It’s Hard to Talk about Child Abuse

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Child sexual abuse is so repulsive, that it is truly difficult to talk about. It is painful to admit that any person would harm a child in such a vulgar, intimate way. The sad truth is that we need to talk more about child abuse in order to prevent it. To protect the children and youth that we serve, we need to talk, reflect and take action.

You have read about allegations of abuse, about criminal convictions for abuse, and about lawsuits against organizations that were unable to prevent abuse from happening on their premises, in their programs, and to their clients, members, participants, athletes and patients. While a growing number of youth-serving organizations are responding quickly and effectively to allegations of abuse, there are still organizations whose leaders discount reports filed by young victims or their parents.

As we head into April, which is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, please consider whether key stakeholders in your nonprofit are comfortable talking about child abuse. If not, next month may be the perfect time to start a discussion. The more we talk, the more we can prevent child abuse victims from going unheard.

- **Tone at the top**. If your nonprofit serves children or teens, your board should be talking about the risk of abuse perpetrated by adults or young participants. Encourage the board to engage in a candid discussion about the exposure, the effectiveness of risk management strategies, your reporting protocol, and the gaps that need to be addressed without delay.
- **Protection is greater than PR**. During a crisis many nonprofits make the mistake of trying to save face before protecting the vulnerable children the serve. Those responsible for public relations or strategic planning may be especially prone to making this error, because they are trained to think about big picture external risks. But, the public recognizes when nonprofit leaders take the wrong steps during a crisis. Stakeholders would rather know that you are taking immediate steps to protect vulnerable clients, than know that you are expending all energy repairing your reputation. Establish clear youth protection policies describing actions that will separate children from the alleged abuser *immediately* after claims are made. Conduct a thorough investigation of all claims that you receive.
- **Be persistent in policy and practice**. You can help deter child abuse in your nonprofit by:
    - Creating custom, youth protection policies — include policies on photographing children, physical contact with children, out-of-program contact policies, and codes of conduct for staff and participants.
    - Making youth protection training mandatory for all staff working with children. Ask staff to practice reacting if a child were to disclose abuse. Read our book, The Season of Hope: A Risk Management Guide for Youth-Serving Nonprofits, for more staff training ideas.
    - Adopting clear child abuse reporting protocols — Teach staff to follow child abuse reporting

procedures, and ensure that specific staff members understand their roles as mandatory reporters.
    - Creating additional barriers to child abuse including: adequate supervision for those working with youth; appropriate facility design and lighting; program design to reduce the risk of misconduct; and policies that encourage parents to attend and observe their children while participating in your programs.
    - Reaching out for help — If you need help revamping your child abuse protection policies, look to My Risk Management Policies as a tool for creating custom policies.

Empower Young Participants — Adults, not children, are ultimately responsible for providing a safe environment. But many organizations have found that it is vital to empower young participants to say "No!" if they feel uncomfortable with any actual or suggested physical contact with an adult or another child participant. Consider offering training for parents to teach their children "good touch" vs. "bad touch." Parents and nonprofit staff can also teach kids that they will never be blamed for abuse, and that they are always safe to report abuse.

Before April begins, let's pledge to talk about preventing child abuse. Once we start talking, we can work effectively to recognize the risk of child abuse, and to take action to prevent it.

Check out these other great youth protection resources and child abuse prevention campaigns:

Million March Against Child Abuse — local grassroots campaigns to increase child abuse awareness. The Million Marches will occur on April 22nd, 2013, so join a march in your state!

Darkness to Light — committed to ending child sexual abuse

Youth Protection Resources for Families Served by Your Nonprofit:

From Prevent Child Abuse America (www.preventchildabuse.org)

- Abuse awareness and prevention resources for parents: www.preventchildabuse.org/publications/parents/index.shtml

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