

Protecting Children From Sexual Abuse

© 2019

Marjorie S. Fink, CSW
Sexual Assault Prevention
Specialist

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Facts About Child Sexual Abuse	5
Preventing Sexual Abuse: What to Teach Your Child	6
About "Being Special"	6
About "It's Your Body"	6
About "Feelings"	7
About "Touching"	7
About Saying "NO"	8
About "Secrets"	8
About "It's Never a Child's Fault"	9
About "Telling"	9
Preventing Sexual Abuse: What Parents Can Do	10
Promote Your Child's Self Esteem	10
Set Family Safety Rules	10
Teach Your Child to be Assertive	11
Listen to Your Child	11
Practice Prevention Techniques	12
Indicators of Sexual Abuse	12
How to Help a Child Who Has Been Abused	13
Stay Calm	13
Believe in What the Child Has Told You	13
Emphasize that It's Not the Child's Fault	13
Take Action	14
Prevention Tips for Parents	14
Do's and Don'ts	14
Where to Call for Help	15

Introduction

This booklet has been developed to help parents deal with the difficult subject of child sexual abuse. Parents can help their children feel more secure by teaching them how to recognize possible abuse before it happens, how to say "No," and how to get help.

Although it is the responsibility of adults to keep children safe, potential child victims are most likely to be alone with the abuser. Because parents cannot always be there to provide protection, children must be taught how to develop and use their own resources to protect themselves.

The pages which follow provide information to enable parents to talk to their children about sexual abuse. Remember ... **CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IS THE ABUSE OF POWER.** It is when someone bigger, older, and with more authority is able to abuse another person, in this case a child, only because they are more powerful. Children are vulnerable to sexual abuse simply because they are children and uninformed.

The informed and prepared child is far better equipped to prevent or stop some forms of sexual abuse than the child who has never confronted the possibility that it can happen.

The informed and prepared parent is better equipped to provide their children with the knowledge and skills needed to help prevent victimization and exploitation.

The informed parent is also better able to recognize the signs of abuse, learn how to encourage their children to share their concerns and fears early on before the abuse progresses into a more serious encounter, and provide help when needed.

Marjorie S. Fink, CSW

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

FACTS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse is any sexual contact with a child under the age of eighteen. It includes the tricked, forced and secret touching of a child's private parts under or through clothing. It is against the law. Incest is any sexual contact between family members and is the most common form of child sexual abuse.

In any case of child sexual abuse, regardless of the child's intelligence, race, age, social class, or family income, the child is always the victim.

One out of every four girls and one out of every seven boys are sexually abused before 18 years of age. One half the victims are 12 and under.

Children are sexually abused most often by a person who they know and trust - usually someone in the family. In 90% of the cases, the abuser is someone who the child knows. In over 60% of the time, the abuser is the child's father or stepfather.

Most sexual assaults occur without physical force or violence. When the offender is someone the child knows, and there is an established relationship, the offender takes advantage of the child's trust. Once the sexual activity takes place, the offender entraps the child by threatening him or her into keeping it a secret.

Most sexual assaults occur over a period of time and follow a pattern of gradual escalation. At first, slightly inappropriate behavior such as accidentally touching a child's buttocks or breast may occur. If it is allowed to continue, the contact progresses and becomes more sexual and assaultive in nature.

Both male and female victims suffer trauma from sexual abuse by being betrayed, exploited, and misused. Even a single contact or instance that involves no physical contact, can be damaging because of the feelings of mistrust they can create.

Most child molesters do not recognize their problem and will not seek help on their own. Restraint, treatment or both are needed to correct their behavior.

PREVENTING SEXUAL ABUSE: WHAT TO TEACH YOUR CHILD

Through understanding the concepts of prevention, parents can learn how to help their children develop the confidence and ability to protect themselves. Being able to speak with your children about touching and getting help is an essential part of ensuring their safety. Suggestions of what parents can say to children are presented so these topics can be discussed in a positive, nonthreatening, and comfortable manner for parents and children alike.

About "BEING SPECIAL"

It is important that children feel deserving of good treatment when learning how to protect themselves. Teach your children that they are special. Encourage your children to take good care of their "special selves."

What Parents Can Say About "BEING SPECIAL"

- "You are very special. There is no one else in the whole world exactly like you."
- "It is important to take good care of yourself and your body because your body belongs to you and is a special part of you."
- "I am glad you take good care of yourself by... brushing your teeth, using your seat belt, etc. ... because you are important and special."

About "IT'S YOUR BODY"

When teaching children about privacy and respect for one's own body, it is helpful to teach your child the proper names for body parts when they are young, stressing that the private parts of the body are the parts covered by a bathing suit. This gives a child the language to understand and tell. When children are taught that they own their bodies and can decide how their bodies are touched and treated, they are more likely to exercise their right to protect themselves.

What Parents Can Say About "IT'S YOUR BODY"

- "Your body belongs to you and you can decide who touches you."
- "It's your body and only you know how you feel about the way you are touched."
- "It's your body and no one has a right to trick you into touching your private parts."

About "FEELINGS"

Children tend to ignore their own feelings in uncomfortable situations, instead of recognizing them as warnings. Our feelings help us by letting us know if what is happening feels good or bad. It is like having our own special radar. By paying attention to our feelings we can then decide if anything needs to be done to help us feel better. By encouraging children to listen to their feelings they can be helped to trust how they feel. This is a very important part of sexual abuse prevention because children need to learn to trust their own feelings in situations that involve tricked, secret, or forced touching.

Children are only likely to act upon their feelings by asking an adult for help, trying to assert themselves by saying "No," and attempting to get away when they feel they have a right to their feelings.

What Parents Can Say About "FEELINGS"

- "Our feelings, like our bodies, are a very special and important part of us."
- "Listen to your feelings. They can help you by telling you if what is happening feels good or bad to you."
- "You know how you feel. If something feels funny, does not feel okay or feels bad, then you are right."

About "TOUCHING"

Children need to know that no one has a right to touch them in ways that make them feel uncomfortable. Parents can help their children understand that there are different kinds of touches which result in different feelings. Children can then be encouraged to pay attention to their feelings.

What Parents Can Say About "TOUCHING"

- "A good touch feels good, like a handshake or a hug that you want."
- "A bad touch is a touch that feels bad, such as a hit, a punch, or a kick. A bad touch is also when someone tricks a child into touching the private parts of their body."
- "If you are not sure whether the touch was good or bad, that is a confusing touch. Children are most confused about a touch when a person they know and trust touches them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable."
- "Your feelings will tell you what to do. If you feel bad or confused about someone touching you or seeing your body without clothes, your feelings are telling you 'NO,' this is not okay for me. Whenever you feel 'NO,' say 'NO.'"

About Saying "NO"

Children are taught to obey adults in authority. This gives adults power over children and increases children's vulnerability because children are likely to do whatever an adult tells them. Because it is so difficult for children to stand up to adults and say "NO," especially in an assaultive situation, children need to practice saying "NO" in different ways and in a loud, assertive voice. This may stop a sexually abusive situation and keep it from recurring. To empower children, give them permission to say "NO" whenever they feel the need to protect themselves.

What Parents Can Say About "SAYING NO"

- *"It's okay to say 'NO' to adults or to anyone that makes you feel uncomfortable in any way."*
- *"When someone makes you feel bad and you need to tell them 'NO,' say it in your loudest voice, so they know you really mean it."*
- *To young children say, "If a grown-up tries to give you a bad touch, tell the grown-up, 'NO,' my mommy doesn't let people touch me there. My mommy told me that's a bad kind of touch and I am not allowed to do that."*

About "SECRETS"

A person who sexually abuses a child has a great deal invested in keeping it a secret. The offender often applies force by telling a child, "This is our special secret," or "Promise not to tell or you'll get into trouble." Children need to understand that no one has the right to ask or tell a child to keep an unpleasant or bad secret. They also need to understand the difference between good and bad secrets because without this understanding they may find it difficult to tell an adult and get the help they need.

What Parents Can Say About "SECRETS"

- *"A good secret may be one involving a pleasant surprise like a surprise party or a birthday present."*
- *"A bad secret is any secret that makes a child feel bad, afraid or worried. If you are tricked into promising to keep 'touching' a secret, that's a bad secret."*
- *"It may be hard to tell a bad secret when you promised not to. Remember, it's always okay to tell a bad secret to get help."*

About "IT'S NEVER A CHILD'S FAULT"

Adults need to understand that children are not even partially responsible for the abuse they may have suffered. Understanding that it is always the adult who is totally responsible for this behavior can aid adults in helping to prevent further abuse. Encourage "telling" even if the abuser is in the family and someone the child trusted or loved.

It is helpful for children to know this information before abuse occurs so that they will be more likely to tell a trusted adult. Frequently, children feel guilty after a disclosure, especially when they did not resist or were ineffective in resisting the abuse. It is also particularly crucial at this time for a child to hear that it is not his or her fault.

What Parents Can Say About "IT'S NEVER A CHILD'S FAULT"

- *"It's never the child's fault. Even if you didn't say 'NO' or 'STOP' and even if you promised not to tell. It's always wrong for a bigger or older person to trick or force you into getting a bad touch."*

About "TELLING"

While it is important for children to learn how to protect themselves in the event they are alone with an abuser, a child can only be truly safe from further abuse if an adult is told and assumes responsibility for the child's protection. It is very difficult for a child to reveal if they have been abused, because they may have promised not to tell or feel they are to blame, and may not know how or who to tell. Emphasizing the following with your child can enable the child to tell and get the needed help.

What Parents Can Say About "TELLING"

- *"Sometimes, children will find it difficult to 'tell' if they think the touching was their fault and if they 'promised not to tell.'"*
- *"Remember it is always okay to tell a bad secret to get help."*
- *"Remember that it's always okay to tell an adult you trust if you need help and it's very important to keep telling until you get help."*
- *"If you come to me for help I will believe you. I will not blame you, and I will help you be safe."*
- *"I want you to think about who you would tell if you needed help. Then let's make a list of who you trust and could go to for help."*

PREVENTING SEXUAL ABUSE: WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

There are many positive ways parents can reduce their child's vulnerability. The information offered here emphasizes the importance of empowering children in their everyday lives by enhancing their self-esteem, teaching family values and communication skills, and strengthening the parent/child relationship.

Promote Your Child's Self-Esteem

In order to encourage children to take care of themselves and give them the confidence they need to do it, they need self-esteem reinforcement. While all children are vulnerable to sexual abuse, children with low self-esteem appear to be at greater risk. The following are some of the ways parents can help children see themselves as special, unique, worthy, and of value:

1. Emphasize the value of being different and, therefore, special by helping your children appreciate and understand the differences in people.
2. Stress the ways we take care of our special selves in terms of health, nutrition, and safety. This can give parents an opportunity to point out the importance of children taking care of themselves in these ways because they are important and special.
3. Help children feel empowered by giving them some control over what happens to them. Provide them with acceptable choices and the opportunity to make their own decisions. It is very important for all children to be given choices about touching and privacy and to learn to assert themselves.
4. Reinforce the meaning of privacy, private possessions and caring for one's own possessions. Allow each child the opportunity to have certain things all to him or herself, free from sharing. This encourages value and pride in ownership, respect for property and the right to privacy. Children can then apply this concept to their own bodies.

Set Family Safety Rules

A good way to help your child develop skills related to self-protection is by setting family rules about respecting each other's privacy, touching, and how family members treat each other. The rules can also carry over

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

outside the family by giving children permission to make decisions about their bodies and how they are treated. A child will potentially be able to use these rules to verbally resist uncomfortable touching by telling a possible abuser, "I am not allowed...it's against the rules in my family...etc." Some suggestions for family rules follow:

Rule: Each family member has a right to ask for privacy and family members are expected to respect this right. If this right is denied, then a child is encouraged to "tell."

Rule: Each family member has the right to make decisions about how they are touched. Other family members are expected to comply with these decisions.

Teach Your Child To Be Assertive

A child who is never allowed to say "NO" to an authority figure is unlikely to be assertive in a threatening situation even if the child understands the importance of saying "NO." Children need to practice asserting themselves with adults in everyday life experiences to be prepared to use this skill to protect themselves.

Tell children that it is important to tell someone how they feel if they do not like what is happening by saying: *"It's okay to say "NO" to adults or anyone who makes you feel uncomfortable in any way, even if it is a parent, teacher, coach, clergyman, anyone!"*

Use every opportunity as their parents to encourage a child to tell you anytime you may make them feel bad in any way. Reinforce the child's right to his or her own feelings by saying:

"I am glad you told me how you feel. Let's try to work things out."

Listen To Your Child

It is more likely that your child will come to you with his or her concerns and you will be able to help, if you take the time to talk to your children every day about their lives. Show them your genuine interest and be available to really listen to them and observe their behavior. Develop your ability as a parent to communicate with your child by encouraging him or her to tell or ask you anything that concerns them. Ask questions that clarify what the child is trying to say. For example, if a child says that someone makes them feel weird or funny, respond by saying, *"What do you mean by weird?"*

Practice Prevention Techniques

Play a "WHAT IF" game to develop the skills of saying "NO," telling, and understanding about touches. Present the following situations and encourage your child to practice responding:

- "WHAT IF...someone touched your private parts. What would you say?"
- "WHAT IF...someone tried to play a secret touching game with you. What would you say?"
- "WHAT IF...someone gave you a bad touch. Who would you tell and what would you say?"
- "WHAT IF...someone told you not to tell about a bad touch because it was your fault. Who would you tell and what would you say?"
- "WHAT IF...the person you told about a bad touch said they didn't believe you. Who else would you tell and what would you say?"

INDICATORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

It is important to recognize that child sexual abuse is a possibility if several of the following physical and behavioral indicators are present.

Physical Indicators: The following physical symptoms may indicate abuse is present, although a child may not show any physical signs and still have suffered abuse.

- Irritation of the mouth, genital or anal areas
- Difficulty walking, sitting or urinating
- Venereal disease
- Genital and urinary infections
- Torn, stained or bloody clothes or undergarments

Behavioral Indicators: The symptoms below, especially if they come on abruptly, are a strong sign that a problem exists for a child.

- Sleep disturbances
- Sudden new fears such as fear of being alone, overly clingy, fear of physical contact, in general, or with a particular person or persons (for example, all males)
- Regression to younger babyish behavior such as wetting or soiling self
- Sexually explicit language, behavior or knowledge inappropriate to the child's age
- Change in school performance, truancy, behavior problems, inability to concentrate and function academically
- Self-destructive behavior such as alcohol and drug abuse, self-mutilation, attempted suicide, stealing, shoplifting, prostitution, and running away

HOW TO HELP A CHILD WHO HAS BEEN ABUSED

It is important for an adult to know how to handle a situation involving sexual abuse before a child discloses that he or she has been sexually abused. Knowing what to do and what to say can help an adult remain reassuring to the child.

Stay Calm

- **What to do:** Try to stay in control of your emotions. Remember, the child is likely to already feel responsible, self-blaming, guilty and afraid. An upsetting reaction by an adult can only reinforce these feelings in the child. It can be helpful to question the child about what happened, when the abuse occurred, and who was involved only if the child is not made to feel responsible for being victimized.
- **What to say:** "I am glad that you told me. You did the right thing about telling." Encourage the child gently by saying, "Can you tell me more about what happened?" Fear and anger are normal adult reactions when hearing about abuse. Let the child know, "I am not angry at you. You are not to blame at all. I am angry that someone hurt you."

Believe In What The Child Has Told You

- **What to do:** Children do not make up stories about sexual assault. Adults, however, often find it hard to believe that such a thing can happen and their first reaction might be to deny the problem. Believe the child no matter how hard it is. The child has trusted his or her feelings enough to tell and now needs to be reassured that you, the helping adult, believe what the child has told you.
- **What to say:** "I believe you."

Emphasize That It's Not the Child's Fault

- **What to do:** Although it is important to place the blame with the offender, it's scary to a child to make threats about what might happen to the offender, especially if it is a family member or someone close to the child. It is more reassuring to communicate that the child did nothing wrong and did not cause what happened.
- **What to say:** "It's not your fault. It's never a child's fault even if you didn't say no or promised not to tell. What Uncle Joe did was wrong and unfair. He has a problem and needs help so he doesn't hurt you or any other child again."

Take Action

- If nothing is done, the molestation will continue. Seek help immediately. Mental health agencies can give psychological help and emotional treatment and a physician should be contacted promptly for treatment of physical injuries.
- If the abuser was in the family, Seeking help is crucial for the child, the family and the abuser. Children need help to feel safe and in order not to blame themselves. If the abuser is in the family, help is available from Child Protective Services. C.P.S. helps by receiving investigating reports of child abuse and making referrals for professional help. Families need help to learn healthy patterns of interaction in order to prevent further abuse, and the abuser needs help to stop abusing.
- If the abuser is a stranger, not a relative and not someone who has the responsibility for caring for the child, then the police should be contacted. If the police are not called, other children remain at risk of being molested as well.

PREVENTION TIPS FOR PARENTS

DO's

- Do teach your child that it's your body and you decide who touches you. If you don't feel like a hug or a kiss, it's okay.
- Do listen to your child when he or she expresses discomfort about anyone. Try to understand what really concerns your child by asking what he or she means by weird, funny, uncomfortable, etc.
- Do tell your child that it's okay not to obey an adult if what the adult is asking the child to do makes him/her feel uncomfortable in any way, no matter what it is and no matter who is the adult.
- Do tell your child that it's okay to say "NO" loudly to anyone who makes them feel bad and anytime touching, privacy, and secrets are involved.
- Do make sure that your child knows that sexual assault is never a child's fault even if the child didn't say "NO" and promised not to tell.
- Do listen to your children when they come to you for help. They are coming to you because they are unable to handle the situation on their own.
- Do believe your child and help him/her trust their feelings. The conversation you have with your child should provide information to truly help your child and be reassuring.
- Do respect your child's right to privacy by teaching your child to ask for privacy and by responding positively to any request by a child that demonstrates making decisions about his or her own body.

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

DON'TS

- Don't force your child to hug or kiss relatives if they show any reluctance at all.
- If your child says that someone makes them feel funny or weird, don't tell your child not to feel that way because Mr. ... is such a nice person.
- Don't tell your child to always obey adults.
- Don't say it's rude to say "NO" loudly to someone bigger and older who is in charge.
- Don't encourage your children to "fight their own battles" rather than involving a parent on issues of touching and privacy.
- Don't disregard your child's right to privacy by forcing the child to undress in front of others.

GIVE YOUR CHILDREN LOTS OF GOOD TOUCHES - THEY DESERVE IT!

WHERE TO CALL FOR HELP

Child abuse is against the law. Each state in the nation has a law against the abuse of children, a 24-hour hotline child abuse number, and a statewide agency with local offices to receive and investigate reports, usually known as Child Protective Services (C.P.S.). Reporting suspected child abuse is the first step in the helping process.

The following agencies deal with child abuse reports:

- Department of Child Protective Services
- Department of Social Services
- Bureau of Child Welfare Law Enforcement Agencies

The following are agencies that provide assistance to families:

Crisis Intervention Centers

These can provide immediate help about where to go for legal, medical, and emotional support.

Crisis Hot Lines

These are frequently staffed by professionals who are specially trained in the area of child abuse with whom you can discuss your concerns and ask questions.

Mental Health Associations

This agency has offices in most counties nationwide and can assist in providing information and referrals for professional help for the victim and his or her family.

Each state has its own 800 child abuse hotline number. For the hotline number in your state, call the Child Help USA National Hotline - 1-800-4-A CHILD.