President Ronald Reagan said it best, "Trust, but verify." He may have applied this old Russian proverb to United States' relations with the Soviet Union, but like any good proverb it fits many situations. It makes a good watch-word for parents in dealing with respected institutions, especially with regard to the possible sexual misbehavior of their representatives.

For the last two weeks, the news media have been filled with the discussion of Jerry Sandusky's use of Pennsylvania State University's football facilities for the alleged rape of young boys. The failure to stop this activity cost the university not only its legendary football coach Joe Paterno but more importantly its president, Graham Spanier, whose 15 years in that office helped build Penn State into an academic powerhouse.

Much of the media coverage has focused on Sandusky's alleged activities or on the failure of people in leadership within the university to stop Sandusky or to report him to the police. Editorials have ranged from shutting down Penn State's football program to the question of whether sexual crimes are simply part of big college sports.

Given the international attention paid to these illegal activities, I am sure that every coach, athletic director and university president, as well as high school principal, has wondered "could it happen here?" I am also certain that nearly every parent has asked themselves, "could this happen to my child?" and then, "how can I protect my child?"

The answer to this last question lies not in rejecting these institutions but in understanding the nature of institutions and applying Reagan's dictum, "Trust but verify."

Given Joe Paterno's adherence to Catholicism, the press analysis of this football story has frequently compared it to the scandal of sex abuse rocking the Catholic Church. The similarities of cover-up "to protect the reputation of the institution" are certainly strong. The parallel between the two is instructive.

In sociological terms, institutions have a two-fold character. On the one hand, an organization takes on a life of its own-to the point where the law has declared it a "person" with respect to many legal rights and responsibilities. On the other hand, institutions are simply organizations made up of people. An organization is no better or worse than the individuals who work in them.

The problem facing parents is the conflict between the identity and reputation of an institution (its "personhood") and the identity and reputation of the people in it.

This nation has many trusted and valued institutions: football, universities and churches are among them. Many parents and families belong to these organizations and volunteer their time to assist their activities. These institutions set, preach and teach high ideals-from good sportsmanship and fair play to the moral values of life. Parents expect these organizations to live up to their ideals.

At least 99.9 percent of the people involved in these institutions are good people of stellar character. But there are a tiny number of individuals in some of them whose character and intentions are immoral or even criminal. The trust which the institution's reputation instills in its members does not apply to them.

But how do you know who to avoid? You don't. So this is why Reagan's dictum is important, "Trust but verify." In other words, trust the institution. Trust its members as a whole. But verify the individuals who work with your children, in a thoughtful and sensible manner.

One final point. The rape of children is a crime. The legal term child "sexual abuse" makes it sound comparable to "alcohol abuse." You know, like the person who can't keep away from the bottle, so you send them to Alcoholics Anonymous for therapy. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The law distinguishes between "rape" and "abuse." The term "rape" connotes that the victim has the power of consent and refused to consent, while "abuse" connotes that the victim had no power to consent because they were a minor or were mentally handicapped. When this legal terminology is used in popular discourse, the terms' meaning changes. "Abuse" implies something less than "rape." This is incorrect; "abuse" is the term used for the rape of a child. So let's call it what it is, "child rape."