Preventing the Sexual Exploitation of Children

The words **sexual exploitation** evoke a number of reactions and feelings. Perhaps one of the most devastating is silence – our inability or unwillingness as a society to speak about this horrific problem. That same silence may also impact a child who has been sexually exploited. Children may be frightened or intimidated into not telling. They may feel they won't be believed or what happened is their fault. All of these feelings may cause them to hide their pain.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) is working to bring sexual exploitation to the forefront; raise awareness about this issue; and help combat its negative, long-term effects. NCMEC wants to help families and communities support the courageous child victims who come forward so they may begin healing. And NCMEC wants to make more people aware of the problem so other children don't have to suffer in silence.

NCMEC wants people to know that the sexual exploitation of a child has multiple victims and the effects may extend like tentacles into the community. Often people feel powerless to fight its insidious nature because the problem seems too huge and overwhelming. Or people really don't want to confront the issue of who the perpetrator might be. People don't want to believe it could be a person in a position of trust or responsibility living in their own neighborhoods.

But there are steps that need to be taken. When taken they would lead to a reduction in the incidence of sexual exploitation, an improvement in how we protect our children from this scourge, and caring and support for those children who have suffered at the hands of these offenders. It's all about empowerment and giving children, parents and guardians, and communities the strength to overcome what they have lost, so they may live healthy and productive lives.

What Families May Do

- Listen to your children. Pay attention if they tell you they don't want to be with someone or go somewhere.
- Take the time to talk to your children. Encourage open communication and learn how to be an active listener.
- Notice when someone shows one or all of your children a great deal of attention or begins giving them gifts.
- Teach your children they have the right to say **NO** to any touch or actions by others that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused. Teach them to immediately tell you if this happens. Reassure them you're there to help and it is okay to tell you anything.
- Be sensitive to any changes in your children's behavior or attitude.
- Look and listen to small cues and clues that something may be troubling your children because children are not always comfortable disclosing disturbing events or feelings.
- If your children do confide problems to you, strive to remain calm, noncritical, and nonjudgmental. Listen compassionately to their concern, and work **with them** to get the help they need to resolve the problem.
- Be sure to screen babysitters and caregivers. Many states now have a public registry allowing parents and guardians to check out individuals for prior criminal records and sex offenses. Check references with other families who have used the caregiver or babysitter. Once you have chosen the caregiver, drop in unexpectedly to see how your children are doing. Ask your children how the experience with the caregiver was, and carefully listen to the response.
- Provide oversight and supervision of your children's computer use. Know who they're communicating with online and where they may have access to computers. Establish rules and guidelines for computer use for your children.
- Be involved in your children's activities. As an active participant, you'll have a better opportunity to observe how the adults in charge interact with your children.
- Work with your children's school to institute sound child-safety programs as part of their curriculum.
- Practice basic safety skills with your children and discuss their safety openly and honestly. There is no substitute for your attention and supervision. Being available and taking time to really know and listen to your children helps build feelings of safety and security.

What Schools May Do

- Make sure teachers, volunteers, and anyone else with access to children is properly screened and trained.
- Implement and enforce a policy for reporting child sexual exploitation and handling disclosures from children.
- Establish protocols and screening for school computer use. Provide training for students and teachers regarding the acceptable use of computers.
- Choose or develop child-safety programs for the school that are based on accepted educational theories; are appropriate for the child's age and levels of education and development; are designed to offer concepts that will help children build self-confidence in order to better handle and protect themselves in all types of situations, use multiple program components repeated several years in a row, and use qualified presenters who include role-playing, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and active participation in presentations.
- Assess your environmental structure and take every possible step to make it safer for children. Make certain children are properly supervised both in the classroom and around the campus.
- Make certain campus security is in place so all visitors are screened through the office and unusual incidents/visitors are handled.
- Provide programs and roles for parents and guardians to make them part of their children's safety and security at school and while going to and from school.

What Communities May Do

- Notify the public of the sex-offender registry and community-notification requirements. Schedule town meetings and community seminars to raise awareness about these policies and issues.
- Support local law-enforcement efforts to establish neighborhood crime-watch programs. Report suspicious persons/activities to local law enforcement.
- Support aggressive prosecution of offenders who victimize children within local communities and have an action plan and protocol in place to alert the community and assuage their fears when a high-profile arrest is made.
- Mobilize community groups and child-serving organizations to help make your community more "child safe." Determine if available services and programs are adequate to address the needs of your community.
- Assess local law-enforcement technology resources, and advocate for systems and other technology available to quickly disseminate information about abducted and missing children. Such systems include the **L**ost **C**hild **A**lert **T**echnology **R**esource (LOCATER™) that provides law enforcement, free-of-charge, the tools and technology needed to rapidly disseminate images of and information about missing children both electronically and on posters. Implement and support **A**merica's **M**issing: **B**roadcast **E**mergency **R**esponse (AMBER) Alert in the community through local media and law enforcement involvement to rapidly disseminate images and information to the public, via radio, television, and cable "airwaves," in serious child-abduction cases. Although these programs will not prevent sexual exploitation, they allow for a rapid and effective mobilization if a child is abducted.
- Advocate use of Code Adam in local retail stores to rapidly locate lost children by using standard protocols and procedures. An immediate response to a lost child minimizes the possibility that the child will be taken from the store.
- Institute free child-identification programs in the community to help ensure all parents and guardians have a recent, clear, and readily available photograph of their children.
- Advocate for meaningful legislative change with elected officials.

It is only through unified and diligent preparation and persistent prevention efforts that the sexual exploitation of children may be effectively addressed. For information regarding NCMEC's resources to help prevent the sexual exploitation of children, visit www.cybertipline.com or call 1-800-843-5678.

Information reprinted respectively from NCMEC's *Know the Rules...General Tips for Parents and Guardians to Help Keep Their Children Safer*, *KIDS AND COMPANY: TOGETHER FOR SAFETY*, and *Guidelines for Programs to Reduce Child Victimization: A Resource for Communities When Choosing a Program to Teach Personal Safety to Children.*
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