

Three Strategies for Protecting Kids from Sexual Predators

By Kidpower Executive Director/Co-Founder Irene van der Zande

Note: Kidpower is an international nonprofit leader in violence prevention and personal safety established in 1989. We have served over 2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures locally and worldwide. Please visit www.kidpower.org for our extensive free on-line Library, publications for sale in our Store, in-person workshops, and long-distance coaching.

The Penn State Football child abuse scandal in the US is a classic case of someone misusing his position of trust and power to abuse and coerce kids and of adults in responsible positions not taking action to stop him. Parents are left wondering, ““What do I need to look out for? How can I protect my kids? What can I teach them about protecting themselves?”

In Kidpower’s experience working with over 2 million people of all ages and abilities since 1989, here are three strategies that might have been able to prevent the terrible wrong done to these children and helped to bring this man’s abusive behavior to light much sooner.

1. Make sure you know who is in charge of your kids. Remember that anyone can be an abuser. As parents and other caring adults, we need to face the reality is that there are sexual predators who will create opportunities to be alone with kids by doing wonderful things with and for them. And, most of these offenders will seem like really nice people with excellent reputations. When people ask me to tell them what a child molester might look like, I say, “Look in the mirror - a molester looks just like anyone else!”

Most adults who choose to do great things with kids are good people who truly want to help. A coach, a youth group leader, a Big Brother/Big Sister, a religious leader, and a child therapist can all have relationships with children and teens in the context of their paid or volunteer role, and these relationships can be tremendously important to a young person. However, the vulnerability of young people to anyone put into these positions of trust is why more attention needs to be paid to screening these individuals and to following up thoroughly on any hint of a problem.

Don’t just trust someone because they are part of a reputable institution, church, or school. Check the person out for yourself, especially if he or she is going to be alone with your child. Check references. Don’t assume that someone will tell you if something bad happens. Trust your intuition if something feels uncomfortable to you. Watch out for someone who seems to single out certain kids for special attention and private relationships, who seeks social and recreational opportunities to be alone with kids

without other adults there, or who is not open to parents and other responsible adults being fully informed about and comfortable with what is going on. When in doubt, check it out!

2. Teach kids not to keep secrets about problems, touch, presents, or favors. Most abusers cultivate strong relationships with children before doing anything sexual. Often, they test a child's boundaries by being inappropriate in other ways. In the chilling book, *Conversations with a Pedophile*, the abuser, who was interviewed by the author while in prison, describes how he would use a swear word to a boy in a church youth group and then say something like, "Oops! I just said a bad word. Please don't tell your parents, because then we couldn't have fun together any more." He would then target boys who he was confident wouldn't tell.

This pedophile's strong advice to parents about protecting their kids from people like him was, "Listen to your kids!" Get kids into the habit of talking to you by asking supportive questions, being a good listener, and not lecturing. Pay attention to what they say. Let kids know that you care about what they are doing and want to know what is happening with them no matter how busy you are. Be very clear that problems, touch, presents, favors, privileges, and games should not be a secret. Teach young people how to set boundaries with people they know and care about.

3. Put Safety First! Kidpower's core principle is: *The safety and self-esteem of a child are more important than anyone's embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense.* Any of the many adults who witnessed or learned of Sandusky's behavior might have prevented years of abuse and other victims if they had reported what happened to the police. The damage to Penn State's reputation would have been far less than the damage that is being caused now.

If you suspect that there is a safety problem, especially involving children, take personal responsibility for doing something to address it. This means speaking up persistently and widely until effective action is taken to fix that problem. Don't just tell someone, even if that person is in a position of authority, and assume that your responsibility is at an end. Follow up to see what is happening. Realize that children and young people who are being abused need help and protection – and that anyone who is abusing them needs to be stopped.

The Kidpower article [*Worthy of Trust: What Organizations Need to Do to Protect Children From Harm*](#) describes what people need to do to take charge of the safety of young people in their care.

To learn more about how to protect kids from sexual abuse, see our [Child Abuse Prevention Resource Page](#).