

The Essence of Youth Protection: Rules, Reporting and Consequences

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Organizations are obsessed with ferreting out sexual predators and preventing them access to young people. Unfortunately, in their zeal to do this, organizations focus too much on the sexual predator, and not enough on the safety of the children they want to protect.

Nearly every organization that offers services to children and youth has adopted some form of child abuse prevention. In 1993, when the federal National Child Protection Act was adopted, few organizations conducted criminal history record checks. Fifteen years later criminal history record checks have become a best practice. Organizations risk being pilloried in the public eye if a staff member is accused of committing child sexual abuse and the organization has failed to conduct a criminal records check — whether a check would have revealed any relevant information or not.

The foundation of youth protection should be enforcing the rules that are designed to safeguard the children that are served. Just as a highway patrol officer enforces speed limits to reduce traffic fatalities, organizations need to enforce their youth protection rules to prevent child abuse. Unfortunately, their attention seems to be more focused on catching child molesters than on identifying those who break the rules — there is an important difference.

People are unlikely to catch child molesters in the act of molesting a child. The vast majority of child abuse cases are either disclosed by the child after the fact or suspected by an observer due to physical or behavioral signs displayed by the child after abuse has occurred. In most cases of sexual abuse involving staff and participants of an organization, there were earlier signs that rules were being broken. If confronted, it is typical for the rule breaker to explain away the infraction and promise to do better in the future. However, the adults charged with protecting youth should not minimize the significance of rule breaking because it is the equivalent of looking the other way. Shame on them if they know about rules being broken, but continue to give the rule-breaker access to children.

It is a characteristic of organizations that have not focused on either the rules or what should be done about rule-breaking that there are no policies requiring staff to report rule-breaking. In contrast, there are almost always policies that state if you witness abuse you must report it, as mandated by state laws. But what good are such policies or laws that require mandatory reporting if all that is observed is rule-breaking, as opposed to child abuse? In contrast, what if rule-breaking must be reported and the rule-breakers face consequences that are meaningful? In this latter scenario there is a much stronger likelihood that child abuse can be prevented.

Youth protection should not be abuse response. Organizations need to be proactive in their approach to youth protection. We cannot afford to wait until the child is victimized to take action. The goal is to prevent abuse from happening. To achieve this goal, we need a total commitment to enforcing policies that limit the opportunity for abuse within our organizations.

The approach is simple:

- First be sure that everyone knows the rules.
- Second, establish enforcement mechanisms so that everyone, including the children in the program and their parents, knows that a report must be made if rules are broken.
- Third, follow through by enforcing the rules and holding everyone accountable. Consequences may range from requiring corrective action to termination, depending on the seriousness of the infraction and the individual's past record of compliance.

Need help identifying what “rules” are needed to protect youth at your organization? The *Nonprofit Risk Management Center* offers consulting services for youth-serving organizations including risk assessments, as well as policy review and development, all at affordable rates. For more information, please contact John Patterson at 202-785-3891 or via [email](#).