

Continuing Our Efforts to Protect Vulnerable Adults

By The VIRTUS Programs

Preview:

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Article:

Introduction

Keeping children and youth from harm is essential in every ministry or program—but it is just as important to work toward the protection of vulnerable adults. Although any adult may become vulnerable depending on their circumstances, the term “vulnerable adults” typically refers to those 18 years of age and older who, due to a physical, mental, emotional or behavioral condition, are unable to protect themselves from abuse or other harm. This includes adults living with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Adults could be living with a condition that makes them temporarily vulnerable (such as recovering from a recent surgery), or they could be living with a more permanent condition (such as someone living with dementia).

Types of Abuse and Scope of the Problem

Similar to the abuse of children, there are different types of abuse vulnerable adults may experience. This can include sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, neglect and financial abuse.¹ Although instances of the abuse of vulnerable adults are often underreported, it is estimated that one in every 10 adults over age 60 experiences some form of abuse.² Adults living with an intellectual or developmental disability are more likely to experience violence or sexual abuse than other adults.³

Vulnerable adults often face many barriers to reporting any type of abuse. Those who abuse vulnerable adults are often in positions of trust or authority over the vulnerable adult—such as family members, care providers, business professionals, or even institutions (such as nursing homes). Victims may be reluctant to speak out due to fear of retaliation, or because they rely on their abuser as a caretaker or for their basic needs. They may also be isolated from others and do not have access to be able to report. Other barriers to reporting include feelings of shame, memory loss, or physical,

¹ Center for Disease Control. *About Abuse of Older Persons*. <https://www.cdc.gov/elder-abuse/about/index.html>

² The National Institute of Justice. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/studies-mistreatment-older-adults-offer-solutions-urgent-and-growing-societal>

³ Starke, M., Larsson, A., & Punzi, E. (2025). *People with intellectual disability and their risk of exposure to violence: Identification and prevention – a literature review*. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 29(3), 760–783. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17446295241252472>

emotional, verbal, or cognitive impairments that can make communicating about the abuse even more challenging.

Warning Signs of Inappropriate Behavior

Some abusers seek out and “groom” vulnerable adults for their own interests. Grooming is a process used by an individual to gain control of a vulnerable adult and bring about his or her cooperation. They will take advantage of particular circumstances, or create their own circumstances to abuse—and crossing boundaries is often part of the manipulative process. Grooming could include flattery, bribery, accusations, intimidation, anger, control, creating a false sense of trust, encouraging secrecy, special attention, and more. Most abusers are known and trusted by the adults, and include family members and care providers.

Additional signs that indicate someone could be a risk of harm to a vulnerable adult are when the person:

- Acts with indifference toward the vulnerable adult in his or her care, pays little attention or shows little patience toward them
- Prevents the adult from speaking to visitors, or takes away privileges
- Gives the vulnerable adult “dirty” looks or “glares” to intimidate them
- Uses fear, or a threat of force to get the vulnerable adult to follow instructions
- Suddenly seems to have a larger cash flow or more expensive things, whereas the vulnerable adult may appear to have less or is struggling financially
- Isolates the vulnerable adult from other people, refuses to allow visitors, keeps the vulnerable adult away from others who might observe warning signs
- Misuses medication (such as over-sedation)
- Withholds food (not including food that the person legitimately/medically should not eat for their health)
- Restricts movement when not medically needed (i.e., tying someone to a bed or chair)
- Yells at the vulnerable adult, and,
- Uses excessive or frequent physical force to restrain the adult or “force” them to “comply” or follow instructions.

Indicators of possible abuse in Vulnerable Adults

There are also indicators vulnerable adults may exhibit if they are experiencing neglect, physical abuse or sexual abuse. This could include observing:

- Injuries such as cuts, bruises, and other wounds that appear to be untreated or never seem to heal
- Poor skin color, sunken eyes, dehydration or apparent malnutrition
- Frequent trips to the hospital (for reasons unassociated with a chronic medical condition)
- Soiled clothing

- Apparent pain from touching
- Lack of social contact
- Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, and confusion
- Apparent disorientation or confusion and far-fetched or inconsistent stories to explain their situation and/or circumstances
- Living conditions that are inadequate, or consistently unclean
- Room temperatures that are too extreme in both winter and summer
- Foul odors in the house, and,
- Possible financial abuse, which could include the purchase of expensive care provider gifts, the disappearance of personal items and financial issues such as credit card problems, missing bank account funds or bounced checks.

Communicating Concerns

When someone (a professional or caring adult) who is providing service abuses their position of power and harms a vulnerable adult through abuse or a boundary violation, it's a serious violation of trust, ethics and morality.

If you suspect a vulnerable adult has experienced abuse, or if abuse is disclosed to you by a vulnerable adult, make a report to Adult Protective Services or to local law enforcement. If the suspected abuse involves someone within your organization, then also notify an official designated by your organization's policy. If the vulnerable adult lives in an assisted living or group home environment, there may be additional reporting requirements to state and/or local entities.

If you do not have a suspicion of abuse, but are concerned about behavior that indicates a risk to the vulnerable adult, communicate directly with the person's supervisor or organization. Continue pursuing your concerns up the "chain of command" until satisfied that safety has been achieved. Additional resources may be available through the [National Adult Protective Services Association](https://www.napsa-now.org/).⁴

Conclusion

Protecting vulnerable adults from abuse is not only a moral responsibility, but a reflection of the integrity and accountability at the heart of every ministry or program. By understanding the reality of vulnerable adult abuse, considering our own behavior, learning warning signs and communicating concerns—we strive to protect others who may not be in a position to protect themselves. Thank you for your commitment to helping protect the vulnerable.

⁴ National Adult Protective Services Association. <https://www.napsa-now.org/>