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Stop It Now![®] prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.

What Parents Need to Know When Selecting a Program for their Child

Choosing a school or program is one of the most complicated and emotional decisions you have to make as a parent. The specific activities, the schedule, the costs, how it matches your child's needs and interest-- all these things play a part in your decision. Whether or not the school has a child sexual abuse prevention policy needs to be a consideration.

9 Questions to ask of your child's existing or prospective school and the answers you should expect to hear.

1. What is the organization's policy on child sexual abuse prevention?

To be sure your child is safe, make sure any program you are considering has a more comprehensive approach to preventing sexual and other forms of child abuse. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has defined six key components of a comprehensive approach to keeping kids safe. These include:

- Screening and selecting employees and volunteers
- Guidelines on interactions between individuals
- Monitoring behavior
- Ensuring safe physical environments
- Responding to inappropriate behavior, breaches in policy, and allegations and suspicions of child sexual abuse
- Training about child sexual abuse

2. How does the program screen staff?

The organization or program should be knowledgeable about who sexually abuses children and what puts children at risk to be abused. Ask how they screen employees and volunteers and be wary if they rely solely on criminal background checks. They should use written applications and personal interviews to learn about what previous experience someone has working with youth and to identify any potential warning signs. <http://www.stopitnow.org/warnings> For example, some people who sexually abuse children spend all of their time with children or youth and do not have any relationships (friendships, significant partners, co-workers) with adults.

351 Pleasant Street
Suite B-319

Northampton, MA 01060

Phone: 413.587.3500

Fax: 413.587.3505

www.StopItNow.org

info@StopItNow.org

HelpLine: 1.888.PREVENT



3. Are criminal background checks enough?

No. Criminal background checks can give a false sense of security. Because the vast majority of child sexual abuse goes unreported, the vast majority of people who have sexually abused children will pass a criminal background check. Too often, organizations serving kids rely solely on background checks to determine whether a person is safe to work with children. This is a very low bar. People who have sexually abused children will pass a criminal background check unless the abuse has been reported, prosecuted as a sexual crime, and the person has been found guilty.

4. Do they check references?

Reference checks provide important opportunities to learn more about an applicant's experience. When asking for references, programs should require applicants to include non-family members and should watch for gaps in references and ask about them. For example, if an applicant spent three years working at a child care facility but doesn't list anyone from the facility as a reference, this should be discussed to understand why.

5. What is their policy or code of conduct about interactions between employees/ volunteers and youth?

Organizations should have a policy regarding staff and youth interactions. Does the code include examples of positive interactions or is it so focused on what not to do that your child could miss out on appropriate, encouraging interaction? Are you comfortable with how they define appropriate and inappropriate interactions?

6. How do they monitor interactions between adults and children?

All the policies in the world won't do any good unless they are observing interactions and taking action as needed. Organizations who take seriously the safety of children understand the importance of both observation and taking action. What procedures does the organization have for monitoring interactions? What is the procedure for bringing up concerns about interactions between adults or older youth and children? Who is designated to handle these concerns?

7. Have they considered safety in the physical environment?

Safety in the physical layout can be too often overlooked. Are all areas of the space visible to others or could someone bring a child into a corner or closet without being seen by others? Do doors have windows or are they kept open so anyone walking by can see how staff are interacting with children? When you visit the space, think about how easy or difficult it will be for staff to monitor interactions. Would it be easy for someone from outside the program to gain access? Can anyone walk in or do you need to sign in?

8. How do they handle situations like inappropriate behavior or allegations of sexual abuse?

You want to be certain that they have policies and procedures in place to deal with not only evidence of sexual abuse but breaches in policies and concerning behaviors. Some situations require an internal response while others should be handled by authorities. Organizations with policies in place are better equipped to handle concerns than those who have not.



9. What training staff and volunteers receive about preventing child sexual abuse?

Training is another way that organizations send a message to staff and volunteers that they are serious about keeping children safe from abuse. Training should include information on how to identify signs of abuse and when it is appropriate to make a referral. They should also know what the procedures are for making a referral and the designated staff person to handle these referrals. Training should be ongoing and refresher courses available.

It is important that even temporary staff and volunteers are made aware of the school's child protection policy and mechanism for reporting any concerns and allegations. Some organizations even provide training to parents and other caregivers because they know the importance of knowledgeable adults in keeping children safe.

Learn More

If you find that a youth-serving program does not have a prevention policy, you can refer them to: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Report Preventing Child Sexual Abuse within Youth-Serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures, visit:

www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/PreventingChildSexualAbuse.pdf.

Nonprofit Risk Management Center, Guidance and technical assistance for nonprofits with risk management issues. <http://www.nonprofitrisk.org/>

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