



Protecting God's Children for Adults

The Prevention and Mitigation of Abuse of Vulnerable Adults Part III: Mitigation

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Statistics tell us that the abuse of vulnerable adults is usually emotional, physical, or financial instead of abuse that is sexual in nature. Exploitation of a sexual nature has been reported to be one percent of the cases of abuse. Approximately 500,000 allegations of abuse against vulnerable adults are reported to Adult Protective Services each year, but it is thought that only a small percentage of cases are ever reported. Studies indicate that as many as 10 percent of the vulnerable adult population is subject to abuse and that only one-in-six cases of abuse are ever reported.



While bias against vulnerable adults is a major contributing factor to the low reporting and prosecution rates, the same factors that have an impact on the prosecution of child sexual abuse also play a major role when the victim is a vulnerable adult. An important aspect of this problem is the fact that these are adults and they have the right to consent to or to refuse participation in the report, investigation, or prosecution of the matter; however, many are very fearful to do so.

When the victim is an adult with developmental disabilities, the offender is often a caregiver. However, when the victim is an elderly person, the most likely perpetrator is a family member. Forensic evidence is hard to find and it is often a challenge for prosecutors to find ways to convince a jury that an adult-child would deliberately harm a parent or elderly family member.

Some of the warning signs of an inappropriate relationship with a vulnerable adult are the same as those that indicate someone is a potential risk to harm a child. Warning signs are:

1. Always wants to be alone with the person;
2. Discourages others from being around and arranges to have the targeted person in areas where they cannot be monitored;
3. Thinks the rules do not apply to them; or
4. Uses bad language or tells dirty jokes around the person.

Additional signs that indicate a caregiver is a risk of harm to a vulnerable adult can be found when:

1. The person acts with indifference toward the vulnerable adult in his or her care; or
2. The caregiver or family member prevents the adult from speaking to visitors.

Using these warning signs as a guide to screen out possible perpetrators of abuse, we further protect vulnerable adults by controlling access to those who are vulnerable by:

1. Using written, standard applications when employing or contracting with a caregiver;
2. Requiring a type of criminal background check or making sure the facility where the vulnerable adult lives enforces this employment practice;

3. Checking the references of people who come forth as caregivers; and
4. Having face-to face interviews with the caregivers and communicating with them often.

Monitoring techniques should include making sure all family members have access to the programs in which the vulnerable adult is involved. In addition, facilities serving the vulnerable adult population should have policies regarding the use of secluded areas. If it is a home situation, various family members should check in randomly, including during bathing/showering times and throughout the day.

Most importantly, being aware of the vulnerable persons in our lives is crucial. It is extremely important to talk with, listen to, and observe the vulnerable adults in our lives. Listen between the lines and pay careful attention to even the slightest signs of fear in a vulnerable adult. Do not ignore any sign that makes you uncomfortable. Act upon and investigate this as soon as you are able.

Most especially notice the following:

1. Injuries such as cuts, bruises, and other wounds that appear to be uncared for or do not heal;
2. Poor skin color, sunken eyes, dehydration, or apparent malnutrition;
3. Frequent trips to the hospital;
4. Soiled clothing, apparent pain upon touching;
5. Lack of social contact;
6. Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, and confusion; or
7. Apparent disorientation or confusion and far-fetched stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances.

It is extremely important to remember that one of the key warning signs that indicates a caregiver or family member is abusing a vulnerable adult is that the caregiver or family member isolates the victim from other people. They refuse to allow visitors and keep the vulnerable adult away from anyone who might observe the signs of abuse or neglect. In addition, the abusive caregiver passes off reports from the vulnerable adult as a part of their vulnerability—namely, they are confused, unreliable in relating the truth, or have dementia or another cognitive dysfunction. Caretakers may also claim that the vulnerable adult is getting back at them for not allowing them to eat a favorite food or that the vulnerable person is telling lies about the caregiver to hurt them. Here again we note the grooming behaviors.

In addition, there are environmental signs that a vulnerable adult is being abused. Living conditions that are inadequate or consistently unclean is cause for concern. Other environmental clues include room temperatures that are extreme and foul odors in the home. When the vulnerable adult always appears hungry, has unusually poor hygiene, has financial problems that were not there previously, or experiences the disappearance of items, e.g., jewelry, clothing, cash, etc., the time to act has come.

The most important thing anyone can do to prevent this from happening is to report any suspicion of abuse against a vulnerable adult to the authorities as soon as possible. Communicating concerns prevents abuse from continuing. Continue pursuing your concerns until you are satisfied that safety has been achieved. Each of us has the moral responsibility to report suspected abuse. If we notice that a caregiver or family member is behaving in a way that indicates they are a risk to the vulnerable adult, communicate your concern to that person or report the suspected problems to someone who can make a difference as soon as possible.