

Knowledge Without Action Makes No Real Difference

By [Sharon Doty, J.D., M.H.R.](#)

Almost everyone who attends a session of *Protecting God's Children*® for Adults leaves able to identify one or more of the warning signs that risky adults exhibit when interacting with children. They remember that touch should be Public, Appropriate, and Non-Sexual (PAN) or that it is important to interrupt adults who seem to always be alone with children, or one or two of the other warning signs. In the days, weeks, and months to come, participants can start to notice various warning signs of a potential problem and perhaps even intervene when it is present. Sometimes they are reminded in a particular moment that something is not right and they alter the



situation or change their own behavior to adjust.

Hearing the warning signs once is not enough for us to be able to absorb them into the background of our thinking and use them as a filter for the actions of adults who engage with our children. It takes repetition and practice to be someone who can see and intervene in situations that raise concerns about the potential safety of children. Even then, knowing is not enough. Knowledge without action

makes no real difference.

If that's the case, how do we take what we learn in the session and create safer environments? If we just take the first of the warning signs, always wants to be alone with children, we can see that we can begin immediately. Here are a few things we can do immediately to make the physical environment safer and interrupt any attempt to always seclude children.

- Prohibit covering glass in doors with artwork or other obstructions.
- Set up after school programs or other one-on-one conversations with staff and volunteers in more open or public portions of the facility.
- Keep a public calendar (shared specifically with your administration) of one-on-one appointments with children and youth and encourage "drop in" visits to any teacher, clergy, counselor, or coach that is meeting after hours with a student. "Drop in" visits mean that you invite others to drop in, regardless of the time, during your ministry or work so that everyone can see that you are part of a safe environment.
- Priests can hear confessions in the sanctuary in an open area. Others may be able to see the priest and penitent, but should not be able to hear if they are

careful in their speaking. You can also encourage confessions to be held in an area where there is a glass door and others can view the room.

- Require parents or other responsible adults to be present anytime a staff member, clergy or a volunteer is meeting alone with a young person. If the interaction is of a confidential nature, make sure it takes place in a location that is open and allows for the physical interaction to be observable.
- If the priest and an altar server are alone in the sacristy, the priest can place himself in a more public section of the area until the altar server has completed their duties and left the area. Or, ask for the door to remain open, let others know to come in and check on things, and invite others to be there. The idea is to not be in an isolated location while one on one, but also ensure that children are not in areas by themselves without adult supervision.

There are countless ways that we can work together to establish policies and practices that promote the elimination of any opportunity for a person who might have bad intentions, or who simply has boundary issues, to always be alone with children. In a boundary issue situation, the greater concern is the conditioning of children that could take place, in that children are more likely to accept inappropriate behavior from someone else who does have bad intentions. In addition, we have to look for ways to observe and intervene when something seems off to us. Policies and practices are not enough. We also need observance and appropriate action.

Observance is simple, but not really easy. The definition of "observe" is: to see, watch, perceive, or notice. That part is easy enough. We have our eyes open and see what's happening around us in our daily activities. However, the important part for our purposes here is "notice." Observing the adults who interact with the children in our care means paying attention to the little things. It means noticing when something just doesn't seem right to you and refusing to "let it go" because of who it is or what you think you know about the adult involved. Observing means paying attention and then attending to what you see in a way that promotes a safe environment.

Appropriate action can include a wide variety of things. Some situations may only require a gentle nudge from you to interrupt the flow. For example, you may see someone secluding a child in a way that makes you uncomfortable, or blocking the view of the child with their body. Perhaps all there is to do is join them and make sure there are two adults there at all times. Other situations may require more drastic or dramatic action. You may need to communicate with a supervisor so as to remind the adults involved of the standards that are part of the policies and practices. The person might need to have additional support to know and see how to make sure this situation is addressed in a way that promotes a safe environment. When concerned, it's important to bring the matter to the attention of supervisors or others in a parish or school in order to make sure the behavior is addressed and altered.

The point for all of us is that knowing the warning signs of someone who might have an inappropriate relationship with a child, or who is exhibiting problematic behavior, is only the first step. If we are going to protect children, we must make the warning

signs the foundation of our efforts. We must look through the filter of "know the warning signs" to observe and to act in order to create safer environments for all God's children.