




Adventist Risk Management, Inc.



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How to Spot Red Flag Behaviors

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If you do an online search for news about “youth pastor abusing children,” unfortunately, you will unearth a myriad of results. The same thing would happen if you did a similar search for daycare workers, PE teachers, sports coaches, etc. Anywhere there are children, the risk of exposure to sex offenders is real.

The abusers aren’t limited to males either. Take this headline from the news a few years ago: “‘Hummer Mom’ Christine Hubbs Convicted of Underage Sex, Says She’s Not a ‘Predator.’”^[1] Christine Hubbs is the wife of a well-known dentist in California. Even prominent, successful women can be convicted of these crimes.

It is important to recognize that you cannot spot a pedophile by their looks. They come in all shapes and sizes. They come from every socioeconomic class, all ages, disabled and abled, men and women. So, if we can’t pick them out of a crowd, how can we protect children, especially in our churches? That’s what we will be discussing here.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND RED FLAG BEHAVIORS

Most sex offenders are male. However, research suggests that between 1% and 9% of those who offend sexually worldwide are women. The percentage varies depending on the source of data, but most estimates settle on 5%.^[2] This means that we need to be watchful of these red flag/grooming behaviors if we want to keep our kids safe.

According to Cory Jewell Jensen, co-director of the Center for Behavioral Intervention in Beaverton, Oregon, “Most child sex offenders commit dozens of crimes before they are apprehended.”^[3] In a training entitled “Creepy but Crucial Information: Advanced Grooming as Described by Sex Offenders,” she also points out that 5% of the male population (1 in 20 men) suffer from pedophilia (Seto, 2008). And fewer than 5% of sex offenders are ever apprehended.^[4]

GROOMING AND RED FLAG BEHAVIORS

If you read about the details of the arrests of these abusers, you will find some consistencies in their behaviors. We call these “red flag” behaviors. While some of these behaviors may not appear terribly alarming on their own, if there are several, it should give you a reason to

pause and pay closer attention to whether it is appropriate for that person to volunteer at your church. Grooming can take a long time, and offenders can be very patient. They will groom parents, family members, and the children. They do this to gain the family's trust, so if the child does report, the child will be less likely to be believed. When an offender grooms the family or those closest to the child, they are less likely to notice the offender's "red flags." There are subtle differences between grooming and red flags. Grooming is a process that takes time. Red flags are the actions they take to groom. So, what is the grooming process and how does it relate to red flags? Let's break that down.

The grooming process includes:

- Identifying and targeting a victim
- Gaining trust and access
- Playing a role in the child's life
- Isolating the child
- Creating secrecy around the relationship
- Initiating sexual contact
- Controlling the relationship

If you can identify any of the above behaviors in an individual, that is a red flag because these are some of the first steps they are going to take before they offend. But grooming is only part of it. There are other behaviors you can spot as well.

For instance, they may become friends with the parents, then offer to take their child to sporting events or to eat ice cream. Then they may start coaching the child's soccer team or volunteering as a Pathfinder counselor, etc. As you can see, grooming and red flag behaviors go hand in hand.

Here are red flag behaviors to be aware of:

- Giving gifts (e.g., video games, movie tickets, a skateboard, clothes, candy, etc.)
- Violating boundaries (e.g., tickling or touching when asked not to, continuing to tell jokes even after being asked to stop, etc.)
- Touching a child inappropriately in front of people to see if they react
- Getting upset when asked to stop a behavior
- Making inappropriate jokes around young people
- Spending more time around children than people their own age
- Asking children to keep secrets
- Knowing a lot about trends young people are interested in

These behaviors should give reason to question whether that individual is right for volunteering in the church/school environment.

FOLLOWING YOUR INTUITION

Your "gut feeling" can play a role when looking at a volunteer prospect. There are individuals you just don't feel right being around, or there is just something that doesn't seem right, but you can't put your finger on it. Often, especially in the church environment, we dismiss those feelings when we should trust them.

So, when we are talking about keeping kids safe in our churches, we have several things in place to do this. We have a code of conduct we expect our volunteers to follow. We ask them to do child protection training. We require background checks for anyone working with children or whom they view as leaders in the church. Finally, we should also do referencing by an individual who is not associated with the local church.

When a local church is doing the referencing for their own volunteers, the people giving the references tend not to be as honest about their feelings—that is if the person in charge of referencing even checks the references. After all, they know the individual too, so they may not think they need an official reference check.

That is why we recommend having referencing done by an independent individual, perhaps the pastor or someone at the conference level.

TAKEAWAYS

1. Don't ignore any red flag behaviors when selecting volunteers for children/youth.
2. Make referencing a priority.
3. Trust your gut instinct.

We want to say that churches are a safe place; however, that is an incorrect statement. Churches are a place that offenders target due to the nature of the environment. Therefore, we need to do our part to create safety protocols. That way, our children can feel safe, and we know we have taken every available step to protect them.

References

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