

Optimizing Your Potential as a 4-H Volunteer



Reducing Risks for Volunteers

Introduction

Issues of sexual harassment and sexual abuse fill our newspapers and broadcasts these days. They are disturbing issues, and sometimes it seems as though accusations are made for situations where no wrongdoing was intended or done. Other cases, however, are very real. Because of this, all interactions with youth are scrutinized very closely.

4-H/Youth volunteers need to learn how best to ensure that they and the youth they are working with are not put in risky situations.

There are 11 factors that help determine the level of risk for sexual abuse for children. This fact sheet will examine those factors to help you learn ways to keep yourself and the young people you work with safe.

4-H Youth Program Philosophy

The Indiana 4-H youth program provides a strong educational youth development program. Our programs deliver educational experiences in a variety of settings, whether it is one-to-one, small groups, camps, or large events such as fairs and recognition events.

The adults who volunteer to serve in helping capacities with our programs are caring,

capable individuals with a desire to guide and nurture the young people they serve.

We treasure the rich heritage of Indiana 4-H youth programs and want to ensure that our program is available to all who want to participate. We also want to do whatever we can to make sure that both youth and adults have a good and rewarding experience.

Youth Work Can Be Risky

Our society is changing, and adults working with youth today need to be aware of some of the issues and problems that could arise from close working relationships with young people.

Oftentimes individuals perceive situations differently, and that creates the possibility that youth volunteers could be accused of harassment or sexual abuse when there was absolutely no intent. Therefore, it is prudent to be aware of situations that could put volunteers at risk, and to take any and all precautions to ensure that no accusations will be raised.

Factors To Consider:

There are 11 factors to consider when determining if you may be at risk. They are:

Location
Parental involvement
Adult supervision
Frequency and duration of interaction
Changing clothes
Training
Education of children
Monitoring
Physical contact
Staff and supervisor turnover
Age and disabilities

Location:

Generally, the more public the program setting, the lower the exposure to risk for child abuse. Holding activities in facilities with greater public access usually reduces the opportunity for sexual abuse to occur by permitting the activities to be observed by other individuals such as parents, other children, and interested bystanders.

As you might guess, activities in private homes present an average risk, especially if some youth arrive early or stay late and are alone with the adult. Activities held in isolated settings, such as camp settings, present a higher risk.

Parental Involvement:

Generally, the more parental involvement in the program, the lower the risk for child abuse. When parents are actively involved in a program, they provide additional observation, monitoring, and supervision of activities.

Child molesters seek children who are isolated and in need of acceptance and affection from adults, so parental involvement is often a sign that the child is less vulnerable.

Adult Supervision:

Generally the more adult supervision of program activities, the lower the exposure to risk for child sexual abuse. The opportunities for sexual abuse are less when several volunteers are present than when a single volunteer supervises program activities.

There are no magic supervision ratios of adults to children. The specific ratio of volunteers to participants should be sufficient to supervise activities safely when taking into account such factors as:

- the size of the group;
- the ages of children involved;
- the nature of the activity
- the setting in which the activity occurs.

Sufficient numbers of adults should be present to ensure that if some were pulled away from their assignments, sufficient supervision would continue to be present.

Some resources suggest that at least three people (adults and/or youth) are present in all situations.

Number of Interactions:

Obviously, the less regular the interaction between a volunteer and any specific child, the lower the exposure to risk for child sexual abuse. A volunteer who interacts infrequently with a particular child has less opportunity to develop a relationship that could lead to sexual abuse than does a volunteer who meets with the same child several times a week.

Longer periods of involvement provide more opportunities for sexual abuse to occur due to the grooming process used by many child molesters to gain a child's trust.

The opportunity for sexual abuse increases with the length of the program, since the child molester has more time to break down the child's resistance.

Changing Clothes:

The less that changing clothing is a necessary part of the program activity, the lower the exposure to risk for child abuse.

When children are changing clothes, showering, or preparing for bed, they are more vulnerable to sexual abuse than when they are fully clothed.

Training:

Training for volunteers can reduce a child's exposure to risk within a program by:

- 1) Alerting volunteers that the organization is mindful of the potential for abuse and will respond aggressively to allegations of sexual abuse;
- 2) Informing volunteers about what to look for so that they can more adequately supervise program activities, just as we are doing here, and;
- 3) Communicating policies adopted by the organization to prevent child sexual abuse from happening.

When an organization **REQUIRES** its volunteers to participate in a training program developed to address the risks of child abuse the risk of child sexual abuse within the organization decreases.

Education of Children:

Generally, the more age-appropriate education about child abuse that is provided to children and youth participants, the lower the exposure to risk for child sexual abuse.

Many children do not understand what sexual abuse is; nor do they know what to do when sexual abuse occurs. Educating children about sexual abuse helps them recognize attempted or actual sexual abuse; it empowers children to resist the efforts of child molesters; and it encourages children to report any individuals who behave in a sexually abusive manner.

Research shows that when children are required to participate in educational experiences about child abuse the risk is low. When education is offered to children, but not required, then the risk is at a medium level, and when no education is offered the risk is much higher.

Monitoring:

The more monitoring of volunteer activity that occurs, the lower the exposure to risk for child abuse. Either volunteers or employees of the organization may perform this monitoring or supervision. When volunteers are left to function independently with little or no monitoring of their activities, the opportunities for child sexual abuse increase and so should the level of volunteer screening.

Physical Contact:

The less physical contact involved in activities between volunteers and youth, the lower the exposure to risk for child sexual abuse.

“Physical contact” refers to touching between children and volunteers as a routine part of the volunteer’s responsibilities. Physical contact may range from assisting children with disabilities with their personal hygiene, to assisting with instruction in sports such as wrestling and swimming.

Unfortunately, volunteers whose responsibilities require them to have physical contact with children can misuse the opportunity which that contact provides to sexualize the touch and then, if questioned, justify it as an unintentional slip.

Staff Turnover:

Organizations with very little staff turnover are at lower risk for child abuse allegations. Those where there is considerable turnover of both staff and volunteers are, of course, at a much higher risk.

Children who are working with volunteers whom they do not know well or are not able to evaluate any changes in their behavior or note any other indicators of possible concern.

Age and Disabilities:

The age of onset of sexual abuse is highest between 8 and 12 years of age. The risk of sexual abuse is especially high for children between 10 and 12 years of age.

Children with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be sexually abused as are children of the same ages who do not have disabilities.

Children with social, emotional, or family-related problems also are at higher risk of child sexual abuse than other children of the same age.

Summary:

Our programs involve youth, caring adults, parents, and leaders having fun and learning and working together in club activities, project groups, special interest groups, and endless special events.

Awareness of the 11 risk factors, and your efforts to ensure that the activities you plan are low-risk experiences, will ensure that all involved have an educational and rewarding experience.

References:

- *Legal Requirements for Responding to the Suspicion of Neglect and Abuse.* Indiana 4-H Youth Program Policies and Procedures. Purdue Cooperative Extension Service. West Lafayette, IN. 2000.
- *Assessing the level of Risk for Child Sexual Abuse.* Indiana 4-H Youth Program Policies and Procedures. Purdue Cooperative Extension Service. West Lafayette, IN. 2000.
- *Screening Volunteers to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse: A community Guide for Youth Organizations.* National Collaboration for Youth. The National Assembly of National Voluntary Health and Social Welfare Organizations. 1997.
- **Prevent Child Abuse Indiana.** Online at <http://www.pcain.org/>