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Expert offers tips to protect children from predators

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Written by: Shannon Dueck

The President of the Joy Smith Foundation has weighed in on the alleged attempted abductions in Steinbach and area.

Several reports were made on social media earlier this summer. One of the posts came from an alleged incident that took place at the Steinbach soccer park. It was reported that two men walked over to where children were practicing, stood beside the goal posts, and then watched and filmed the boys playing.

In a separate post, it was noted that several attempted abductions or luring of a child happened along the walking paths near the Steinbach Aquatic Centre. The post says that men approached young girls biking along the path and tried to lure them away.

And a third post came from a parent who attended an outdoor festival in Richer. She suggested that a stranger started to play with her daughter and appeared to try and lure her away. She eventually contacted police.

RCMP say they have no information regarding the two incidents in Steinbach. As for the Richer incident, RCMP say though it is suspicious activity, it does not appear to be an abduction attempt.

Janet Campbell is President and Chief Executive Officer of the Joy Smith Foundation. She explains that they are an organization dedicated to combatting human trafficking in Canada. She notes their work focuses on efforts to prevent someone from being victimized. They also work with individuals who have had those experiences in order to support them through their healing and recovery journey.

Campbell says though she cannot comment directly on the three incidents posted on social media, she can say that these do not appear to be cases of human trafficking.

"From a human trafficking perspective, it's very rare for these cases to develop as a result of a snatch and grab type of scenario," says Campbell.

She notes human trafficking is often something that starts with an individual who is known to the victim. They will often build a relationship and gain the trust of the victim and then lure them away and groom them. Campbell says this is the most common way for human trafficking cases to develop in Canada.

In order to help protect children, Campbell says it is important to have a safety plan. She notes kids should have a safe word or a code with their parents, which can be relayed if they need help.

"It should be something very quick and easy to convey or even to text," she says.

Campbell says children also need to know that individuals they meet online are strangers and that these strangers can present some greater dangers than individuals they encounter in their own community. She notes other tips include staying away from individuals they do not know, never approaching a car, and never touching a piece of paper or anything else that may be handed to them by a stranger.

"These are all tactics that can be used in situations that we've had," she adds.

Campbell encourages parents to also pay attention to individuals who may be new in their child's life, and to watch for any changes they may demonstrate in their attitude towards school or the way they dress and do their makeup.

"These kinds of changes could suggest that they are under pressure from this new circle of friends or new trusted relationship," she explains. "And that's something to pay close attention to and explore a little further."

If you should spot a suspicious person, Campbell says it is very important not to put yourself in harm's way. If you see something that does not seem right, she encourages contacting police. Campbell says too often people neglect to call police, for fear that their assessment of the situation is wrong.

"People should just really be encouraged to call the police and share their concerns," she urges. "The police will take that information and they know exactly what to do with it and how to handle these situations."

Meanwhile, Campbell says human trafficking happens in every community across Canada. She notes the two most common forms are sex trafficking and forced labour trafficking.

"The pattern of trafficking through a known and trusted connection that falsely lures them into a situation, and grooms and manipulates them to a point where they feel trapped and they have no other option out, is something that is more common than people realize," says Campbell.

She says hundreds and hundreds of individuals in Manitoba are suffering in silence. If you see something suspicious, you are encouraged to call the authorities or leave an anonymous tip with Crime Stoppers.

"One phone call could quite literally save a life," she says. "You never know what small piece of information could help the authorities to protect somebody that's vulnerable, or rescue somebody who is in harm's way."