

Circle of Care

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Sometimes, when we are faced with a difficult decision or choices, we find ourselves in a dilemma that we never imagined we would face. We think that we are prepared, that we are certain that we will be able to follow our values, hearts and have clarity of thought, but when faced with an important issue or crisis, we find ourselves adrift, even lost. And so it is with the most important thing we can do in the prevention of child sexual abuse—reporting our concerns. Every state has mandated reporting laws, and those of us who are mandated reporters know what our responsibilities are. What about those who are not mandated by the law to report their suspicions and concerns of child sexual abuse?



Many people can recognize the warning signs of abusers, and many know by their own intuition when something is just not right between an adult and child, yet many still are very resistant to making the call to the child protective services within the state to report what they know. Some reasons that I have heard for this resistance are that people don't want to hurt the reputation of another person, or upset a child's family or parents. People don't want to get involved, preferring to leave these kinds of things to those above their pay grade. Or they just are fearful of any number of things that they imagine could happen to them.

Whatever the fear, or reason, or excuse—there is still this fact: delaying or refusing to report suspicions or concerns of someone who has inappropriate contact with a child or children allows possible abuse to continue.

When you spell it all out, everyone readily agrees that to delay, ignore or refuse to report is inexcusable and irresponsible behavior. But everyone also agrees about the great difficulty that is faced when there is a need to call and report to the authorities.

There is a simple template and exercise that I teach that is most effective in figuring out a plan of action when it comes to important decisions like reporting. I call it the "Circle of Care". I inform the group that I am going to present a case study of a particular situation and I ask them to plot out the case using a circle/donut/bagel. For example, I ask everyone to draw a large circle on a piece of paper and then draw inside that larger circle a smaller one, so that what you see looks like a bagel or donut. Then I ask folks to draw lines from the inner circle to the outer, forming wedges or pie slices. Can you picture it? A big bagel with lines forming wedges all pointing to the center. The center is left blank as are the wedges.

They must use the circle and do the following: Brainstorm about the person, place or thing that is most important in solving or figuring out this problem. Place the person who is most directly impacted by the actions in the center circle. Then, filling in the wedges (adding more if you need them), I ask them to list the things and resources that will help in figuring out the problem. Finally, I ask them

to report their findings and the answer they have come up with. "What should you do and how should you address this?", is their assignment.

What if this were a question about a child being sexually abused—what would you do then? Who would be in the center of the circle and what would your plan be? Would it be the devastated parents? Would it be the person whose reputation could potentially be affected? Would you insert yourself into the center with your reservations? Or someone, or something else?

The center circle must hold the most vulnerable person in the dilemma, and if you put anyone other than the child in the center, then you are headed in the absolute wrong direction. Placing the child in the center vividly shows us that we can waste no time in delaying a report to child protective services. If we place ourselves there, we are delaying the call. If we place the child parent's there, we are losing focus. Placing the child in the center reminds us vividly who we are protecting and why.

When you make a call to child protective authorities and report your suspicions, it is all handled by professionals who know what they are doing and have a great amount of experience in handling such information. Your call may be the first about a particular child, or it may be the third or fourth about the case which could propel officials to make swift interventions.

I use this circle exercise with a lot of folks in various circumstances and for different problems. It never fails to provide clarity and direction. Convenience, kindness, charity, thoughtfulness—there are no good reasons to put anyone else in the center of the circle except a child or vulnerable person. No matter what.