

Keeping our Kids Safe

For most of us, seeing children playing in a school yard brings up memories of our own childhoods -- riding bikes, catching lightning bugs, giggling with friends. Sadly, for many children, the world is not a safe and loving haven, but a dangerous and hurtful place filled with violence and fear.

The truth is at least one of every five girls and one of every seven boys will be sexually abused by the time they are 18. One in five . . . And 90% of child sexual abuse victims are abused by someone they know -- friend of the family, neighbor, babysitter, family member.

The average child sexual abuse victim is eight years old.

Make it a Part of Personal Safety

Of course, parents can't be with their children every minute of every day, but developing your child's self-confidence and knowledge of who to turn to for help goes a long way toward providing a solid line of defense. Teaching children from toddler age to be assertive reduces the risk of sexual abuse.

Warning children about strangers will not tell them how to resist the friend or relative who uses threats or bribery. Research shows that the child who is informed about sexual abuse is less likely to become a victim than the uninformed child -- and the risks of sexual abuse are as real as fire or an accident.

At an early age, children need to have a basic knowledge about their bodies. Teach your child the correct names for all body parts, including breasts, vagina, penis, and anus. When children know the correct words, they can describe to you what is happening or what has happened to himself/herself from this inappropriate touching. We suggest you define "inappropriate" as: "When someone touches or looks at your private parts or asks you to touch or look at theirs and it doesn't feel right. What that person does may not hurt, but you know whether or not you feel uncomfortable about it."

Play "NO" games. Let children know it's okay to say "no" to an older person who is asking for close physical contact or touching they are not comfortable with, including relatives and close friends. Play lots of "what if" games. Include information about what to say on the phone if you're gone, what to do if someone comes to the door, what to do if approached on the street. Be sure to include examples with people your child knows.

Discuss people in the community that your child may turn to for help, such as a trusted teacher, police officer, principal, school nurse, etc. It's important that they understand the need to tell an adult about what has happened. Most importantly, let your children know they can talk to you about anything that happens, and that you will believe them and won't get angry.

Practice through play

Use "what if" games to teach your children about these common approaches used by abusers:

- Bribery - Children may be offered candy, toys, or other rewards.
- Enticement - Offenders may try to gain a child's trust through special attention and flattery.
- The "SECRET" - Offenders often use a "shared secret" or a "secret game" with a child. They will ask the child not to reveal their special secret.
- Assistance - Offenders will often ask a child for some kind of help -- directions, help in finding a lost pet, etc.

- Emergency - Offenders may tell the child that a parent is sick or their home has burned down and that they have been sent to get the child.
- Employment - Offenders may promise a paying job, modeling position, or photo portfolio.
- Threats/violence - Offenders may use verbal threats, but most assaults occur without additional physical force.

Signs that your child may have been abused

These sudden changes may indicate that your child has been abused, but could also indicate a reaction to other kinds of stress:

- Reluctance to go to a particular place or with a particular person.
- Nightmares or unusual sleep patterns; bedwetting.
- Sudden changes in eating habits.
- Sudden withdrawal from friends, relatives or immediate family.
- Abrupt changes in feelings about school.
- Sudden new fears -- being alone, certain people, night time.
- Any physical problem, especially in the genital areas. Children can contract sexually transmitted diseases.
- Unusual interest in or knowledge of sexuality of others or themselves.
- Touching of self or others in sexual manner inappropriate for age of child.