

## Keep Children Home at Night

Who would suspect that sleep overs, where children stay overnight at the homes of their close friends and extended family members, could be risky – even dangerous. Many parents have allowed and even encouraged children to sleep overnight at their friends' homes as a way of helping them build closer relationships and develop social skills. Even those parents who aren't sure about the homes involved may give in to their children's pleas to be allowed to go.

But the reports of adult survivors of childhood physical and sexual assault place the innocent looking sleep overs in a very different light. While away from home in settings that their parents believed were completely safe, they report being severely traumatized by atrocities that they never told their parents about – perhaps because they could not bear to remember them or because of severe threats of what would happen if they did tell.

The distressing reports of courageous survivors can help today's parents be more street smart about how child predators work. Armed with more information about predators, they will be more cautious about where their children are allowed to go overnight.

Parents must first abandon common stereotypes about child predators. Parents know that some predators, such as pedophiles, are driven by sexual attraction to children. However they may not be aware that others are motivated by sadism or hunger for power. Still other predators act out of social and financial incentives. They may be young or old, male or female, extroverted or shy.

What all committed predators have in common is the set of skills needed to acquire the trust of parents. Obviously trust is an essential prerequisite to gaining access to victims. To secure that trust many predators hold high positions in their professions, are married with children and have excellent social skills. Many live in suburbia, having well kept homes, immaculate yards, and all of the outward trappings of respectability. Many predators attend church regularly and serve actively.

Inwardly they are raving wolves, but parents never see that side of them. Only their children do, and only when the predators are alone with them. Then the rules change. Then all of the once-respected boundaries are dissolved. What happens is governed by who has the power and the predators have it all.

Parents have learned that in this complex society they must limit their trust to protect themselves from being scammed or exploited. They may shred documents to prevent identity theft, delete emails telling them they have just won the sweepstakes in Nigeria, and withhold information from strangers who call on the phone asking questions. But placing limits on their trust of friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers and members of their church congregation may seem excessive or overprotective.

However, in our modern society parents must set limits to protect their families, because today's child predators ply their trade with incredible cunning by exploiting the naivety of those friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers and fellow church members who might be persuaded, if the circumstances were right, to allow them access to their most precious possessions – their children.

How can limits be placed on trust without offending – without implying that parents suspect someone of being a closet predator? The best way, perhaps the only way, is to establish the family rule that no sleep overs are allowed with anyone. Then when someone asks if a child can stay overnight at their home the answer is "no" regardless of who asked. The answer is "no" because that is a family rule, not because the person extending the invitation is suspected of something. Eventually, if enough parents use this approach, a new community standard will be established. A time honored tradition, the sleep over, will be another casualty of our society's loss of innocence. And our children will be safer.

Source: <http://www.articlecircle.com>

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