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## **Stop It Now! Responds to Freeh Report on Penn State Leaders' Disregard for Children**

NORTHAMPTON, MASS. – The release of the Freeh Report to Penn State University today documents a culture of secrecy and silence around child sexual abuse by Jerry Sandusky and a fundamental disregard for children's safety and welfare. The actions and inactions of the Penn State leadership are outrageous when we read the details of the report. It highlights how leaders, like many of adults, behave in ways that favor protecting themselves, their reputations and their institutions over protecting children.

From our years of work on child sexual abuse prevention, we know that this inaction and culture of silence and disregard for children is all too common in families, communities and all our institutions when it comes to the issue of child sexual abuse.

We agree with the Freeh Report recommendations on policies and practices, but urge Penn State and other institutions go further. Compliance with mandatory reporting statutes, whistleblower policies and background checks are important steps to dealing with abuse but set a low bar for protecting children. They don't proactively respond to unidentified risks since they respond only after a child has already been harmed.

We want the Penn State case to be the tipping point in favor of children's safety from sexual abuse everywhere. But for that to happen the lesson we must take away for prevention is that we – as individuals, institutions and as a society – must to go further to create safety for children. We cannot just promote actions and policies that assume the inevitability of children being sexually abused, and then be surprised when another child is harmed. Therefore we applaud the Freeh Report's emphasis on the culture change that is needed to protect children.

So what can Penn State – and all of us – do to truly create a culture of prevention in which adults speak out and create safety before harm?

Here's some of what we have learned from our 20 years of work on child sexual abuse prevention:

1) We can understand and overcome the barriers to speaking up about abuse.

- In our research with adults, we know that none of us thinks we're the person who does nothing when we are worried that someone we know has sexually abused a child. And yet, too many of us, when faced with that situation in our own lives, are paralyzed and don't know what to say or do, especially when we don't have "proof" that someone has already harmed a child. Do you know whom to call with your concerns? Have you thought through what words you'll say to protect a child's boundaries? How would you handle a situation where a respected leader is behaving suspiciously?

2) We can get comfortable speaking up about very small things that may increase the risk of a child being sexually abused, and not just signs that someone is thinking of sexually abusing children.

- We can decide ahead of time what is okay and not okay around children and we can proactively set boundaries. Once boundaries are defined, it becomes more apparent when behaviors violate those boundaries.
- We need to learn to speak up immediately when we see boundaries ignored or violated.

3) We can create a plan of action so that when we're confronted with a situation that worries us, we'll know what to do. And we're not talking about a stranger at the playground or someone trying to lure a child into their car. We're talking about:

- the nice youth worker who seems to hug the girls a lot more than the boys;
- the uncle with the roaming hands;
- the neighbor with the latest video games who encourages kids to stop by after school, or even;
- the respected coach who takes kids on overnight trips to see professional football games.

4) We can also ask basic questions of the institutions and organization that work with our kids.

- We can learn in advance what their policies are and how they are implemented.
- We can ask what training our schools, youth groups and faith communities offer to staff and volunteers.
- We can speak up to those in leadership-whether it's about the newest volunteer or the winningest coach.

This work is not easy. There can be risks – friendships lost, family support withdrawn, loss of donors and advertisers, and even more. But as one of our supporters says: It's better to offend an adult than fail a child.

We can and must all learn to "be that adult" – the adult who is there for children and young people, who recognizes warning signs, and who's a broken record when it comes to speaking out about concerning behaviors.

Whether it's the general risk of child sexual abuse or a specific concern, we can use this question to guide our next steps: "Whose needs are most important?" If we act on a belief that the needs of children are paramount, then that will help keep priorities where they need to be.

- [Learn more about the Freeh Report and how you can take action.](#)

### **Join us to Stop It Now!**

For 20 years Stop It Now! has succeeded in helping adults and communities prevent child sexual abuse. Children, families and professionals everywhere owe a debt to the many courageous donors who have made this work possible. Please join them – and our campaign to prevent child sexual abuse.

**If you want to help keep kids safe** – and become part of the work to end child sexual abuse – please [\*\*DONATE NOW.\*\*](#)

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