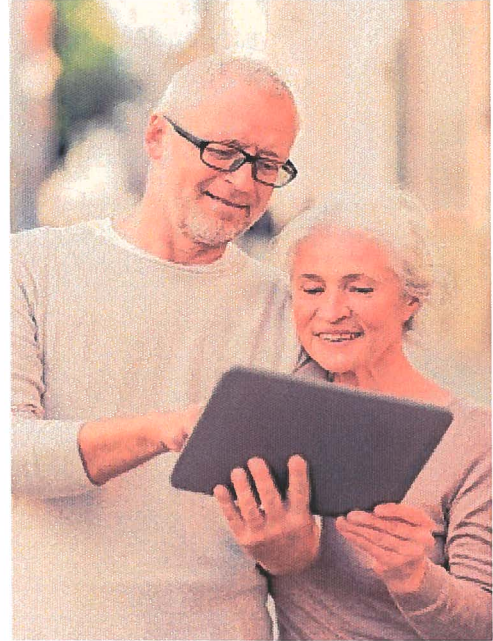


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Vulnerable Adult Abuse (Part 1): A Closer Look at the Context and Reality

Editor's Note: *At the VIRTUS Programs, our mission is to educate and empower organizations and individuals to work together to ensure safe environments. Not only do our training articles educate caring adults on preventing child sexual abuse and other types of abuse, but there's also information that can be applicable to addressing vulnerable adult abuse as well. This article (Part 1), and the next one (Part 2, next month), will discuss vulnerable adults. This first article will provide an overview on vulnerable adults and the types of abuse/exploitation they may experience. We know that the more vulnerable a person is, the greater the risk to their exploitation and abuse. A case study that is relevant to all adults highlights how sophisticated abuse can be—even for persons who might not be considered "vulnerable" under the traditional definition. The next article in this series (Part 2) will provide actions caring adults can take to prevent the abuse of vulnerable adults, and how to appropriately respond if it is occurring, which may be particularly useful if your organization also has a policy and ministries for the protection of vulnerable adults.*



Introduction & Context:

While each of us can be vulnerable in any given set of circumstances, the phrase "vulnerable adults" has a wide and varied definition. It can apply, but is not limited to: adults with physical, mental, emotional or behavioral conditions who have an illness or a situation that renders them unable to protect themselves or get help when injured or abused. It applies to adults whose condition or disability impairs their ability to provide adequately for their own care, and to adults who habitually lack the use of reason, along with individuals who have a court-appointed guardian. The term can also apply to the elderly, whose various circumstances might make them susceptible to persons or situations that cause them harm, or individuals who are residents or patients within hospitals or nursing homes, or an adult who receives care services from a licensed personal care service within the home.

Adult persons needing or requiring help from other adults are always in a position of vulnerability, because of the disparity of power within those helping relationships. In the same vein, the adult who's providing the service is always responsible for upholding professional boundaries. When a professional or caring adult who's providing service abuses his/her position of power, it's a serious violation of trust, ethics and morality.

Reality & Prevalence:

Similar to child sexual abuse, most vulnerable adult abusers are known and trusted by the victims, and include caregivers and even family members. Some abusers seek out and "groom" vulnerable adults, which is the means for an offender to gain control of a vulnerable adult and bring about his/her cooperation. Grooming could include flattery, bribery, accusations,

intimidation, anger, control, creating a false sense of trust, encouraging secrecy, special attention and more.

Statistics tell us that most abuse of vulnerable adults falls within the realm of mental or emotional abuse, physical abuse, financial exploitation, sexual abuse and neglect—which could include caregiver neglect or self neglect. While a small percentage of elder abuse involves sexual exploitation, financial exploitation is a major cause of abuse for this group, and sexual acts can be used as a tool to exert power and control over any situation.

Depending on the type and circumstances of the abuse, vulnerable adults who fall victim to one of these crimes are often afraid to communicate—sometimes because of fear of retribution, or feelings of shame. Another reason is because the people who commit these acts are often relatives, business professionals and institutions, con artists and caregivers. The vulnerable adults may also have a debilitating physical, verbal, emotional, and/or intellectual/ psychological impediment that prevents them from communicating or coming forward to report an abusive situation. They may not remember what happened or become confused about what is occurring; or, they may not even realize they've been victimized at all.

Closer look at financial abuse and fraud:

One specific type of abuse to highlight for vulnerable adults includes financial or material exploitation where abusers, for their own profit or advantage, use or steal the vulnerable adult's resources of trust funds, income, bank accounts, credit cards or property. The exploitation could also include borrowing money and promising to return it, or providing investment or retirement opportunities. Fraud falls within this realm of financial exploitation, and includes telemarketing and mail scams.

Caring adults who have received training within the Protecting God's Children Program are familiar with efforts to protect children that involve limiting the dissemination of personal information—particularly over the Internet—because of victimization risks. This is the type of message that should be echoed to persons of all ages, and particularly vulnerable adults. These measures include being circumspect with providing:

- Full names or nicknames
- DOBs
- Phone numbers
- Home addresses
- Images depicting a frequently-visited location, including the home, neighborhood, school, etc.

Recall that the definition of a vulnerable adult is wide and varied. When we know that an individual is already vulnerable based on various factors, there is greater risk to their exploitation and abuse. However, sometimes there are situations that can occur that make an individual more vulnerable when they wouldn't be under normal circumstances. So what happens when personal information is not intentionally provided to someone with bad intentions, but it is nonetheless exploited causing an unsuspecting individual to become a victim?

Case study:

Have you ever had a family member, via any social media platform, ask you to disclose the basis of your relationship online? Perhaps they ask you to denote that you're their cousin, grandchild, parent, child or grandparent? Some social media sites and apps make it novel and fun to connect with family and share this connection over the Internet to create an electronic 'family tree' of sorts that becomes attached to the profile, without realizing it can be devastating when in the hands of the wrong person. Scammers may exploit this information provided via the

Internet through obituaries or even popular social media such as Facebook or Instagram—and may use the information gleaned from accounts with limited security settings for their own aims.

The "Grandparent Scam" has been highlighted over the years by the FBI, AARP and popular news outlets such as CBS and The New York Times to refer to a progressively sophisticated type of fraud abuse that's becoming more prevalent due to the increased usage of social networking sites and the Internet. While it has been dubbed the "Grandparent Scam", the reality is that this type of scam can affect anyone, regardless of age or relationship to others. The scammer will look at social media to determine personal information to use as fodder when tricking the victim, which helps to make their fraudulent stories more believable. When a child (or adult) has a social media account without proper protections, it's easy for someone with bad intentions to exploit the information in order to more successfully target the victim. According to the FBI, there are multiple scenarios that could arise, and the possibilities really are endless. Imagine this scenario:

Penelope is a 14-year-old child visiting Spain with her choir as part of her school's spring break trip. She posts updates and beautiful pictures about the experience on social media whenever she has access to WIFI—to which loved ones and friends comment and "like" immediately. Some of Penelope's family members also "share" Penelope's photos on their own profiles and pages, and comment online about how excited they are for her to their own wider social network of friends.

Since families are typically aware when loved ones are in foreign countries, this could make a fraudulent situation more believable if one of these family members is contacted by an imposter. Due to a lack of security protections on any of those individuals' social media accounts, a scammer could look at this information and contact a grandparent (or other relative) who has posted a reaction to one of Penelope's posts, or shared it. This communication could be late at night (when people aren't thinking clearly), where the scammer calls and pretends to be an authority figure, police officer, doctor, etc., who outlines a grave situation involving Penelope and asks the adults to not waste time; rather, to send money immediately. Or, the individual could identify themselves as a crook and threaten to harm Penelope if the relative doesn't comply immediately—threatening worse repercussions if the police are called. The scammer could even call pretending to be Penelope who requests financial help due to a bad situation, such as being arrested, broken down, mugged, etc. They might call crying and using a strained voice, which would make the voice harder to recognize—and the imposter acting as Penelope might appeal to the emotions of the relative to not tell the parents to avoid getting into more trouble. Once the money is wired, it often can't be retrieved again—all occurring while Penelope is safe and sound on her trip. In this scenario, the child's information has been exploited, and the other targeted adult has been the recipient of a fraud scheme.

Conclusion:

If some type of exploitative or fraudulent situation does occur, it's often difficult for the person experiencing it to immediately determine if it is exploitation due to the manipulation of the abuser. It may be even harder to communicate about abuse after it occurs—particularly depending on the level of the person's vulnerability. This is why it's so important for caring adults to be aware of the types of abuse different adult populations might face—and what types of situations might make adults be more vulnerable. Our next article will explore how to both assist in the prevention of the traditional types of vulnerable adult abuse and the more sophisticated types, and the proper response if it does happen on "our watch".

References available upon request. To provide constructive feedback, please email editor@virtus.org.

1) Based on the article, which of the following statements are accurate?

- A) Much of the information that applies to the protection of children may also be applicable to the protection of vulnerable adults.
 - B) It's often challenging for a vulnerable adult to disclose about abuse that has happened to him/her.
 - C) One of the most prevalent types of abuse targeting vulnerable adults involves financial exploitation.
 - D) All of the above.
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