

## YMCAs CAN LEAD THE WAY IN PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE

YMCAs across the country embrace the idea of building strong kids, strong families and strong communities. Ys can easily incorporate this “Triangle of Strength” into their child abuse prevention efforts. As Dr. Rick Dangel’s interview points out, the potential for child abuse in YMCAs is fairly significant. By involving parents, communities, and the Y, a three-sided effort, Ys can lead the way in efforts to protect our children.

Dr. Dangel also points out several areas in which a Y must make efforts to protect children. There is no “silver bullet” for this critical issue; however, the commitment for effort must begin with the YMCA leadership. Boards and CEOs should ensure that the YMCA of the USA 11 Strategies for Child Abuse Prevention are implemented as a start. YMCAs should communicate their commitment and practices to parents and the community through printed materials and general communication. The Our Promise poster can help communicate this commitment. Communication empowers parents and others to serve as a check system for monitoring behaviors at the Y.

Monitoring behavior at the YMCA is not enough however. Parents can help protect children and YMCA staff by being familiar with policies for limiting planned contact outside the YMCA such as one-on-one babysitting. Parents also may be able to assist in monitoring how youth communicate with one another and YMCA staff electronically via the Internet and text messaging.

YMCAs also can lead the way during their annual Healthy Kids’ Day celebration by incorporating abuse awareness activities in the events. Healthy kids are ones who know how to protect themselves and are protected by others. Healthy Kids’ Day is usually held in April which is traditionally National Child Abuse Prevention Month. By incorporating activities that bring youth, families, and community together, the Y can help lead the way for youth safety. Activities can include awareness games for youth, parent education, community group involvement, videos, fingerprinting, Internet safety, and others.

These are just a few examples of how a YMCA can focus on this critical issue. Y staff has tremendous abilities for creativity. By using readily available resources, activities easily can be added to all phases of YMCA work. No one wants a child to be abused, whether at the Y, by a Y staff member, another child, or in any other way. Whether it is neglect or physical, emotional or sexual abuse, YMCAs have the mission responsibility and unique position with youth and the community to be a leader in abuse prevention. Safe Kids, let’s lead the way.

—Michael Gurtler

**Perspective:** Is it possible to be too careful or overly cautious about protecting ourselves, to the extent of tying our own hands to run a good program?

**Dr. Dangel:** Protecting kids and running good programs go hand-in-hand. There is no kind of program that can’t be operated safely, but effective risk management practices must be program-specific. What works in child care won’t work in a teen mentoring program. Staff don’t have to worry about protecting themselves as long as they stick to the policies, practice what they learn in training, and report their concerns to their supervisor.

**Perspective:** It always seems like the predators are one step ahead of those trying to prevent abuse in their methods and diversions. What should we be on the lookout for?

**Dr. Dangel:** We are seeing three trends across the nation: Children are acting out sexually more often, in more aggressive ways, and much younger. We were involved in more than 200 cases of children as young as four or five years old engaging in advanced sexual activity in programs this year alone.

The frequency of cases involving female perpetrators is increasing. The number of law suits against organizations

## Coming In January:

YMCA Mission Creep:  
Should It Be Cured?