

Protecting God's Children: Step Four-Be Aware of Child and Youth Behavior

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“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”

—Benjamin Franklin

I was in a local, large home improvement store looking up and down the aisles for something when I overheard a father and young son, about four years old, having this conversation: “Papi what is sand paper?” “Paper with sand glued on it so you can rub it on wood and make it smoother,” said the Dad. “Why,” asked the little boy. No answer from the Dad. “Papi, why?” The dad is trying to locate the grade of sandpaper he wants, and I have abandoned my search for spray paint to people watch. “Here,” says the dad, “Feel this.” “Ouch,” says the kid. “How did they get it on there?” “Glue,” teaches the father. “Why don’t you just rub the sand on the wood,” asked the son. “Because putting it on paper makes it easier ... look, feel this, it is finer, and this one is rough. There are different kinds of sand paper for each job,” stated the father. “Too much work,” declares the son and off they went.

And so it goes. We all have these stories from our own families—experiences of trying to explain to a child the reasons “Why.” Sometimes we can become exasperated from it; other times it is a joy to teach and watch someone learn.

In Step Four—Be Aware of Child and Youth Behavior, we have the opportunity to encourage parents and others who care for children and young people to be patient with their charges and take their role seriously. Sometimes in between all of those questions, answers and cues, is an opportunity for adults to learn.

Modeling for children by allowing them to see how you are involved and what you are accomplishing shows them that it is a two-way street. Getting down on the floor and playing a game with them, or building with blocks, or playing with dolls is a wonderful opportunity to follow the tenets of Step Four by being involved first hand in the lives of children.

The meaning of “be aware of child and youth behavior.” is parents and caring adults should know what is happening in the lives of the children under their care. To be effective, caregivers must pay attention to the subtle signs that indicate a child may be in harm’s way. We further ask them why it is important to be aware of child and youth behavior. Letting them know that communication is key in this step when they observe, talk and listen to their children is helpful in detecting if a child is in danger. Caregivers might notice a sudden change in behavior such as moodiness or aggression, losing interest in school or neglecting their personal hygiene. These are some of the signs that could be indications of child sexual abuse.

1. Talk to your children: Be clear, direct, understanding and consistent.
2. Listen to your children: Read between the lines; often what isn’t being said offers the most information. Probe for further evidence, be proactive and take the lead.

3. Observe your children, including their Internet and cell phone use: Parents are in charge. Know everything about your child's life, their friends and their friend's families. Be thorough.
4. Let your children know they can tell you anything: While you clearly teach your family values, make certain that you say your love for your children is absolute and all encompassing and is more important than anything they do, even if it is bad or wrong.
5. Discuss with children where their private parts are and that not all adults or children should see or touch them: Children should learn their entire body belongs to them and it is sacred as made by God. Teach children that no one has the right to touch them unless to keep them clean and healthy, and it is OK to communicate if they are uncomfortable.
6. Talk to your children often about protecting themselves, including when using the Internet and/or other technology: Have frequent conversations about these important family rules.
7. Teach your children what to do if someone tries to touch them: Use frequent, sound bite methods to teach and remind them what to do.
8. Teach your children what to do if someone makes them uncomfortable: Teach them the full meaning of word uncomfortable. Teach them to not be afraid to speak up when they are uncomfortable.
9. Teach your children what to do if they have an uncomfortable online experience: Develop family rules about Internet and technology use. Create a joint plan of attack allowing the children some ownership of the safety rules that the family discusses and creates together.

Step Four is a wonderful opportunity to affirm the role of parents as primary educators of their children and caring adults as collaborators to assist parents in this monumental task. It is also a chance to give concrete ways to communicate with children and to teach the basics of open, honest and successful communication.