

Summer Safety Tips Can Help Prevent Sexual Abuse

There are guidelines that parents, guardians, and grandparents can use to ensure that children have safe and happy experiences in all their summertime activities. There are also some things that summer programs can do to create a safe environment for everyone.



Playing Outdoors (Adapted from VIRTUS® Article posted March 31, 2003)

- **Reinforce the safe-adult, safe-kid, and safe-touching rules.** Let your child know that they should never go anywhere alone with a stranger, even if the stranger asks them to nicely or seems to need their help. Your children should always talk to you first before going *anywhere* with *anyone*.
- **Children do, in fact, offend against other children.** This issue is not unique to a particular season. However, children may have more opportunities to be out of your immediate sight during the summer. For this reason, it's important to periodically remind your child know that another child or adult—even a child or adult they know and trust, may:
 - Want to see or touch their private parts,
 - Try to touch their private parts, or
 - Want to show them *their* (the adult's) private parts.

Tell your child that if one of these situations occurs, your child should say: "Stop it!" and should immediately tell you what happened. Granted, kids are kids and are curious about their bodies, but it is better to play it safe than sorry.

- **Make sure your child knows where he or she may and may not go, has a watch, can tell time, and knows when to check in with you.** Younger children should check in more frequently than older children.
- **If you can afford it, purchase a cell phone or a walkie-talkie set for your child** so he or she can reach you in an emergency or vice-versa. But, if you do this, remember to keep your phone or walkie-talkie turned on and accessible to you.

Bottom Line:

Summer brings a whole range of issues that affect your ability to protect your children from sexual abuse. The core *best practice* rule for child safety is to have as much information as possible and replace blind trust with knowledge and healthy suspicion. That means asking questions:

- Where are you going?
- What will you do while you are there?
- Who will be with you?
- When will you return?
- Which adults will be present?

Then evaluate the situation and determine if it is safe for your child to participate. And, don't be afraid to say "No." When you and your children *think* safety, summer is filled with fun opportunities for children to enjoy.

Summer Safety – Monitor All Programs (VIRTUS® Online Bulletin Featured July 17, 2006)

As part of the evaluation process of potential programs for your children in addition to questions about the content of the program and what the children will be doing, ask the program administrators a series of questions that include the following:

- Was a criminal background check conducted on all adults participating in the program in any capacity? If so, did the process include fingerprinting? If not, why not and what is being done to assure that it is safe to entrust children to the people hired to work in the program?
- Were everyone's references checked to find out about their previous work with children and young people?
- Have you (the program leadership) established monitoring and behavioral standards and communicated the standards to everyone involved to ensure that expectations of them are clear. Do they understand what will not be tolerated?
- How will children be allowed to communicate with parents while at the program? Are there restrictions on cell phones or calling home and, if so, what steps are being taken to assure that these restrictions do not have the effect of creating a "safety zone" for predators?

Take time to find out how the programs are set up and how they are monitored. For example:

- What is the ratio of adults to children in the program?
- What is the policy about being alone with a child?
- How will the activities be monitored to assure that the policies are enforced and the children are safe at all times?
- If not currently in place, will child safety policies be developed and in place before the program begins, and how can parents get copies of the policies?
- What are the guidelines for parents, guardians, and caretakers who want to drop in and check to see how things are going?
- Are any activities conducted off-site and if so, how are these activities conducted?
- Are children ever isolated with an adult and, if so, how is the situation monitored to assure the safety of everyone involved?

Be willing to refuse to allow your child to participate in or to remove your child from programs—even ones that the child likes—if the appropriate standards are not established, if you discover that the program is not enforcing these standards, or not following their own rules about how things are to be monitored.

Sometimes parents rely on the reputation of a particular program from past years to determine whether they allow their children to participate. These historical perspectives from other parents and young people should always be a factor in the decision making process. If you find that the monitoring and screening processes in place are inadequate to assure your child's safety, do not let the "reputation" of the program or its apparent success be the guiding principle for whether your children are allowed to participate.

Remember that these are the programs and the people that you are entrusting with your most precious gift from God—your children.