

How to Protect Children from Sexual Abuse

Parents often ask what they can do to help prevent their children from being sexual abused. They want to know how they should talk to their children about such a sensitive topic. A common concern of parents with regard to this subject is finding the best way to bridge this conversation with their children.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Should I tell my child we are going to talk about child sexual abuse?

A: Children do not need to know that you are teaching them skills that may help prevent child sexual abuse. What children do need to know is that the information you are sharing with them will give them skills to help keep them safe and healthy.

Q: Should I share stories from the news with my children so they take this subject seriously?

A: Although it is often done with good intentions, it is important not to use fear to teach children about safety. Scaring them only increases their insecurity and can make them more vulnerable. It is important to share age-appropriate information that balances protection and empowerment.

Q: Am I going to damage my children by teaching them about this?

A: Experts explain that it is common for parents to be concerned about the impact of learning about sexual abuse on children. Prevention education does not harm children. In fact, there is substantial evidence to suggest the opposite. Research shows that children who receive comprehensive preventative education are more likely to report abuse than those who do not. Early disclosure stops abuse from continuing and allows the child victim to get the necessary intervention help.

Remember that children do not need to know that you are teaching them safety skills to prevent child sexual abuse. There is nothing fearful for children in learning about labeling their body parts, identifying their feelings, identifying safe adults, etc.

Q: How should I talk to my children?

A: It is suggested that discussions be ongoing. Personal safety should become an integral part of a child's life. It is important to talk to them in a matter-of-fact manner just like you would approach any other type of personal safety. Such as:

- Bike safety — Children need to wear a helmet.
- Car safety — Children need to wear a seat belt.
- Home safety — Children need to lock the door.
- Fire safety — Children need to stop, drop and roll.

Just as you remind children on an ongoing basis about using the above safety strategies, skills to reduce sexual abuse and exploitation should be discussed on an ongoing basis.



How to Protect Children from Sexual Abuse (cont'd)

Q: Where should discussions begin and continue on? What do I discuss?

1. Beginning the discussion: (Approximately 4-7 years of age)

- Encourage children to start to take ownership over their bodies:
 - Let children begin to dress themselves;
 - Let children begin to bathe and wash themselves; and,
 - Let children go to the toilet themselves.
- Teach children how to be assertive. Create opportunities for them to practice matching their body language with strong verbal messages that demonstrate they mean business (“NO!”, “Stop!”, “I don’t like that!”, etc.)
- Notice when children are reluctant to express affection. Do not force it. Remember that teaching respect does not mean teaching obedience. Respect children’s decisions to avoid physical affection, such as hugging. This fosters self-awareness and respects their right to make decisions about touching.
- Teach children the correct names of body parts.
- Teach children that their private parts, the areas covered by their bathing suit, belong to them and shouldn’t be touched by others (present exceptions such as times when they are hurt or sick and they need help from a doctor or parent/guardian, etc.).
- Teach children to tell you if anyone:
 - wants to look at their private parts or asks them to look at another person’s private parts;
 - asks to touch their private parts or asks them to touch another person’s private parts;
 - wants to take naked pictures of them or shows them naked pictures of others;
 - tells them sexual jokes or talks to them about sex;
 - wants to bathe them and washes their private area excessively; and,
 - makes the child feel scared, hurt, sad, or uncomfortable.
- Explain the difference between secrets that are okay to keep and secrets that need to be told to a safe adult. Explain that any secrets about touching or secrets about picture taking should be told to a safe adult.
- Teach children how to label their feelings (e.g. happy, sad, mad, scared, mixed-up, etc.).
- Help children identify safe adults in their lives who they can turn to for help.



How to Protect Children from Sexual Abuse (cont'd)

2. Continue discussions: (Approximately 8-11 years of age)

- Teach children the difference between public and private behaviour.
- Discuss privacy boundaries for changing, bathing and going to the bathroom. It is common for children of this age to begin seeking some privacy.
- Set limits with regard to what information children are exposed to such as adult subject matters (e.g. conversations, television, music, Internet, games, etc.). Although children are interested in adult information, they do not have the knowledge or experience to handle it.
- Have children practice assertive behaviour. Create opportunities for children to practice 'what if' situations where they need be assertive with someone, including with adults they do and do not know. Have them practice being assertive by using their voice and bodies to send a message that shows they mean business.
- Talk to children about how difficult it can be to be assertive with an adult they know. Explain that it can be uncomfortable when an adult, especially someone they like, breaks their personal boundaries (crosses the line). It is not realistic to expect that in this type of situation children will shout "No!" It is more helpful to acknowledge how difficult this situation would be, and reinforce that it is never okay for an adult, including adults a child knows and likes, to break boundaries with children. Encourage children to tell you or another safe adult if this happens. Reassure them that it is never a child's fault if an adult breaks boundaries.
- Individuals who are a risk to sexually abuse a child may use the idea of friendship to increase a child's compliance and reduce the likelihood of disclosure. Discuss with children what friendship is and what it isn't.
- Encourage children to identify and label their feelings. This will promote self-monitoring of feelings and increase self-awareness.
- Explain the difference between secrets that are okay to keep and secrets that need to be told to a safe adult. Explain that any secrets about touching or secrets about picture taking should be told to a safe adult.
- Have children identify safe adults within the family, at school, and in the neighbourhood.



How to Protect Children from Sexual Abuse (cont'd)

3. Subsequent discussions for pre- and early adolescents

- Discuss healthy vs. unhealthy relationships, boundaries and roles of adults.
 - Discuss the difference between cooperative vs. coercive relationships.
 - Explain the difference between children's and adult's roles. An adult's role is to protect children, not to be friends and confide in children.
 - Explain that sexual attention from an adult is never okay. It is important to explain that when an experience like this happens to a child, it is never the child's fault. Under all circumstances, it always an adult's responsibility to maintain boundaries.
- Continue setting limits with regard to what information children are privy to (e.g. adult conversations, television, music, Internet, games, etc.). Strengthening appropriate boundaries between adults and children increases their personal safety.

