

This resource is one of many available to you through the *Second Step* Child Protection Unit, a comprehensive school-based child protection program, which includes staff training, student lessons, and family resources. Access additional free resources on child sexual abuse prevention for parents at [earlyopenoften.org](http://earlyopenoften.org).

## Fact Sheet on Staff Sexual Misconduct with Children

### Leader Version

#### What is staff sexual misconduct?

“Staff sexual misconduct” covers any criminal or noncriminal sexualized behaviors between an adult working or volunteering in a school, early learning center, or youth-serving program and a child. It includes all behaviors of a sexual nature considered inappropriate in your code of conduct or child sexual abuse under state criminal codes.

#### Who are the abusers?

- Adult staff members who sexually abuse children are mostly men
- They repeatedly abuse one child after another, often over a period of many years
- They carefully and deliberately select children, befriend them, build trust with them, and then proceed to engage in sexual interactions. This process is called “grooming”
- They also build trust with or groom other adults in the community, for example, the principal, director, teachers, other staff members, and parents
- Often they are respected as valuable members of the staff

#### What are their grooming patterns with children?

*Pattern 1:* Targeting one child with extra attention (for example, to help with reading, sports, and so on)

*Pattern 2:* Targeting one child to be a helper

#### Offenders will often do the following to groom a child:

- Meet alone with the targeted child before, during, or after school or program hours
- Build a relationship with this child’s parents
- Go to the child’s house
- Give the child or family gifts
- Act like an uncle or family friend

#### Where does the abuse happen?

- In closets, bathrooms, locker rooms, storage rooms, offices, music rooms, and other secluded places
- In rooms behind locked doors or with window blinds drawn
- During movies or activities where the child is sitting on the adult’s lap
- While playing what the offenders call “games,” often with blindfolds, including touching games

#### Remember:

- Staff sexual misconduct must be reported immediately
- If you feel something is wrong, trust that feeling—abusers will try to groom you to ignore it
- You are mandated by law to report child sexual abuse and face penalties for failing to do so
- Always act to protect the child and the law will protect you

### What behaviors might be red flags for possible abuse?

- Violations of your code of conduct, such as:
  - Inappropriate touching, either the type of touch or the frequency of the touch
  - Meeting alone with a child behind a closed door
  - Driving a child places without the school or program's knowledge
- Personal contact with the child using social media, email, texting, and so on
- Favoring an individual child
- Violations of your safe environment policy, such as:
  - Covering over windows
  - Closing or locking doors

### What to Do

If you observe violations of your child protection policies plus behaviors that fall into typical grooming patterns, it may cause you to suspect a staff member of sexual misconduct. Suspecting another staff member of sexual misconduct can be an unsettling experience. Your first response may be to deny, rationalize, or ignore the suspicions, especially if the person you suspect is a popular or long-term member of the staff. You may have the same unsettling reaction when one of your staff comes to you to report suspicions about another staff member. **But the reality is that some adults who work with children do abuse them, and you must act to protect the child.** This means reporting your suspicions according to your established procedures. The following are some DOs and DON'Ts to keep in mind when you have reasonable cause to suspect:

#### DO report the suspected sexual misconduct

Follow your established reporting procedures and in compliance with state requirements. You may report directly to child protective services or law enforcement or to the designated person in your reporting procedure. Take care to clearly reference both violations of child protection policies and patterns of behavior when making your report.

#### DO maintain confidentiality

*For the victim:* Keep the suspected abuser and the victim apart. It is never acceptable to interview the suspect and the victim together. You'll also need to protect the victim's family from press inquiries and media attention.

*For the accused:* Accused staff are innocent until proven guilty, so it's important that their right to privacy is respected and protected. They have the right to know a report has been made. Then they may be placed on paid administrative leave while the investigation is underway. As the leader, you will need to determine how much information to share with other staff about the reasons for the leave and if they are permitted to contact the suspect.

*For the reporter of misconduct:* Despite the outcome of the investigation—that is, if the allegations are deemed unfounded, unsubstantiated, or substantiated—it's important to take steps to ensure those who voiced their suspicions and made the report remain anonymous, at least to the accused. Make sure your staff know that laws in all states protect reporters of abuse from civil and criminal liability as long as the report is made in good faith.

**DO support the staff**

Staff act *in loco parentis*; they are entrusted with the well-being of children. When an employee violates that trust and abuses a child, it can be devastating for the staff and community. The recovery process will be long, but with effective communication and support healing can occur. Some strategies for you to consider include:

- Notify key personnel that a report of staff sexual misconduct has been made
- Meet with the staff and let them know what to expect
- Designate a spokesperson to handle press inquiries and questions to help reduce rumors and misinformation circulating
- Train staff and volunteers to handle questions from parents, the community, and the media
- Offer support groups for staff and families
- Refer individuals or families in need to counselors or therapists

**DON'T interview the child, the person who made the report, or the suspected abuser**

In order to ensure the rules of collecting evidence are followed, only the official investigator should interview those (especially the child) involved in the case.

**What if violations of child protection policies are observed, but there is no reasonable cause to suspect sexual misconduct?**

Your code of conduct and safe environment policy are there to protect children **and** your staff. The person seen violating these policies is putting him or herself at risk even if there is no sexual misconduct taking place. And it may be that a child is also at risk. Take reports of misconduct very seriously. As the leader, it's important to follow up on the information. It may add to other reports you've received or observations you've made about the same person. Maintain confidentiality of those involved. Do not name the staff member who is in violation of the child protection policies to anyone. Follow your procedures for responding to violations of child protection policies.

**Remember:**

If you or a staff member witness a sexual interaction between an adult and a child, or if a child discloses sexual abuse by a staff member to you, you need to make a report immediately either to the designated person in your reporting procedure or directly to child protective services or law enforcement.