

It's time ... to protect your students

Jen (38) and Tim (13)

Three weeks ago, I was so excited to start my new job as the Education Director of my church. It is a huge job that involves hiring teachers, reviewing curriculum and day-to-day oversight of the after-school programs from first grade through high school, as well as, the growing teen social program.

My first year is off to a great start. The teachers and student assistants are hired, and the school is operating with a growing enrollment.

One afternoon, Susan, a parent of two students, comes to my office to tell me that one of my teen student assistants was in the paper for "exposing himself" to a group of kids. It is a small town, and even though his name was not published, it is fairly clear who it is. We talked about Susan's concerns and what to do next. I assure her that I will look into this further, verify what really happened, and then take some action here.

I promise to get back to her within the week about what we will do to ensure that the school is a safe place for her children.

Activity

- Since this is now a public situation, think about what you would do and who needs to know or who can help you, the school and the teenager. Your goal is to ensure that your school and your congregation is as safe a place as possible and that you do not leave everyone in a state of fear or panic.
- Create a network map of WHO might be involved in this situation and WHAT they can do. An answer key appears on the following two pages.

Answer Key

Directions

First, talk about what Jen could do and what concerns she would need to address. Then, brainstorm all of the options available to her. When that is done, take the time to brainstorm who else is in a position to act. Last, add in the question about what they might be able to do: (below are some examples and note that each person has a number of options open to them)

- The Priest/Minister of the church
- Tim's parents
- Parents/Susan who raised the issue to Jen

Sample of suggested responses

For Jen, Education Director

- Talk with the Priest or Minister about what happened and possible actions.
- Talk with Tim and his parents to verify what happened and explain what actions need to be taken (e.g. taking Tim out of his position as a teaching assistant and possibly find another job with more direct adult supervision).
- Use this as a “teachable” moment for the parents and talk about safety issues as well as the range of adolescent behaviors from healthy sexual exploration to abuse.
- Be prepared for the disclosure of other incidents that might be discussed once this conversation has begun (e.g., know the proper procedures and contacts for reporting abuse).
- Explore resources in the community that might be helpful to Tim, his family or others.
- Contact other faith-based organizations or schools to explore the policies they may have in place.
- Create a committee to establish a policy and procedure around child safety.

For the Priest/Minister of the church

- If it is not appropriate for the Education Director to take on this leadership, talk with Tim and his parents to verify what happened and explain what actions need to be taken (e.g. taking Tim out of his position as a teaching assistant and possibly find another job with more direct adult supervision).
- Offer ongoing support to Tim and to the entire family.
- Use this as an opportunity to talk about sexual abuse, harassment, inappropriate behaviors and healthy sexual development during a sermon.
- Contact other faith-based organizations to explore the policies they may have in place.
- Explore resources in the community that might be helpful to Tim, his family or others.

Tim's family

- Talk with Tim about what happened (this incident could be anywhere from a friend daring him to flash younger kids to one among many incidents that need to be addressed)
- Be sure that Tim understands the possible consequences of a "sex offense" on his record. Within your family, decide what is best for Tim.
- Find out about support that might be available through the church or community
- Look for other safe structured places for Tim to work or volunteer

Parents/Susan who raised the issue

- Check back with the Education Director about what will be done.
- Offer to help organize a parent meeting to talk about what is being done to keep everyone informed and answer questions.
- Ask for a clear policy for safe congregations