

Communicate Your Concerns About Boundary Issues, Too

By Sharon Doty, J.D., M.H.R.

(March 2019)

Recently a friend came to me with a situation she was facing that, in her view, had no easy answer. She has never participated in a VIRTUS® program but had just attended a child protection session I led for a group of people who work with children in my community. She has also received some of the traditional training for adults that focuses on recognizing children who might have been abused, dealing with disclosures and reporting suspected abuse. This situation did not fit into any of those boxes so she was a little off balance and unsure of how to proceed.

Here is the scenario: She has middle schoolers and a large vehicle, so she is often the driver for groups of girls—her own and their friends. Her children are very open and outspoken and they promote that type of communication with their friends. The girls are also comfortable talking about anything and everything while riding in the car, even though they know the mother can hear every word. More than once, she has heard them talking about one of the younger men who teaches at their school. The conversation centers on the girls being uncomfortable around him. My friend has asked the girls a few questions intended to get to the heart of the discomfort and is left with the concern that although nothing has happened so far, there is an unidentified boundary type of risk with this teacher and she is unsure how to handle it. We talked about the importance of communicating her concern to someone who can do something about it—and then looked to see who that might be. In doing this, we created a plan of action that gave her some peace of mind and would put the school on notice to have their eye on this teacher and his interactions with students.

This is precisely the kind of situation that Step 5 regarding communicating concerns intends to address. Most people who work with children are familiar with state laws about reporting and the mandates that accompany those laws. Reporting laws focus our attention on the children around us. We are mandated to be aware of their behavior and listen to them and then, if we believe that a child is being or has been abused, we report that information to law enforcement or child protection. Children in unstable, unsafe, and vulnerable situations are counting on each of us to follow that law and do the right thing for them.

However, Step 5 is about more than that. It is about holding each other accountable, and paying attention to the adults interacting with our children, and identifying those who are behaving in a way that raises concerns. This is a new idea for most of the world. We are not used to scrutinizing the behaviors of others, and we are a little uncomfortable with the idea.

In my experience, it seems more comfortable to watch for signs in children than to observe and scrutinize the behavior of adults we work with and around. And, while reporting is never easy, we know that the law mandates that we take those actions in order to protect children—so we do. Dealing with our concerns about the behavior of an adult, or in the case of the woman who came to me, the unease that children expressed about how he acts and interacts them is much more uncomfortable and difficult for us because we feel like we are accusing someone of something without having any evidence. But, we aren't accusing anyone of anything when we address inappropriate behavior and boundary violations, or communicate our concerns. By doing these things, it's the only way we can prevent child sexual abuse from happening at all.

The plan I created with my friend raises awareness with both the school and the teacher that something needs to be tended to with this teacher—for his safety as well as that of the children in the school. She is willing to deal with the discomfort because the lives of her children and others she knows and cares for are at risk. During our discussion, she realized that her discomfort with having a conversation to raise awareness about these behavior issues is nothing compared to the harm to a child if this turns out to be an indicator that he is a child molester. Even if he isn't, his boundary issues could have led to a slippery slope of problems, and could also be conditioning children to more easily accept inappropriate behavior from someone who truly does have bad intentions. My friend also conceded that if his behavior is just thoughtless and careless, he needs to know so that he changes the way he interacts and eliminates all of the above-mentioned concerns.

Step 5 admonishes us to Communicate our Concerns. It means precisely that. If you have a concern about the behavior of an adult who has access to children, communicate it directly to the person or to someone who can do something about it, such as a supervisor. If you have a concern that a child is being or has been abused, report it to civil authorities. The central element of this Step is "Communicate." Tell someone who can do something to impact the situation.