

The Boogie Man is Real

By Radha Selvester, CDS Family & Behavioral Health Services

This time of year we find many dressing up and pretending to be something scary. We laugh at our make-believe zombies, vampires, and boogie men. The bad news is that boogie men are real.

The traditional definition of a boogie man is an evil person who scares or hurts naughty children. By that definition, we have many boogie men in our midst. These are sexual predators. They are all around us, ready to take advantage of our children for their exploitation and pleasure. The only difference between them and the boogie men of the past is that they don't ONLY hurt "naughty" children. They take advantage of any vulnerable children.

There are many web sites that can show you exactly where our real live modern day boogie men live. Our Alachua County Sheriff's Office has a listing with photos and names organized by zip codes: http://www.gainesville.com/assets/pdf/2012_Alachua_County_Sexual_Offenders.pdf. There are hundreds of KNOWN sexual offenders and predators living in our county on this list. I'm sure there are others who haven't been caught yet. Therefore, parents must be diligent to teach children how to avoid becoming victimized.

Responsible parents are vigilant about watching small children. But life changes around middle school so that 24/7 supervision becomes unrealistic. Adolescents want independence and freedom, not realizing how easily they can be exploited. There really are predators/pimps lurking everywhere waiting for the opportunity to lure vulnerable youth into their lairs. Only about ¼ of human trafficking or kidnapping victims are "stolen" away by force. ¾ of victims are LURED. These victims of human trafficking (modern day slavery) are tricked with offers of gifts, a place to stay, a loving relationship, etc. The most vulnerable youth are those who are homeless or have run away from home. In fact, within the first 48 hours of being out on the streets, 1/3 of all youth are involved in the commercial sex trade!

Sexual predators don't limit themselves to homeless kids. If they can lure a middle school girl from her family, they will. Yes middle school is their target age. The average age to become involved in prostitution in the USA is 14 but in Florida it's only 12! Predators are usually male and victims female but there are many exceptions. But in all cases if a minor is involved in a sexual act, the adult is the one breaking the law.

The number one risk factor for becoming a human trafficking victim is RUNNING AWAY from home (and that could include being out past curfew or going somewhere without parental consent). The number one risk factor for running away is FAMILY CONFLICT. CDS offers free Family Action Counseling to kids age 6-17 to help reduce family conflict. The counseling includes helping parents develop better skills for dealing with their children, especially during the challenging adolescent years. CDS also offers a residential program for youth age 10-17 if the family needs some time apart to work on their relationship. Please call 352 244 0628 (M-F) for counseling or 352 244 0618 (24/7) for CDS Interface Youth Shelter. www.cdsfl.org