

# ABUSE

## RESPONDING TO RED FLAGS & SUSPICIOUS BEHAVIOR

### Why Respond?

In many of the sexual abuse incidents 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, an individual in their program was sexually abused.

Abusers display patterns of behavior when they are grooming the individual. They are overtly physical, give gifts, create one-to-one opportunities. Interrupting these behaviors prevents abusers from operating in your programs.

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

### Five Steps for Responding

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

#### 1 INTERRUPT THE INTERACTION

When you see someone who is behaving inappropriately with an individual, step in. Introduce yourself, or ask to speak privately with them.

#### 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 an individual.



### Message to Administrators

Staff members will 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.

A general rule in risk management is that if you respond to small problems, you prevent big problems. Your staff are your eyes and ears in the programs. When they bring information forward, and you respond appropriately, you are teaching them that you care about what they have to say and that you are true to your “zero tolerance” for abuse policy. **Moreover, you may be keeping those you serve from abuse.**

## 5 Steps to Take When Problems Are Reported

### 1 TAKE ALL REPORTS SERIOUSLY

Fortunately most reports do not reveal serious incidents, but it is important to know which ones do without responding to all of them. Often the first response to complaints about suspicious behavior is to minimize them, but by taking each report seriously, you have the opportunity to stop behavior that is inappropriate or that could lead to abuse.

### 2 GATHER INFORMATION

The second step is to gather information. For example, if you receive a complaint about an employee, you may begin by reviewing the employee's personnel file to see if he or she has been reported for similar behavior in the past. You may observe the staff or interview other staff and supervisors. You may want to check work schedules for the day and time in question to help verify whether the alleged incident could have occurred as reported and whether the accused was working alone at the time. Be sure that you have a clear statement of the allegation. In short, before you make a decision about how to respond to a report, be sure that you have all the information you need to make a solid decision.

### 3 DOCUMENT

Document the report as it was explained to you. If you choose to add comments not relayed by the reporter, clearly delineate your own comments or observations by putting them in a separate section of the document. Continue to document your activities as you gather additional information. Why do this? We forget small details that may be important later if the case reveals actual abuse or results in legal action. Besides, documentation allows you-and others- to review your actions and verify that you responded appropriately.

### 4 ACT

Depending on what you discover while gathering information, you can next decide on what action best addresses the situation. You may want to involve others at this point, especially for employee discipline or other serious matters. You may choose any one or several of the following:

- Increase monitoring or supervision of the employee
- Speak with the employee
- Retrain the employee
- Suspend the employee
- Initiate progressive disciplinary process
- Report your concerns to your supervisor
- Conduct a formal incident review or investigation
- Terminate the employee
- Notify authorities
- Notify parents or guardians

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However you respond, take one more action as well: get back to the person who reported the incident. You do not have to give details regarding personnel or confidential matters, but you can reassure this person that his or her concern has been addressed. Staff will have more confidence about reporting once they know that you will take the necessary steps to solve the problem.

### 5 DEVELOP ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSE

Finally, once the dust has settled, consider whether the report uncovers a larger problem. For example, did you learn that an important policy was frequently violated? Or that many employees knew of the concern but did not know what to do about it? Or whether your employees did not have the information they needed to adequately perform their jobs. Analyzing a single incident in this way will reveal whether you have a problem with one person or a systemic problem that requires a change to your policies, your response systems, or training.

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