

Keeping Children Safe

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Editor's note: The month of April is dedicated as the National Child Abuse Prevention Month and is a time for all of us to learn more about what we can tangibly do to help protect the children in our care.



In today's world, there is a growing awareness of the risks to children from maltreatment in our schools and organizations, including physical and sexual abuse exploitation, emotional abuse and violence of all types. The VIRTUS® programs focus primarily on eliminating the risk of sexual abuse. However, during this month, when our attention is on child abuse of all types, we are taking a closer look at ways we can create safer school and organizational environments that can prevent abuse and violence. It is important for teachers, staff and parents to have their eye on these issues and work together.

Some key areas to pay attention to in this effort as it relates to schools are:

1. Written policies: Written policies and procedures must clearly set out the organization's commitment to safety-and the policies must be applied to EVERYONE involved with children. Staff, volunteers and parents should work together to create a policy that works for the organization. Look at what others are doing but customize your program to your children, staff, mission and facilities.

- Make sure the policy is available to parents, volunteers, teachers and staff, and write a child friendly version to share with the students.
- Cover the material in teacher and staff meetings to answer questions and identify concerns, and have teachers and staff read and sign the policy. Then bring it to parents at a meeting of the local parent/teacher organization.
- Publicize the policy as much as possible. Let everyone know what is acceptable and unacceptable in your program or organization and any consequences for failure to operate consistently with these policies.
- Include examples of situations that are covered by the policy so that everyone is clear on how the policy is applied.

2. Service providers, vendors and partners: Make sure service providers, vendors and partners that provide services of any kind to the children either have safety programs in place that mirror yours, or know and agree to participate in and honor yours.

- State reporting laws clearly identify those who are mandated to report suspected abuse. Create and manage your policies so that they comply with reporting laws and put children first.
- With regard to school violence, work with the nearest law enforcement organization to establish the best possible procedures for dealing with violence of any kind on school grounds.

- In both cases, include parents in the discussions about how to deal with these issues.

3. Drills & plans: Most schools have fire drills and other practices for unusual occurrences. Create a plan for dealing with a threat of violence on the premises and include it in your regular safety training. Children know about gun violence in schools and they are already dealing with some level of fear. The more calm and practical you can be in creating a plan the more effective it will be for all the students and staff.

4. Communication: Establish a "feedback" system so that everyone involved with the program or organization can tell you they see what works and does not work, including any concerns that occur.

5. Parental consent: Make sure you have parental consent for children to participate in any program or service and set up a procedure for including children in the conversation. Ask them questions and listen carefully to their answers. They will tell you a great deal about what it takes to make them feel safe.

6. Threat assessment and response: Identify the risk level for each location or program-based on an assessment of whether they are high, medium, or low risk situations. Then, tailor procedures to make sure all precautions are in place to promote an environment safe from abuse. For example, make sure that more than one adult is present at all times and in those rare occasions where one-on-one contact is necessary, provide an environment that invites observation such as rooms with windows or open areas where others could come through. Lock doors and close off areas that are not being used. Regularly check spaces to assure that no one is using them without permission.

There are many areas of risk in school environments. However, we can work together with administrators, teachers, and staff to build a safe and nurturing experience for everyone involved if we work together and listen to each other.

Regardless of what we do, children may still be the victims of abuse and violence at times. This is a hard reality for us all. However, being part of creating and promoting a proactive plan to create a safe environment that prevents, to the best of our ability, violence and abuse of any kind is our best chance at making sure all our children are safe every day.