

## *A Parent's Guide: Talking to Young Children about Sexual Abuse*

### *An Educational Program to Help Parents Communicate with Children Ages 3-11*

#### **What is child sexual abuse?**

Child sexual abuse is when someone older or more powerful involves a child or adolescent in sexual activity. The activity can be anything of a sexual nature, such as:

- inappropriate hugging or kissing
- talking dirty about sexuality
- playing sexually oriented games
- showing pornography
- taking nude photos
- genital touching
- sexual intercourse

#### **Why should I teach my child about sexual abuse?**

Research shows that child sexual abuse is alarmingly common. Before the age of 18, one in four girls and one in eight boys will be sexually abused. **But abuse doesn't have to happen.**

Child molesters count on children not knowing about their bodies. They count on children not knowing the names of their body parts or the rules about their bodies. They count on children not knowing about sexual abuse.

Teaching the right information to your children when they are young helps them recognize when something isn't right or when someone may be taking advantage of them or doing something illegal.

As a parent, you are the primary protector of your children. Their safety is up to you. But when you teach your children the information in this handout, they can help you keep them safe.

#### **What does my child need to know about sexual abuse?**

Your child needs to know three things:

1. **The names of his or her body parts**
2. **Rules about his or her body**
3. **What to do if someone tries to break the rules about his or her body**

1. Number one, your child needs to know the names of his body parts.

Your child needs to know the names of his body parts so he has the words to tell you if something is wrong.

#### **»»» Teaching Tips**

When you start teaching your child names of body parts like eyes, ears, nose, elbows, and knees, include private parts like breast, bottom, penis, and vagina. Most experts agree that children should learn the anatomically correct names of their body parts.

Don't worry that your child will be uncomfortable talking about this topic. Even if he is (or you are) this is a perfect time to





break the ice—before there's a problem! Just knowing that it's okay to talk about private parts with his parents is a big step in the right direction for your child.

Talking with your children when they are young helps keep the lines of communication open as they get older.

2. Number two, your child needs to know that there are rules about her body. This is important because once she knows the rules, she can tell you if anyone tries to break them.

Children understand the idea of rules. They know there are rules about how to behave at the dinner table, about how to play with other children, and about following instructions from their parents. When you teach your children these rules, just add rules about their bodies.

#### »»» *Teaching Tips*

Teaching children rules about their bodies can be very natural. For example, we teach children a rule about their eyes: Be careful not to poke them. We teach children a rule about their ears: Don't stick objects in them. And we teach them to keep their bodies clean by taking baths.

In the same way, we also can teach them rules about their private parts—for example, don't touch them in front of other people and don't let other people touch them unless Mommy or Daddy knows about it.

And there are other important rules your child should know. Teach her that she should not touch other children's

private parts or use bad words to describe her own private parts.

She should also know to tell you if someone asks her to keep secrets from you, tries to get her to do things she isn't supposed to do, scares her, or makes her feel uncomfortable.

#### »»» *Reinforcing Tips*

Reinforce the rules by bringing them up occasionally, at convenient times, like during baths or at bedtime. With older children, you can casually mention the rules, perhaps while taking your child to school or playing a board game. By reminding your children about the rules, you let your children know their bodies are valuable gifts, that you are there to listen, and that they can talk to you about their bodies.

Another way to reinforce the rules is by modeling them yourself. For example, if your child touches your private parts, gently remind her of the rule that other people are not allowed to touch your private parts.

3. Number three, your child needs to know what to do if someone breaks the rules about his body.

#### »»» *Teaching Tips*

Teach your child early on that if someone tries to break the rules about his body, he should tell you right away. Let him know that he will not get in trouble for telling you and that you are proud of him for following the rules about his body. You should also teach him that if someone tries to break the rules about his body, he can tell that person to stop.

#### »»» *Reinforcing Tips*

Every once in a while, remind your child about the rules. For example, ask him to tell you a rule about his body. Or ask him if anyone has ever touched his private parts, told

him to keep a secret from you, or tried to get him to do something he wasn't supposed to do. This accomplishes two things: It teaches your child he can talk to you about anything, and it reminds him that he should tell you if something has happened.

**How should I teach my child about sexual abuse?**

Talk about sexual abuse the same way you talk about other safety issues, like crossing the street or using scissors properly. Take advantage of convenient opportunities—for example, if you see something about safety in a children's book you're reading. Remember to use a calm tone of voice and don't act secretive or frightened.

Ultimately, how much you teach your child depends on your child's age and what she is ready to learn. You'll have to decide based on your own child's development. And of course, the language and examples you use will be different for a 3-year-old than for a 9-year-old. The important thing is that you teach your child that she can talk to you about anything.

You'll want to bring up the topic many times, just like you do any other safety lesson, because you can't teach everything at once.



**What if my child discloses abuse?**

If your child tells you that someone has broken the rules about his body or sexually abused him your reaction will make a big difference. Follow these five guidelines:

**1. Stay calm.**

Staying calm at a time like this will be very difficult for you, but your reaction will affect how your child responds. Try not to raise your voice or cry.

**2. Listen.**

Listen carefully to what your child tells you. Your child will be scared and may not give you many details. Ask questions like: "Can you tell me more about it?" "What did the person do?" "When did this happen?" or "How many times did this happen?"

**3. Comfort your child.**

Let your child know that you love him very much and that he has done nothing wrong. A big hug can work wonders. Don't ask your child why he didn't tell you sooner—that will just make him feel guilty.

**4. Don't threaten or criticize the person who committed the abuse.**

Although this is a natural response, avoid criticizing the person your child has identified as the abuser. Chances are, your child knows the person well and may even care very much for the person.

**5. Contact the authorities.**

Once you have learned all you can from your child, you should immediately contact the police or child protective services. Be sure to keep your child away from the person involved.

**Important Numbers**

Emergency: \_\_\_\_\_

Police: \_\_\_\_\_

Child Protective Services: \_\_\_\_\_

Family Contact: \_\_\_\_\_