

SAFETY BULLETIN

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Spotlight on Responding to Red Flags: The Role of Staff | Issue 12

In The News

Teachers saw Ms. Hurley eating lunch daily with a small group of seventh graders. They noticed also that this group often stayed after school in her classroom. Some were aware that her “My Space” page included students as “friends.” When Ms. Hurley was arrested for raping a 13-year-old boy from the group, teachers reported that they regarded her prior behavior as inappropriate but never said anything.

An after school care worker notified her supervisor that she saw Emmett, a co-worker, spending too much alone time with an 8-year-old girl. She had even seen the girl in Emmett’s lap. Her reports led to Emmett’s termination when he refused to change his behavior, despite program policies against it.



The Importance of Responding

We are dedicating this Praesidium Safety Bulletin and the next to the importance of responding as a key factor in preventing sexual abuse. Increasingly, Praesidium case studies and investigations reveal that staff who react when they see policy violations support zero tolerance in the organization and stop drift from standards. The next issue of the Safety Bulletin will focus on the role administration plays in responding to red flags and to allegations of abuse.



Why Respond ?

News stories like those above portray the importance of responding swiftly to red-flag behaviors. In many of the sexual abuse incidents Praesidium analyzes, bystanders often report, “I thought something wasn’t right,” or “I never realized that it could lead to *this* [the incident].” But they did not report their concerns. They were waiting until they saw or could prove the abuse. And while they were waiting, a child in their program was sexually abused.

Child molesters display patterns of behavior when they are grooming children. They are overly physical, give gifts, create one-to-one opportunities. Interrupting these behaviors prevents child molesters from operating in your programs.

Be aware, however, that not everyone who displays red-flag behaviors is a molester. Sometimes adults may simply be unaware that their behaviors are against policy or that their behaviors could be misinterpreted, both by observers and by the child. Staff response to these red-flags prevents innocent adults from being falsely accused.



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Five Steps for Responding

When you see red-flag behavior or policy violations, act immediately.

- 1. Interrupt the interaction:** When you see a colleague, a child, a parent or guardian, anyone who is behaving inappropriately with a child, step in. Introduce yourself, or, ask to speak with them privately.
- 2. Explain the behavior you observe:** Tell the person exactly what you saw that concerned you. For instance, say, "I saw Barry sitting in your lap. Remember that allowing an 8-year-old into your lap is against policy."
- 3. Explain the change you want to see:** Suggest a better way to interact. Say, "If Barry needs comforting, let him sit beside you, or give him a side hug." You'll be safer that way."

4. Tell your supervisor: Your supervisor should always know your concerns, especially if you are not comfortable interrupting the situation yourself. Report your concerns as soon as they arise.

5. Continue to monitor: Watch for change. You play a vital role in the safety of your organization. Your active responses can make a difference in the life of a child or colleague.



Message to Administrators:

Staff report only if you provide easy ways for them to do so. Be sure that they know what to report and how. Offer multiple avenues, including an anonymous method. Be willing to accept all reports—concerns as well as allegations. The next safety bulletin will focus in more depth on exactly how supervisors and administrators should respond to staff reports.

Spotlight:

Many organizations use the Praesidium Hotline to report concerns, red-flag behaviors, and policy violations. The hotline is answered by Praesidium staff only and provides anonymity to callers. If you would like to make this available to your staff, please contact us at 817.801.7773 or email to info@PraesidiumInc.com.



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