

Worthy of Trust

What Organizations Must Do to Protect Children From Harm

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Kidpower is an international nonprofit leader in protecting children, teens, and adults, including those with special needs, from bullying, abuse, kidnapping, and other violence. The following article is an excerpt from the chapter on protecting children from child abuse in [The Kidpower Book for Caring Adults: Personal Safety, Self-Protection, Confidence, and Advocacy for Young People](#). Visit www.kidpower.org to learn more about our extensive free on-line Library, affordable publications, workshops, and consulting services. Please contact safety@kidpower.org for permission to use information.

To be worthy of trust, individuals need to know how to take charge of the safety of the young people in their care. This is true of organizations as well. Unfortunately, as ongoing news stories make compellingly clear, even very prominent institutions can have difficulty seeing and stopping abuse, bullying, harassment, and other dangerous behavior.

Here are some ideas about why this happens and how we can work together to build cultures of caring, respect, and safety for everyone in our families, schools, youth organizations, religious institutions, companies, and other groups.

Why Individuals and Organizations Have Trouble Dealing With Problems

As individuals, the drive to preserve our self-image of being a good person is normal. When faced with behavior that might be harmful to a child, taking responsibility requires:

- Strong awareness
- An understanding of the impact of this unsafe behavior
- Healthy boundaries
- Excellent communication skills
- A high level of personal integrity

Without all of these qualities, most of us are likely to try to protect our self-image rather than acknowledge and solve the problem.

When confronted with a difficult situation, we might:

- Ignore the concern, hoping it will go away
- Make excuses by saying, "This happened because of things outside my control."
- Deny responsibility, by saying, "But it's not my job to do this."
- Deny that there is a problem by saying, "That didn't really happen."
- Minimize the concern by saying, "It wasn't that bad."
- Counter-attack by saying, "This problem is actually the fault of the other person."

The more prominent or well-known a group is in its community, the more this need to preserve reputation gets magnified. Most people who have a deep need to believe in the integrity of their family or organization will try to avoid information that conflicts with this image. This is why people tend to look the other way, use the Wishing Technique, make excuses, minimize, or blame the victim rather than do something to fix the problem.

The result is that institutions often try to protect their reputations rather than address issues proactively – unless and until their members at all levels decide to do differently.

Four Decisions We Need to Make

Each individual and group that cares for children – be this family, religious, educational, social, health, or recreational – can learn how to be open to negative information and address problems in a constructive, balanced fashion. Hiding from potential issues doesn't work, and neither does over-reacting.

Here are four decisions we need to make to protect the safety of the children in our care:

- 1) **Put safety first.** Kidpower's underlying principle is, "The safety and self-esteem of a child are more important than anyone's embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense." Remember that saving face in the short run can cause terrible harm and can also lead to severe damage to your reputation in the long run. Putting safety first means making all forms of emotional and physical violence and abuse explicitly and publicly against the rules.
- 2) **Make it safe for everyone to speak up.** One of Kidpower's fundamental boundary rules is that, "Problems should not be secrets." However, people are too often stopped from speaking up about safety concerns because of fear of loss – of credibility, jobs, money, and/or relationships. Addressing safety concerns sooner rather than later can prevent problems from escalating and can help to build a reputation for integrity and commitment to upholding values. Making it safe for people to speak up means having everyone in positions of power know how to put their egos and fear aside and LISTEN to someone's story. Often, stories have more than one side, so be prepared to listen without judgment and to look for solutions rather than blame.
- 3) **Uphold the rules in a fair, equitable fashion.** Be prepared to take action to stop unsafe behavior but don't overreact. If you see a problem, stay calm, make sure you understand the whole story, listen to different perspectives, and think about the purpose of the safety rules. Applying rules automatically without thought can lead to overreactions that reduce safety. A kindergartner trying to peek under a little girl's skirt should simply be stopped – and this behavior is not the same as a group of kids pulling off another kid's pants, which requires a higher level of management. The two situations, even in the same group of children, call for different responses. At the same time, no one's power, charisma, or popularity should place this person above the law or the rules.
- 4) **Have appropriate consequences for unsafe behavior.** A person who pushes boundaries needs to learn how to respect the boundaries of others. If this behavior is hurtful, he or she needs to make amends and show commitment to behaving differently. Positions of power are not a right – they are a privilege. An adult's failure to manage a privilege safely logically results in a loss of that privilege. A person who abuses alcohol needs to stay away from alcohol or lose the permission to drive. An adult who has molested a child needs to lose the privilege of being in a position of power over children ever again.

What Everyone Needs to Know About Keeping Kids Safe

Kidpower is often used as a resource by families, schools, and other groups after abuse committed by a person in a position of trust and power – or after a child in a school or youth group has harmed another child because the adults in charge did not notice and stop the bullying. Everyone is better off if both children and their adults learn People Safety skills before anyone gets hurt.

To keep kids safe, both children and adults need to know:

- 1) What is safe behavior and what is not. This needs to be clearly defined for all areas – hygiene, supervision of activities, driving, swimming, personal safety, and so on. For guidelines about safe behavior related to touch, see Kidpower article about [Touch in Healthy Relationships](#).
- 2) That sometimes people, even adults in leadership positions, have problems that cause them to do things that are unsafe. See article on [Sometimes the People Kids Love Have Problems](#).
- 3) That unsafe behavior, especially by an adult in charge, should NEVER have to be a secret, even if you already promised to keep it a secret. See article on [What Kinds of Secrets are Okay to keep and What Are Not](#).

4) That adults should be in charge of keeping kids safe. We want children to take charge of their own safety as best they can, but the bottom line is that adults are responsible for ensuring that children are protected from harm until they are able to protect themselves. In any case, it is NEVER the child's fault if an adult does something unsafe.

5) How to speak up and stop unsafe behavior. Speaking up takes both skill and courage. Even young children can learn how to stay, "Please stop." Or, "That's not safe!" And young people can learn that it is never too late to tell.

6) How to be persistent in getting the help you need. Children can learn how to find adults who will listen and how to keep asking until an adult helps to solve the problem.

Don't Give Your Power Away

Stay in charge of the people who care for your kids. Don't let anyone's prestige, position, kindness, or authority blind you to potential abuses of power. Remember that an organization that does tremendous good can still have members who do tremendous harm.

Even if a person, place, or group seems great at first, keep checking in. Drop by unexpectedly. Pay attention to potential safety problems. Be prepared to advocate for solutions rather than just hoping that problems will fix themselves. Trust your own intuition and judgment and take action if anything seems wrong to you. Most of all stay in good communication with your kids so that you really know what's happening in their lives.

Positions of power, authority, and leadership are privileges, but safety for children is a right – and kids need their adults to protect that right. As adults, we are responsible for making safety for children a priority at home, at school, and in our communities. We need to make sure our words and actions put safety first – ahead of embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense – every day, everywhere, with everyone. For more information about Kidpower's resources for teaching these People Safety Skills and concepts, please visit our free online [Library](#) and our [Store](#).