

Lessons From Penn State

The Sandusky (Penn State) child sexual abuse case represents complete individual and institutional failure on behalf of children. This tragedy also presents us with an enormous teachable moment. Here are some lessons to consider.

1. **Be wary of hero worship.** We cannot honor a person's stature, position, or notoriety at the expense of children's safety. Sandusky and Paterno are not heroes. Sandusky is a pedophile, and Paterno was complicit in allowing the sexual abuse of children on his watch. Consider your own attitudes toward the leaders in organizations which care for your child, and don't be intimidated about asking hard questions.
2. **Be vigilant about screening.** Unfortunately, in the quest for power, adults may debase children. If you enroll your child in a program affiliated with a "hero," or in a program which seeks the spotlight and winning at any cost, screen and screen again. Ask to read the organization's body-safety policies, ask how the policies translate to practices, and find out how body-safety policies and practices are monitored. You have a right to ask, "Has anyone in your organization ever been accused of inappropriately touching a child? If so, how did you handle it?"
3. **Own the responsibility.** We all – as individuals and members of communities – share responsibility for keeping children safe. Make sure the volunteers, staff, and administrators who interact with your children in school and youth programs have been trained to honor and uphold the body safety of all children.
4. **You don't need proof to protect a child.** While everyone has a right to due process, do not hesitate to speak up if you see concerning behaviors. Learn the warning signs, and if you see something or suspect something, tell the organization's leader, call social services, or report it to the police. If you don't, you are complicit and can be held liable.
5. **Regularly talk with kids about body safety.** With all the responsibilities of parenting, it can be tough to continually reinforce body-safety rules, yet it's important to keep those conversations alive—e.g., "No one is allowed to touch the private areas of your body or ask you to touch theirs. If anyone tries to or does touch your private parts, tell a trusted adult." Children don't always tell when they are being abused because they may have been threatened and/or may fear losing a person they love or admire. So remind them, "It's never too late to tell. I will not be mad at you. I will always love you."



Feather Berkower is co-author of *Off Limits: A Parent's Guide to Keeping Kids Safe from Sexual Abuse*, and she has trained thousands of parents and professionals through www.parentingsafechildren.com.