

Working Together to Protect Our Children

You have just received a telephone call from the juvenile division of your local police department. Your son has told the school nurse that an uncle has sexually abused him, and the police are investigating.

Or, you are changing the bed linens on your daughter's bed and under the mattress you find a small plastic bag with what you suspect is marijuana and some cigarette papers.

As a parent can you picture yourself in either of these situations, or do you feel that, "This could never happen in my family?"

While we all hope that our children will never be victims of child abuse or become drug abusers, both of these problems have reached nearly epidemic proportions in this country, and we are all affected.

In a survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times*, 22 percent of Americans reported that they had been sexually abused as children. A 1983 national survey showed that drugs are in the elementary schools and that even fourth graders have acquired drug abuse habits.

Hardly a day goes by that we do not hear about the problems of drug abuse and child abuse in our society. No greater challenges face the modern family; none raises more anxieties among parents.

Historically, through its national and local health and safety committees, the BSA has had an outstanding record of protecting its members. It continues in this role as a leader in the war on drugs and in combating all forms of child abuse.

In the area of drug abuse, the BSA's award winning program, "Drugs: A Deadly Game," provides educational materials for parents, youth leaders, and youths of all ages. As to child abuse, the BSA has developed a strategy that includes educating Scout volunteers, parents, and Scouts themselves to aid in its detection and prevention.

Both of these problems are addressed in a removable parent's supplement included in each of the current Wolf, Bear, Webelos Scout, and Boy Scout handbooks. Called "How to Protect Your Children from Child Abuse and Drug Abuse: A Parent's Guide," it is available from your local council service center in case your son has an older edition of his handbook. Council service centers also have Spanish translations of the booklet.

The parent's guide helps families develop protective strategies with their children. It provides essential information about both child abuse—particularly child sexual abuse—and drug abuse, so that parents are in the best possible position to help their children. For example, one of the exercises in the guide calls for the parent to ask a child what *he* or *she* would do to thwart an abuser in various realistic situations. This exercise is called, "What if . . .?"

The approach that the Boy Scouts of America has taken to deal with the problem of child abuse is based upon the "Three Rs of Youth Protection."

The first R is *RECOGNIZE*. Children must learn to recognize situations in which they are at risk. These situations are based upon strategies commonly used by child molesters. Since most child molesters are known to the child—family members, or someone in a position of authority over the child, we can no longer simply warn children about "stranger danger."

The process used by a child molester is both predatory and seductive. He selects his victim (most molesters are male) and begins gradually to seduce the child. Molesters appear to have an uncanny ability to select, as victims, children who may be experiencing a need for extra attention and affection. The molester provides the attention and affection that gradually become sexual in nature.

In order to be successful, a molester needs access to children. While it is true that most often this person is a member of the family, it is possible for him or her to be a school teacher, police officer, physician, youth leader—in short, anyone who would seem a most unlikely suspect.

The parent's guide presents rules for child safety that will help your children recognize what to be wary of, regardless of who the suspected abuser may be.

The second R is *RESIST*. Children must learn that most child molesters will stop if the child resists—they want a willing victim. Your child has to learn to trust his or her instincts and feel free to react assertively when feeling threatened. Very few child molesters resort to physical force.

In order to effectively resist, children must learn that they have rights, such as the right to say no to unwanted touching or affection. They also need to realize that if the situation warrants, they can run, scream, make a scene, and physically fight off unwanted advances—and that *you* will respect their decision.

Since family members are the most likely molesters, children should be empowered to resist unwanted attention from any of them. In the parent's guide, there are suggestions for holding family meetings to resolve this kind of issue.

The third R is *REPORT*. Children should be encouraged to tell their parent, teacher, or other trusted adult whenever they encounter questionable behavior by an older youth or an adult. Reporting an attempted or actual molestation is very difficult for children. In the survey by the *Los Angeles Times*, one-third of those who reported that they had been sexually abused as children did not reveal the abuse until well into adulthood.

A primary reason that children do not tell is fear that their parents will not believe them. The parent's guide tells you what to do when a child discloses such abuse.

By discussing the need for them to report *before* anything happens, you can reassure your children that they *can* tell you anything.

Children can be encouraged to report attempted or actual abuse when you help them realize that other children will also be hurt if they do not report. Why? Because child molesters often have many victims.

Another reason that children are reluctant to tell is that they are afraid the molester will get into trouble because of them. This is particularly true if the molester is part of the family or has had a close emotional relationship with the child. Children need to know that the *only* way that many molesters can get help in overcoming their perversion is by being reported.

Another key element in the BSA's strategy to combat child abuse is implementing policies that create barriers to child sexual abuse within the program. For example, the BSA has long prohibited any kind of physical "hazing" as a part of its program. There are *no* secret societies within Scouting, and *all* ceremonies are open to parental observation.

As parents confronting problems of both child abuse and drug abuse, the best preventive strategy is to communicate with your children. The parent's guide provides highly useful advice about how to do this effectively. Do not, it says, wait until a problem occurs, but spend time establishing a climate in which you *can* communicate if a problem *does* occur.

Communication between parents and children happens on a variety of levels. Personal example is one of the most effective. How you handle alcohol and drugs conveys more of an impression than all of the words you speak. Parents who are substance abusers are very likely to have children who follow their lead.

Some parents have a more lenient attitude toward alcohol than toward other drugs. This is exemplified when a parent, well aware of the ill effects children suffer from using marijuana, says, "Well at least my son only drinks and doesn't smoke that stuff." It is important for parents to develop a consistent attitude toward abuse of *all* substances by their children.

There are tremendous peer pressures for children to conform and experiment with drugs and alcohol. The parent's guide suggests ways in which parents may counteract this peer pressure and prevent drug abuse. In addition, the guide identifies the common kinds of drugs and the physical and mental harm they do.

While most of this article has been intended for parents, all of us who work with children have the responsibility to address the unacceptables of child and drug abuse with them. For Scout leaders this includes participating in the BSA's *Youth Protection Guidelines* training program. This two-hour video and discussion session not only prepares all Scouting volunteers to be better Scout leaders, but also alerts them to the problem of child abuse wherever it is encountered—with Scouts, their own children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews.

Fortunately, leaders of the Scouting program are knowledgeable about preventing drug abuse. But they must never let up in this vital mission, because drugs destroy young lives, and the lure of using them is strong. We must help *all* children to "Just say no."

Our materials are there for you. They are accurate and highly useful. The Boy Scouts of America urges you to use them, so that together we can protect the children in your family and in your community.