

## **Helping to keep your children safe from sexual harm**

The mission field can be a wonderfully enriching experience for children as they grow up. TCKs have many opportunities to develop into well-adjusted, sociable and godly adults. Parents can celebrate all that is positive and wholesome about the life and culture they have been called into. At the same time, in this broken world, we need to be wise as to the hazards around us, and to identify where our children may be vulnerable to harm. Sadly, we do need to have our eyes open about the fact that sexual abuse can and does sometimes happen on the mission field. Child abuse is not just something we hear about in the newspapers or back at home.

Prevention is always better than cure. As adults, we are accustomed to protecting ourselves against things that *probably* won't happen but that we still need to be prepared for. For example, house fires, car accidents, theft or severe illness. In the same way we need to be aware of the possibility that somebody may want to harm our children. The consequences of this can be so devastating that it is important to do all that we realistically can to prevent such harm. As in most risk reduction activities, there are a variety of approaches that together reduce the likelihood of something bad happening.

### **What AIM is doing:**

- We want our members to have a high level of confidence in their colleagues and team mates. We are doing all we can as an organisation to ensure that anyone who serves in our organisation is responsible, safe and accountable.
- We do this through vigorous screening of any applicants, and we have a zero tolerance policy to any adult who has ever been involved in the abuse of a child.
- We also expect our members, volunteers, short termers and anyone engaged in formal ministry with AIM to abide by our Code of Conduct.
- The Code of Conduct outlines two main principles in all interaction with children: reducing isolation and increasing accountability. There should be no reason for a non-related adult to be with a child in an isolated place where nobody knows where they are.
- We will investigate any reports of potential harm, and any adult found to have violated our sexual abuse policy will be dismissed from our organisation.

### **Child/child sexual interaction**

This is probably one of the most common issues we deal with in AIM. Children imitate what they seen or have experienced. When a child has had exposure to adult sexuality, they can often act out that behaviour with their peers or with younger children. This

behaviour can become part of childhood play and then develop into a habitual form of pleasure or comfort. It can become an entrenched form of behaviour which escalates in intensity during the adolescent years. The kind of interaction we are concerned about is that which goes beyond normal childhood curiosity. It can be triggered by images seen on internet sites, seen on TV or in magazines or witnessed personally by watching adults engaged in sexual activity. Please be aware that in many of the locations in which we work, local children are often living in densely crowded homes and are exposed to adult sexual activity. Additionally in many African countries, regulation of adult videos and elicited footage is minimal or non-existent. Small local children can easily be exposed to pornography or sexual behaviour beyond their understanding. They can act this out as they play together. Your child may well be in that circle of friends. We are seeing increasing cases of young children engaged in inappropriate and precocious sexual touch. It is very important that this is dealt with early on and the causes addressed.

### **What you as a parent can do:**

- Teach your child a godly self concept that helps defend them from harm. 'You are loved, you are precious, you are unique, you belong to our family, you are safe in this home, you can tell us anything and we will always love you.'
- Meet your child's emotional needs through listening, encouraging, affirming and by providing clear discipline and behavioural boundaries. Children who have a healthy self esteem and good parental communication are less likely to be drawn into a friendship or relationship which offers them time, love and affection.
- Children quickly pick up information from other children about bodies, 'rude' things and anything they are curious about. *Let them hear it from you first.* As soon as they are old enough to understand, talk to them naturally and simply about their bodies, the ways in which boys are different from girls and how our bodies are special.
- Teach them the anatomical names for body parts, even if you also use nicknames. Use teachable moments, such as bath time, or with new babies to explain the gender differences.
- Children go through normal stages of developments where they are curious, fixated or silly about body differences. Be aware of what's normal and what is unusual behaviour.
- Accept that it is ok for a child to say 'No thank you' if someone wants to hug, kiss them or pick them up even if mom and dad are there. Don't force them to be kissed or cuddled even if it's grandma. This is about helping your child to see that they do have control over their own body space and that they are respected and can respect others too.
- Teach your child about good touching and bad touching. Bad touching is anything that hurts- pinching, thumping, pushing and so on. Bad touching is also

anyone who wants to touch you in your private area without your mom or dad's permission.

- They must respect others' boundaries too- not to hit, pinch, push etc. Not to touch anyone else in their private parts (anything that would be covered by a bathing suit).
- Teach your child how to say 'No' if someone tries to touch them in a bad way. 'I don't like that, please stop'. How to say it if someone continues to try to push, hit, try to touch. 'NO! Please Stop!' This is also good practice in preventing bullying or peer pressure.
- Make sure that your child knows they can tell you anything, at anytime and *it's never too late to tell*. If something happens to them, they should tell a grown up- if the first person doesn't listen then they should tell someone else. You can have a family code word to use in order to communicate to you that something has happened and they need to talk.
- 'Nobody must make you keep a secret. The only secrets we have are in the family and are to do with happy surprises'.
- Be involved in knowing who your kids are spending time with. Have age appropriate rules for unsupervised play. Have ground rules that fit your family and context- for example that siblings stick together in play with other kids, or that there is no play in rooms with doors closed.
- Be aware of national kids who are moving in and out of any play circles- especially older children seeking out younger kids. Best to have age peers and own gender as far as possible.
- Be aware of any resistance to playing with a particular child or seeing a particular adult.
- If there is a problem with your own child engaging in concerning sexual interaction with a sibling or another child, this needs to be reported and looked into. Early intervention can stop this from developing into a later pattern of abuse.
- If your child attends a school, find out if there is a Child Safety policy and a named person to go to if a child or parent has any questions or concerns about the manner in which the school operates. The twin principles of high accountability and low isolation are elements of good practice in any school.
- Be aware of the damage pornography does and how pervasive and addictive it is, especially digital pornography. Know what your children are looking at on the internet, especially if they have internet enabled phones.

### Children sometimes don't tell anyone that they are worried because:

- They are afraid of getting into trouble
- They have been threatened/they are being rewarded for compliance by the abuser
- They are ashamed/guilty

## AIM Child Safety Office

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- They are too young to understand it is wrong –‘it’s only a game’

### Learning to listen:

- Children often tell a trusted adult other than their parent.
- They often tell only part of the story- they are testing the water to check the reaction. They may back pedal if they get a negative or emotional response
- The younger they are, the more likely they are to be telling the truth
- If your child does not talk to you, it is not a sign of poor parenting!
- If they do tell you something, stay calm, don’t overreact, try to draw out more information without using leading and suggestive questions.
- Reassure them that they were right to tell. You will help them and protect them.
- Pass any concerns to your REO or the Child Safety Office [cso.io@aimint.org](mailto:cso.io@aimint.org)

Let us be ‘as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves’. Once we have done all we can to put the checks and balances in place to protect our children, may we live fully in the joy of our ministries and friendships!

If you want more information or to get an understanding of AIM’s Child Safety policy, here is a 25 min AIM Safety Matters video:

- [https://vimeo.com/43206396\\_password-aimsafety01](https://vimeo.com/43206396_password-aimsafety01)