



# Stop It Now!®

*Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children*

## About Stop It Now!

**Stop It Now!** believes that all adults must accept the responsibility to recognize, acknowledge and confront the behaviors that lead to the sexual abuse of children. We offer adults tools they can use to prevent sexual abuse – before there's a victim to heal or an offender to punish. In collaboration with our network of community-based Stop It Now! programs, we reach out to adults who are concerned about their own or others' sexualized behavior toward children.

## About the Stop It Now! Helpline

If you need additional resources and support, call the Stop It Now! Helpline (1.888.PREVENT), available Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Eastern time. For more than 10 years, our national toll-free Helpline has provided thousands of adults a unique outlet to confidentially voice their concerns. The Helpline offers callers the support, information and resources they need to help keep children safe, and to create healthier families and communities.

## For more information, contact Stop It Now! at:

351 Pleasant Street  
Suite B-319  
Northampton, MA 01060  
Tel: 413.587.3500  
Fax: 413.587.3505  
info@stopitnow.org

## Lessons from the Field

### Reflections on the Controversy Surrounding the Virginia Stop It Now! Ad Campaign

By Peter Pollard, Director of Public Education

The [Stop It Now! advertising campaign](#) in Virginia, sponsored by the Virginia Department of Health, recently expanded its reach to new markets. After a 2005 launch in Greater Richmond, the campaign reached more Virginians this past summer by encouraging adults with questions or concerns about child sexual abuse to call the [Stop It Now! Helpline](#) or visit [www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org). The Helpline (1.888.PREVENT) is a unique national resource that offers adults a confidential place to discuss any concerns about the issue with professionals – and to explore other resources and actions that are appropriate for their situation.



The Stop It Now! Virginia ad campaign billboard.

One [Roanoke Times editorial](#) opined that this “third prong” approach to combating child sexual abuse “may prove even more helpful than interactive maps that point out where pedophiles live.”

Like other Stop It Now! campaigns, the Virginia campaign generated some controversy as well. The Virginia billboards were featured recently in the [Wall Street Journal](#), on [ABC's Good Morning America](#) and [by Rush Limbaugh](#) in stories that questioned whether the billboard portrayed all men in a negative light. The comments gave us another valuable reminder to always be conscious of the possibility of unintended consequences. The billboards, which had previously been

displayed over 18 months at various locations in Virginia, were taken down according to schedule in early July.

Since it was founded in 1992, Stop It Now! has consistently advocated for strong, nurturing relationships between children and their fathers as one of the most effective means of protecting children from sexual abuse. Although the Virginia ad is in no way intended to suggest that loving interactions between a father and child should be seen as suspect, we understand how the image might be misinterpreted in that way. If some felt our approach distracted from the important goal of educating adults about protecting children, others may too. That concerns us.

We all have an interest in making sure that adults have the skills they need to protect our children from sexual abuse. Since sexual abuse is mostly invisible to bystanders, a lot of Stop It Now!'s work focuses on encouraging people to trust their "gut" feelings and to notice and acknowledge when they feel uncomfortable about how an adult, any adult, is interacting with a child.

We invite people with concerns about their own or someone else's behavior to visit our website ([www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)) to get information or to call our confidential Helpline (1.888.PREVENT) to discuss their concerns with a trained professional. We then help those callers take steps to protect any child at risk, hopefully *before* any harm has occurred. The challenge is to capture that idea in a billboard using a photo and a few simple words.

Stop It Now! has been working for more than 15 years to cut through stereotypes and caricatures about people who sexually abuse children. The startling reality is that most children who are sexually abused are abused by someone they know, often someone they love, not by some scary stranger. And sadly, statistics show that most people who sexually offend are men, although that obviously does not imply that most men are abusers. In Virginia, where the billboards were displayed, research shows that nearly 90 percent of all sexual abuse is committed by males.

That doesn't mean men in general pose a risk to children. Unfortunately, some view those statistics as an indictment against all men. They are not. The challenge for us all, but particularly for us men, is to find a way to acknowledge that reality without blaming all fathers or even all men. The critical goal is, and always has to be, adults protecting children.

That's what Stop It Now! has stood for since 1992. The foundation of all Stop It Now! prevention programs is the insistence that children should not be the ones who have to report or even talk to adults about child sex abuse. [Adults talking about their concerns with other adults](#) is not only the best way to prevent child sexual abuse, but also allows children to be children for as long as possible.

Many of the letters we've received about the Virginia campaign included thoughtful comments from both men and women. They told us that by portraying a man as potentially harmful to a child, we missed an opportunity to attract some men to a cause many of them would readily support. That would be a loss. Hopefully, they and we can use the lessons gleaned from

this experience to engage in even more productive future conversations about protecting children.

Bottom line: we've been reminded again of the power of stereotypes, which inevitably stir "good and evil", "either/or" reactions. Fear leads to paralysis and fosters anger.

Stop It Now! is about hope and empowerment.

We'll continue to be mindful about the unintended consequences of messages that seem pretty straightforward to us, but may inadvertently alienate potential allies.

### **Read other local press coverage:**

*Campaign advocates recognizing, reporting suspected abuse*, The Virginian-Pilot, 6/21/07  
<http://content.hamptonroads.com/story.cfm?story=127074&ran=222513>

*Campaign to prevent child sex abuse expanding in Virginia*, Daily Press (Newport News) and the Associated Press (6/25/07).  
[http://www.wavy.com/Global/story.asp?S=6718270&nav=menu45\\_2](http://www.wavy.com/Global/story.asp?S=6718270&nav=menu45_2)

*Something doesn't seem right. Now what?* (editorial), Roanoke Times (6/29/07)  
<http://www.roanoke.com/editorials/wb/122532>

*C-ville ad riles the right*, C-VILLE Charlottesville's Newsweekly (Issue #19.30)  
[http://c-ville.com/index.php?cat=141404064431134&ShowArticle\\_ID=11432307070993564](http://c-ville.com/index.php?cat=141404064431134&ShowArticle_ID=11432307070993564)

**Stop It Now!** has a wide range of resources on its website ([www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)) including:

- Answers to [commonly asked questions](#) about child sexual abuse.
- Checklists of [warning sign behaviors](#) in an adult or child you care about.
- Tips and strategies for having difficult conversations with other adults contained in our [Let's Talk guide](#). We know that talking about child sexual abuse is already hard – and it's even more difficult when you care about all of the people involved.
- Accurate information on [sexual abuse between children](#).

### **You Can Help Stop Child Sexual Abuse**

**Stop It Now!** is an independent, national non-profit organization that depends on the commitment and support of courageous individuals and organizations.

To find out more about what you can do to help prevent child sexual abuse - and to make a financial contribution - visit [Stop It Now!](#) online at [www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org).