advice

Penn State abuse scandal and what parents can do

By Janice D'Arcy November 7, 2011

The news that [a respected former Penn State football coach](#) allegedly sexually abused several young boys has unnerved more than a few parents.

We often support the attachments our children make with caring adults in their lives, whether they be teachers, coaches or other authority figures. But what happens when those adults shouldn't be trusted? Worse, what happens when the adults around them may suspect a problem, as may have been the case at Penn State, but don't speak up?

Despite the outsized coverage and concern over stranger abductions, surveys reveal that the vast majority of child victims of sexual abuse know their abusers. Oftentimes, the abusers victimize many children, taking advantage of their position of authority. This, of course, has played out horribly in the [Catholic priest abuse scandal](#).

Besides [Jerry Sandusky](#), who was also the founder of an organization for at-risk kids, there have been several other chilling accounts of coaches who've been accused of molesting children. Just last week, a youth coach in Charleston was accused of serially abusing children there. Here's more on that case from Charleston's [Post and Courier](#).

_____ on where the concerns need to be placed. The concern needs to be placed on the communities where people live; on the circle of trust where a child lives," Deborah Donovan Rice, Executive Director of the Massachusetts-based advocacy group "Stop It Now!: Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children," told me when I called her about the Penn State case.

It's not that every teacher and coach should be suspect. But Rice said in the aftermath of these wrenching stories, parents ask "what could I have done?"

She has two answers: Talk to children about appropriate boundaries and ask [a series of questions](#) to the directors of any program the child is involved in.

"You don't have to go in as an accuser. You just have to ask the questions," she said.

Here they are:

1. What is the organization's policy on child sexual abuse prevention?
2. How does the program screen staff?
3. Are criminal background checks enough?
4. Do they check references?
5. What is their policy or code of conduct about interactions between employees/volunteers and youth?
6. How do they monitor interactions between adults and children?
7. Have they considered safety in the physical environment?
8. How do they handle situations like inappropriate behavior or allegations of sexual abuse?
9. What training do staff and volunteers receive about preventing child sexual abuse?

It's okay if the organization does not have great answers, Rice said. It's better that a parent understands the gaps and encourages the group to establish better policies. The [Stop it Now Web site](#) has more resources to help on that front, as well as tips on broaching the subject with children, spotting warning signs of abuse and suggesting other resources.

Is the Penn State case prompting you to rethink your child's "circle of trust"? Will you become more inquisitive about youth programs? Let us know in the comments.
