

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING YOUNG PEOPLE TO RECOGNIZE THE STRATEGIES OFFENDERS USE TO CREATE VULNERABILITY

Now more than ever it's important to teach children and teens about safe and healthy relationships. As children grow older, it's important to remind them along the way that they can come to parents or to another trusted adult with anything they want to discuss, especially if they have questions or concerns about relationships. It's important for parents to make time to intentionally talk to children about how to recognize and respond to relational red flags. They should know our Faith teaches us that help and healing will come when we bring our concerns into the light.

One way to approach this topic is to help young people explore the various ways healthy relationships enrich our lives. Then, ask them to think about ways even healthy relationships can get out of balance and what potentially causes those things to happen.

When these conversations about relationships arise with young people, it's important for parents to keep in mind three key strategies offenders use to groom a vulnerable person for exploitation or abuse:

Unequal Power

When one person in a relationship has more power because of age, size, position, resources, status or knowledge, that person may attempt to use that power to control the other for their own benefit. Teach young people that in healthy relationships there is respect for one another. If they feel like they are being controlled, they should know that this relationship is probably unhealthy and they should either avoid this person or discuss their concerns with you.

Secrecy

Offenders will often pressure children to keep secrets to conceal their activities and avoid notice. Teach young people that healthy relationships rarely have secrets since healthy relationships are built on openness and honesty. Warn them that if someone tells them that no one else will understand them or that they will be blamed if they confide in others, that person is asking them to keep a secret. In that case, they should consult with a trusted adult.

Forced Isolation

Another common form of control by an offender is to force or pressure a young person to be separated from others. Remind young people that individuals in healthy relationships respect each other's needs for friends and family. Teach young people to recognize the tactics of forced isolation by asking themselves, "Does this person say that they are the only one who understands me? Do they get mad if others join me in an activity or just hang out with me?" Alert them that these are forms of forced isolation and that they do not have to give in to that pressure.

We are a *community* of faith!

