

CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY



Child Advocacy Center

KEEPING KIDS SAFE: Steps ADULTS can take to protect children from sexual abuse

Know What is Normal

In order to know if a child's behavior is of concern, we need to first understand what is "normal" sexual behavior for the child's age. For example, looking and touching of both same and opposite gendered playmates is fairly normal; however, anything oral-to-genital, genital-to-genital, or insertion of anything into the genitals is not normal. Children rubbing or touching their genitals is rather common. However, a child who will not stop this behavior when asked, or rubs/touches to the degree where they cause injury to themselves, is not normal.

Many resources exist to help guide parents and professionals to recognize and respond to sexualized behaviors by children. A simple, straightforward, but comprehensive, resource for both parents and professionals is [Expanded 2015 Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors by Toni Cavanagh Johnson](#). www.tcavjohn.com.

Just as importantly, know the red flags of perpetrators. If someone makes you uncomfortable trust your gut. Perpetrators will often start by testing boundaries.... Sitting too close, tickling too much, spending too much time with your child, giving gifts etc. By intervening early you may prevent the situation from escalating.

Safer Sleepovers

Sleepovers are a common part of childhood. They are also a time when your child may be more vulnerable. When making decisions regarding sleep-overs or overnight stays, parents should use discretion. **It is imperative for children to have a way to communicate with their parents if something occurs they are not comfortable with, or if they need to return home at any time.**

When we allow children to stay the night at other people's homes we may increase the chance of sexual abuse. The offender may be the parent in the home, older siblings, neighbor children, or friends/relatives of the family. We often know the families we allow our children to spend time with, but seldom know all the people our children may be exposed to while in their care. Ask who will be around your children.

Also, children are told to tell right away if someone touches them inappropriately. When children are allowed to stay overnight they may be forced to wait until morning to tell. It is unrealistic to think a child would ask to use the phone to call and "tell on" the person who just touched them. Some children never tell because they believe they will get in trouble for not telling "right away." Oftentimes as parents we ask our children if they were good and if they behaved when we pick them up. **Try privately asking things like... Did you have fun? What did you enjoy? Was there something you didn't enjoy?**

Code Words

Every child should have a “code word” they can say to a parent or guardian to indicate they feel uncomfortable, need to go home, or need to be reassured. This should be a word the child can say out loud in front of friends or other adults without losing face or feeling embarrassed or scared. This word should be something the child can say to alert the parent, so it should be a common word, but a word that is seldom used in everyday conversation. Some parents use the child’s favorite superhero, so when the child is feeling unsafe, they just have to say “Batman” and the parent know to get them out of that situation or provide the reassurance they need.

Some parents might use two words, one to mean things are okay and one to mean things are not okay. An example would be “Chicken” and “Fish.” **When a parent calls and asks how the child is doing, the child can respond with “Chicken” to indicate things are okay, or “Fish” to indicate things are not going okay.** Those words allow the child to casually say them without anyone suspecting they are calling for help, and also allow the parent to assess the situation without asking for a detailed response.

In some cases parents may **use the code word as a way to prompt a “fake argument”** so the child won’t lose face, but the parents knows they need to get out of a situation quickly. For example, if a teenager says the code word the parent would respond with “You need to come home right now” and the teen responds back “I don’t want to come home now.” The parent argues that the teen doesn’t have a choice and then heads over to pick them up.

Secrets vs Surprises

Secrets play a big role in child sexual abuse. Make sure your child knows that **no one should ever ask them to keep a secret from their parents.** You will inevitably be asked about birthday presents. Trying to teach a child to distinguish whether something is a “good secret” or a “bad secret” can be confusing at best. Instead explain the difference between secrets and surprises. Secrets are often kept so someone does not get in trouble or embarrassed. **Surprises are kept only for a while and have a happy ending.**

Think of someone saying to your child “Don’t tell your mom or dad. It will be our little secret.” Even if the person was talking about going to get ice cream it would still not be okay for children to think it was okay for someone to keep secrets with them from their parents. Parents are encouraged to teach children that mom and dads are supposed to know ALL secrets. Use the “What If Dialog” to talk about situations where someone might ask a child to keep a secret.

Remember the teenage brain is still developing

As most people know, teenagers do not always make the wisest decisions. In fact, we often expect teenagers to make many questionable decisions before they get it right. Despite their poor decision-making ability, they can serve as convenient babysitters and helpers for parents and youth-serving organizations. As teenagers go through puberty they experience hormone surges, which combined with their lack of full frontal lobe development (the part of the brain used for reasoning and problem solving), can increase their risk to make poor decisions regarding sexual behaviors.

Due to these poor choices we need to keep teenagers safe from themselves and children safe from teenagers. **A significant percentage of child sexual abuse cases each year are the result**

of juvenile offenders. Often these teens have no known prior offenses and seem to reflect acts of curiosity, rather than predatory actions. We have seen both teenage boys and girls initiating these sexual acts with younger children. Regardless of the motivation, sexual acts by teenagers can have a significant impact on the child, as well as on the teenager.

In many cases it not feasible to completely dismiss teens from babysitting or being put in a role of supervising children. However, if parents/organizations have teens interacting with young children, there needs to be some safety guidelines in-place; one option is the “Nanny Cam.” These devices are reasonably affordable and could be used to help adults supervise teens in charge of children. And of course, talk to your children about their experiences with their babysitters. **Questions like “What do you like about him/her?” or “What do you wish he/she didn’t do?” may provide great insight.**

Don't be falsely assured by someone's title

“Molesters Do Not Wear an Ugly Mask. They Wear A Shield of Trust.” Patty Rase Hopson

Parents are often reassured by someone's title that they are not a danger to their children. There can be a false sense of security when the title “doctor,” “pediatrician,” “police officer,” “coach,” “teacher,” or other title is used. Child molesters understand this same concept and may plug themselves into these fields for this very reason. Although the majority of professionals working in these fields do care for children and promote child safety, there is a small percentage of predators who create enormous devastation before they are ever discovered. **Child abusers are found among every profession.**

A child pornography ring was recently busted, and people in 47 states were arrested. The ring focused primarily on children under the age of five, with the greatest emphasis on infants and toddlers. The AP reported: *“Federal authorities say those convicted included teachers, clergy, law enforcement, lawyers, doctors, coaches, and others who came into regular contact with minors.”* Ultimately, parents should make the rule that **a person's title does not grant them free reign over their children, and does not make that person above reproach regarding concerning behaviors.**

The Rule of 5's

Given the above information on the poor decision making of teenagers, it is safe to say most children have some difficulties making decisions. In order to help children practice a life-time habit of learning to thoroughly evaluate choices and consequences, teach them the Rule of 5's. The Rule of 5's consists of thinking ahead 5 minutes, 5 hours, 5 days, and 5 years. Children do not automatically think through situations to get the best outcome for themselves which often results in unintended consequences. We have to help children practice the art of critical decision making with both small and big decisions.

Start teaching the Rule of 5's when children are old enough to grasp the concept of fast forwarding a DVD and being able to anticipate what is going to happen in 5 minutes. The idea is to teach children to “fast-forward” in their head 5 minutes, 5 hours, 5 days, and 5 years. Ultimately we are teaching them to be able to anticipate the consequences of both positive and negative choices. It is important to teach examples of both positive and negative situations. To help illustrate, one of each is given in the first example.

5 Minutes

Children - Positive - "I know you don't want to eat your veggies but let's fast-forward 5 minutes from now. What is it going to be like to be you eating your yummy dessert? What is the best decision to make?"

Children - Negative - "I know you don't want to pick up your toys but let's stop and fast-forward 5 minutes from now. You will just be getting out of time-out and you still have to pick up your toys. What is a better choice?"

Tweens/Teens - "I know you are mad at your friend, but let's fast-forward 5 minutes from now. Is your friendship going to be better or worse if you send that mean text? What is a better choice?"

5 Hours

Children - "I see you are upset but let's fast-forward 5 hours from now. If you keep throwing a fit you will have to go to bed early. What will it be like to be you 5 hours from now when everyone is up and you have to go to bed early? What is a better choice?"

Tweens/Teens - "I see you are upset but let's fast-forward 5 hours from now. If you keep arguing or having a bad attitude you will probably be grounded by the end of the day. What is going to be like to be you when you are grounded from your friends/phone/computer 5 hours from now? What is a better choice?"

5 Days

Children - "It looks like you really want to spend all your allowance right now but let's fast-forward 5 days from now. We are all going to the dollar store on Friday. What will it be like to be you when all the kids get to spend money and you don't have any? What is a better choice?"

Tweens/Teens - "I know it might seem like a good idea to put off all your laundry and chores till this weekend but let's check it out. What is it like to be you in 5 days when we all get to sleep-in or go places and you have to stay home to get all your stuff done? What is a better choice?"

5 Years

Children - Not recommended for use with younger children because they have a difficult time comprehending what 5 years from now would really mean to them.

Tweens/Teens: "Anyone who has sex has a chance at getting pregnant even if they use protection. If you get pregnant, you get 3 choices; you can have the child, give the child up for adoption, or have an abortion. So 5 years from now you get to say 'I have a child', 'I gave a child up for adoption', or 'I had an abortion.' If you don't like the sound of any of those in 5 years, what is a good decision to make?"

It can be just as helpful to have children challenge us...

Child - "Mom, you said you didn't want to eat ice cream today. What will it be like to be you 5 minutes from now after you eat the ice cream? Will you feel good about yourself? What is a better choice?"

If we help children practice the Rule of 5's we **teach them to think ahead and learn to take responsibilities for making decisions that reflect their true desires rather than their immediate impulses.** Ultimately children, tweens/teens, and adults all benefit from using the Rule of 5's. When children watch us practice those same rules it helps reinforce the rewards for critical thinking.

Don't Force Affection

Most people would agree that it is adorable when toddlers begin giving hugs and kisses. Even with the right motivation, parents can get in the habit of forcing children to give hugs and kisses to people when they would rather not. Common statements such as “You are going to hurt Grandma’s feelings if you don’t give her a hug” or “Uncle wants a kiss, go give Uncle kisses” creates a double standard for children. We love that they feel love, happiness or joy and therefore show affection, but then we force that same affection regardless of how they feel. Unfortunately this can send a message that we give affection because it is polite not because they do actually feel affectionate at that time for that person.

As we attempt to teach children healthy boundaries this conflicting information may suggest to the child it is okay to touch people and have people touch them (hugs and kisses) when they are not comfortable with the touch or the person. **Parents are encouraged to make hugs and kisses optional.** In addition, it is helpful to give children options such as handshakes or high-fives as a way of showing affection to people or other children.

Internet Safety

Every day there are new developments in technology which put children at a higher risk to be victimized by online predators. As previously mentioned, children often make poor decisions which can be extremely dangerous when made with social media and other on-line outlets.

Parents and professionals who work with children should attend an internet safety course at least once every 6 months. Given the fluid nature of technology and how quickly information can be outdated it is essential that we stay current with the information needed to protect our children and our homes from the dangers associated with the Internet and social media.

It can be tough trying to stay ahead, but here are a few ideas....Know what your child is doing online. Sit down with them and look through their apps, social media pages etc. Turn your wi-fi off at a certain time. Collect all phones and wi-fi devices at bedtime. Have kids “earn” the wi-fi password by doing chores. Teach children not to give out their full name, location, etc. Have your children tell you if someone they don’t know tries to communicate with them online. Remind your kids that people can pretend to be anyone on-line.

Set Boundaries

Just like children, adults make the best decisions when they have time to think about it. Many parents have not decided what is “too much” or “too far” or “too little” or “too fill in the blank.” What is too much sugar or too much television may be easily corrected if we get it wrong. But something such as knowing too little about a friend before allowing alone time with that friend or playing too violent of a video game may not be as easily corrected. Once we say yes, it is difficult to justify our reasoning and difficult for children to accept why we will not allow then to continue with the behavior.

If we don’t know our boundaries, it is tough to set those guidelines for children and let them know what we expect of them. **If we know when they are allowed to date, drive, wear makeup, get a job, if/when they are allowed to stay overnight, and other decisions ahead of time, it is much easier to educate our children of those boundaries and expectations.**

Say Yes Whenever Possible and Be Prepared to Say No

Remember you are your child's parent. Not their friend. Children have plenty of friends but what they NEED are parents willing to set limits. It is just as easy to say "no" to everything as it is to say "yes". Parents have to find a healthy balance of allowing children to learn, grow, make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. As parents, we need to be prepared to say "no" when it counts and more importantly to mean it.

If your child was walking toward a vicious dog, what would it take to get your child to hear "No?" Would you have to use the child's middle name or yell or would you have to run and grab your child? The question remains, when it counts will your child hear your "No?"

Ultimately, parents train their children how to listen to them. If we teach children our "no" means "maybe" then saying "no" may not have the desired impact we would like. This means that we may not say no as often, but when we do it means what we intend the child to hear and act accordingly. As with most things, it is easiest if we start when our children are young, rather than trying to get them to listen after years of inconsistent parenting. If you do find yourself with an older child who isn't listening, a professional may provide the interventions and guidance you need to get back on track.

If your child discloses abuse believe them

Statistics suggest that **one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused** by their eighteenth birthday. Nearly 90% of these children will NOT tell anyone. If a child discloses abuse believe them. Let them know that this shouldn't have happened and get help. False accusations do happen, but they are rare. As a parent it is your job to believe your child, until you have proof otherwise. Non-offending caregiver support is critical to a child's ability to recover from trauma. Support your child and be sure to take care of yourself as well. Many children benefit from evidenced-based therapy, such as **Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**. Without intervention and support, trauma can impact children's medical and mental health. Some may also begin to exhibit problematic sexual behaviors. With proper support victims become not only survivors, but thrivers.

Teach Body Safety

Always remember that **child abuse is an adult problem**. Children should be taught proper words for their private parts and be taught that nobody has the right to touch or look at their private parts. **Children should not be expected to stop abuse, rather they should be educated to let an adult know** if someone touches or looks at their private parts, or wants them to touch or look at someone else's private parts or makes them feel uncomfortable. Avoid using good touch/bad touch language as this can be confusing for children. It makes them responsible for interpreting the intentions of an adult. A child can just tell a trusted adult, who can then determine the next steps.

Minimize 1:1 time

Minimizing one-on-one situations involving adults/peers as best as we can is **the BEST way to protect children**. Know the policies of your child's school, church, sports, and other groups.