

Parents: How to talk to your children about sex abuse

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More details were revealed Thursday morning about a Hilton Central School District principal who allegedly sexually abused nine pre-teen students on school grounds during school hours over the past four years.

Kirk Ashton, 51, of Rush, who started in 2004 as principal of Northwood Elementary School and last week was placed on administrative leave, is charged with six counts of first-degree sexual abuse and five counts of second-degree course of sexual conduct against a child, both felonies, and nine counts of endangering the welfare of a child, a misdemeanor, the New York State Police said during a news conference.

So, what do you say to your child if he or she asks you about the case? Should you even wait for your child to ask?

First, “I think that families in the Hilton district who have children who attend (Northwood Elementary) should proactively talk to their children,” Deb Rosen, executive director of Bivona Child Advocacy Center, said in a Thursday afternoon phone interview. “The place to start is to ask the child what they might have heard about this. Ask them what they know. And then ask in a direct but supportive way whether the child has ever spent time with anyone in the school district who has made them feel uncomfortable or, for younger children, has made them feel yucky or not right and to ask what that behavior was.”

It is important to not assume the worst or put words in a child’s mouth, Rosen said. If a child reveals that there has been unsafe physical contact, “parents should be careful to modulate their emotional responses,” she said. “All parents are terrified that their children will be sexually violated. But it’s important for them to remain calm. That’s what children need in this situation — they need a calm response, and they need to be believed.”

Tragically and overwhelmingly, Rosen said, “It is the case that children are abused by people they know and they trust. And when you think about children that makes sense. As parents, we let into our children’s lives only those people who we know and we trust, and we communicate to our children that those people are OK — that they can trust them. And unfortunately, there is a minority of people ... who take advantage exactly of that trust and exactly that familiar relationship, and they prey on children and abuse and victimize children.”

One major red flag for parents to look out for, she said, is grooming behavior — an adult lavishing a child with praise, attention, money or gifts. “That really is a cause of concern,” she said and has been a pattern in cases of widespread abuse within major institutions such as the Catholic church.

In addition to having conversations with their children, “Parents also need to be asking themselves and talking to other adults in their family system, ‘Who are the adults that have access to my children? And how do we feel about those adults? And are there any patterns of the contact with our children that we ought to be concerned about?’” Rosen could not recall a case such as the one in Hilton. However, “Across the country there are several cases you could point to that involve a figure of significant authority and significant community trust violating that trust through the abuse of children.”

She added, “Typically, when we see allegations of abuse within an institution, those concerns tend to be very widespread. And so, I think we’re at the beginning and not the end.”

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Parents also should contact State Police at (585) 279-0144 or Bivona at (585) 935-7800.

Earlier at a press conference, Rosen said that more generally, parents in the district also “need to be able to acknowledge to their child that something very worrisome is happening” and to ask them how they feel about it.

However, she said that every parent in Monroe County should initiate conversations with their child about interpersonal safety. The idea is not to instill panic but to elicit information about whether anyone in a child’s life makes him or her feel uncomfortable.

Again, if the child reveals to a parent that there has been an unsafe contact, the parent should remain calm and contact State Police or Bivona, which completed an educational program at the school on March 26, the same day a call was made leading to Ashton’s arrest.

That program teaches children that it’s important to know the “safe adults” in their lives “to talk to and to come forward with any concerns or worries they might have,” Rosen said.

Although, “there are some things that *nobody* can do,” she said by phone. “Nobody can touch your private parts. Nobody can make you touch their private parts. Nobody can take pictures of your private parts. Even if this person is a safe adult, it is not OK and you need to tell somebody else, somebody they really trust.”



Bivona Child Advocacy Executive Director Deb Rosen talks following a press conference Thursday on the arrest of Hilton elementary school Principal Kirk Ashton. SHAWN DOWD/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE