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HAGELIN: Protecting children from sexual predators

By Rebecca Hagelin - - Sunday, June 17, 2012

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

Culture challenge of the week: Sexual predators

The details are horrifying.

As the trial of former Penn State football assistant coach Jerry Sandusky — who faces 52 charges of sexually abusing 10 boys — unfolds, parents all over the country shudder and hold their children close. The abuse described by Sandusky's accusers would make any loving parent want to vomit. But the horror of the abuse allegations is compounded by the indication that many adults repeatedly missed or overlooked the signs that something might be amiss.

If the allegations prove to be true, adults in those communities will have to bear the heavy guilt that children desperately needed protection — and didn't get it.

Without two loving parents — and in some cases even one loving parent — the children in this case would be easy pickings for a powerful, wicked man who was supposed to be watching out for them. But make no mistake: While the boys in the Sandusky case were mostly from poor, single-parent households, children from more affluent backgrounds or who hail from two-parent families also can fall victim to sexual abuse.

It's a mistake to look at the profile of the boys allegedly victimized by Mr. Sandusky and breathe a sigh of relief, thinking, "That couldn't happen to my kid."

Sexual abuse knows no boundaries. Predators may be found among acquaintances, teachers, family friends, family members and, of course, strangers. Indeed, sexual predators often seek jobs that give them access to children. The truly horrifying fact is that 90 percent of the time, according to StopItNow.org, children are abused by someone they

know.

Anecdotally at least, child sexual abuse is a scourge that seems to be growing. In the Washington area this past year, a number of schoolteachers were arrested and charged with sexual offenses ranging from possession of child pornography to attempted indecent liberties with a minor. Other jurisdictions kept a similar, alarming pace of arrests. The spike in Internet child pornography is troubling, too, fueling in-person sex offenses.

Given the trauma endured by children who are victims of sexual abuse, it's disturbing that many sex offenders go free after little or no jail time. But that's a column for another day.

Don't get discouraged, though. Abuse can be prevented. Here's how:

How to save your family: Teach, trust and take action

Visit the top-notch website StopItNow.org, which offers parents and educators excellent resources on sexual abuse. Materials include lists of the common warning signs that suggest a child might be vulnerable to abuse, indications that an adult might have an unhealthy interest in children, FAQs about child sexual abuse, suggestions about keeping children safe in sports and organized activities, and information about state sex-offender registries.

What's the best strategy, then, for keeping children safe? Three simple steps: teach, trust and take action.

First, teach.

Teach your spouse, children, friends and co-workers to recognize the warning signs of child sexual abuse or of an adult's unhealthy interest in children. Like yellow, flashing lights that warn of danger on the road ahead, these warning signs tell us to slow down, pay attention and beware.

Teach your children about inappropriate touching and to be wary of "tricky" adults who play games and keep secrets. Tell them when and how to say no to adults who act or speak inappropriately.

Second, trust.

Trust your gut and teach your children to trust theirs. I always have told my own children

that if they feel the hair on the back of their neck beginning to stand or sense danger in the pit of their stomach, it is time to flee.

If a person or situation, such as being alone with another adult or hugging a stranger, makes your child feel uncomfortable, he needs to listen to that gut feeling and get out of harm's way. Promise your children that you always will take their safety concerns, feelings and fears seriously — in short, that you trust them.

Third, take action.

A child who perceives an uncomfortable or unsafe circumstance needs to take action: Tell a trusted adult, send a text message, make a call to you or another designated person, and run. Screaming also can be a life saver!

And as for adults who observe troubling signs — we also must learn to face the situation head-on rather than turning a timid or blind eye, like some of the adults in Mr. Sandusky's case seemed to do. Make a vow now that should you ever suspect that a child is at risk, you will take action by asking questions, paying attention to details and patterns, intervening when danger is imminent and reporting any abuse allegations immediately.

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