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Feature Article: A Goat in the Clouds

In a famous Gary Larson cartoon two airline pilots trusted their autopilot system so much, that when they peered through an opening in the clouds and saw a mountain goat standing there, they asked, "Say, what's a mountain goat doing way up here in a cloud bank?" That their autopilot system could have malfunctioned was inconceivable to them, in fact, so inconceivable that the approaching catastrophe was unperceivable.

When an event is inconceivable it's also unperceivable. This truism about human perception helps to explain why employees and volunteers, time and again, fail to report warning signs when interactions between an adult and a child appear odd, suspicious, "not quite right," or even distressing. Because it's inconceivable to almost all of us that someone we know, maybe even like or admire or respect or trust, could actually sexually abuse a child. And because we can't conceive it, our minds won't allow us to perceive it, even in the face of compelling evidence!

So what can be done?

Simple. Make certain that your employees know, believe, and understand that children are sexually abused every single day by trusted adults, and that such a tragedy can in fact occur, under their noses, right there. To the extent that you can make it conceivable to them that the crime could occur right there, you are removing barriers to their perception: barriers that get in the way of reporting suspicious or inappropriate interactions or policy violations. Barriers to reporting red flags.

Remember what Gary Larson taught us: **if it's inconceivable, it's unperceivable.**

Ask the Expert

Why don't people say something when they see weird stuff going on?

As you've already learned from "A Goat in the Clouds", most people cannot conceive that their colleague would molest a child. Right from the start they are inclined to resist anything that challenges this perception. From our own research, Praesidium has identified four barriers that keep good and well-meaning people from responding when they see suspicious or inappropriate interactions or policy violations.

1. What if I'm wrong? After all, I didn't see anything illegal.
2. Everyone knows that's just the way he is; it doesn't mean he's a pervert.
3. Even if I told, nothing would happen. Or the opposite, management will freak out and overreact.
4. That's not really my responsibility.

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Fortunately there are ways to combat these barriers. First, make sure everyone is trained—often—to recognize suspicious or inappropriate interactions or policy violations. Second, make it easy for them to respond: give them choices. For example, they can use an anonymous reporting method like Praesidium's Hot Line or a suggestion box, or talk to their supervisor or to their supervisor's supervisor or to the CEO. Third, standardize how administrators respond to reports and assure everyone that all reports will be handled professionally, with information shared only on a need-to-know basis. Finally, remind everyone—often—that the safety of those in care is everyone's responsibility. Try discussing these four barriers in your next staff meeting!

Have a question about preventing abuse in your programs? Email us at Experts@PraesidiumInc.com and watch for an answer in the next Safety Bulletin!

In the News

National Hockey League Great Discloses Abuse

Retired National Hockey League great Theo Fleury recently disclosed his junior league coach sexually abused him for two years...when he was just 14. Like many victims, Fleury was afraid no one would believe him back then if he told. He also feared that his coach would keep him from reaching the National Hockey League, in his mind his reason for his existence. At the time no one said anything about Fleury's coach making him spend the night away from home a couple of times a week or that the coach's bedroom blinds were duct-taped shut. As Fleury reports, *"the most influential adult in my life at the time was telling me that what I thought was wrong was right."* No one could imagine that a famous coach was raping his players. Not until he was later convicted and sentenced to prison.

Community Defends Admitted Perpetrator

Former Sneads High School teacher Tommy Stoutamire pleaded guilty...to four counts of sexual abuse. Even though he wrote a letter apologizing to his victims and accepting responsibility for his actions, members of the community refused to believe what he had done. Read what they wrote:

"How can you judge a man you do NOT know? As religious as Mr. S and his family are, do you think his wife would stand behind a sexual predator? I have a daughter. She could spend the night in the same room as Mr. S and I would feel safe."

"Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor. Unless God sends an Angel to tell me, I will NEVER believe the allegations against him."

"He taught all of us how to feed, train, and show our hogs and steers. I love you Mr. Stoutamire, you are and always will be the best ag teacher. Just remember, one day justice will be served."

Diaper Changing Daycare Worker Arrested

A daycare worker was recently held on felony sex crimes against a two-year-old. When arrested he admitted to the police that he had been molesting children for at least 15 years and that he had been fired from a previous job in a different state for doing the same thing to another toddler. Two of his co-workers had complained to their supervisor that they didn't like the way he changed the babies' diapers and that he only played with the girls, never the boys. Under oath they testified that their supervisor told them they just didn't like him because they *"weren't used to male child care workers"* and that they *"better get used to it."*

Meet Cynthia Williams

Cynthia Williams joins Praesidium as an Account Manager in our Social Services Division. She earned a master's degree in counseling from the University of Northern Colorado and has more than 15 years of experience in social services and in the treatment of sex offenders. She holds a Child Placing Agency Administrator's License and has served as a program director in treatment foster care.



Praesidium Product Spotlight

"Honey, You Have Spinach in Your Teeth" Webinar

Ever come home from dinner out with friends only to look in the mirror and discover that you've had a spot of that oh-so-tasty appetizer stuck in your teeth for the entire evening? Want to learn more about why nobody said anything? Or why employees and volunteers often wait until **after** an incident of abuse to report their concerns about the accused? Find out what you can do to keep this from happening at your organization. Sign up here to receive more information about this one hour webinar.

1,000,000 Armatus Trainings Can't Be Wrong

One sure way to arm your employees and volunteers with what they need to know to identify and respond to suspicious or inappropriate interactions is training. Armatus Online Training from Praesidium makes this easy, economical and effective. To see why Armatus users have completed more than one million Armatus courses, click here to watch a demo. Be sure to ask us about our new reduced pricing!

Online Training Outperforms In-Person

A recent 93-page report on online education concluded, "On average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face to face instruction." What Praesidium is learning from the thousands of subscribers to Armatus, our online library of abuse prevention and safety courses, is that the ease of access and the interactivity of the courses allow organizations to make trainings available just when it's needed. We also know that a once a year, two or three hour abuse prevention training doesn't get the job done—people forget almost 80% of what they learned within a month. A much better approach is small doses, with reminders, and opportunities to practice on the job.

Praesidium's Hot Line Reporting

As you've learned in this issue of Praesidium's Safety Bulletin, one way to remove barriers to reporting is to give your employees a variety of ways to report suspicious behavior. Now you can have them call Praesidium to comfortably and confidentially share their concerns. We'll see that you're notified promptly and we'll even answer questions you may have about how to respond. Call 817.801.7773 or email info1@praesidiuminc.com to learn more.

About Praesidium

With over two decades of experience, Praesidium is the national leader in abuse risk management. We offer a full range of risk management and loss control products and services to help you protect those in your care from abuse and preserve trust in your organization. Contact us today to get started.

817.801.7773 or www.PraesidiumInc.com

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