

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

Listen and Talk With Your Children

Perhaps the most critical child sexual prevention strategy for parents is good communication with your children.

This is not only challenging to every parent but also can be difficult, especially for working parents and parents of adolescents.

- Talk to your child every day and take time to really listen and observe. Learn as many details as you can about your child's activities and feelings. Encourage him or her to share concerns and problems with you.
- Tell your child that his or her body belongs only to them alone and that he or she has the right to say no to anyone who might try to touch them.
- Tell your child that some adults may try to hurt children and make them do things the child doesn't feel comfortable doing. Often these grownups call what they're doing a secret between themselves and the child.
- Explain that some adults may even threaten children by saying that their parents may be hurt or killed if the child ever shares the secret. Emphasize that an adult who does something like this is doing something that is wrong.
- Tell your child that adults whom they know, trust and love or someone who might be in a position of authority (like a babysitter, an uncle, a teacher or even a policeman) might try to do something like this. Try not to scare your children -- emphasize that the vast majority of grownups never do this and that most adults are deeply concerned about protecting children from harm.

Choosing a Preschool or Child Care Center

Although the vast majority of this nation's preschools and child care centers are perfectly safe places, recent reports of child sexual abuse in these settings are a source of great concern to parents.

- Check to make sure that the program is reputable. State or local licensing, child care information and referral services, and other child care community agencies may be helpful sources

of information.

Find out whether there have been any past complaints.

- Find out as much as you can about the teachers and caregivers. Talk with other parents who have used the program.
- Learn about the school or center's hiring policies and practices. Ask how the organization recruits and selects staff. Find out whether they examine references, background checks, and previous employment history before hiring decisions are made.
- Ask whether and how parents are involved during the day. Learn whether the center or school welcomes and supports participation. Be sensitive to the attitude and degree of openness about parental participation.
- Ensure that you have the right to drop in and visit the program at any time.
- Make sure you are informed about every planned outing. Never give the organization blanket permission to take your child off the premises.
- Prohibit in writing the release of your child to anyone without your explicit authorization. Make sure that the program knows who will pick up your child on any given day.

If You Think That Your Child Has Been Abused...

- Believe the child. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse.
- Commend the child for telling you about the experience.
- Convey your support for the child. A child's greatest fear is that he or she is at fault and responsible for the incident. Alleviating this self-blame is of paramount importance.
- Temper your own reaction, recognizing that your perspective and acceptance are critical signals to the child. Your greatest challenge may be to not convey your own horror about the abuse.
- Do not go to the school or program to talk about your concern. Instead, report the suspected molestation to a social services agency or the police.
- Find a specialized agency that evaluates sexual abuse victims -- a hospital or a child welfare agency or a community mental health therapy group. Keep asking until you find a group or an individual with appropriate expertise.
- Search for a physical with the experience and training to detect and recognize sexual abuse when you seek a special medical examination for your child. Community sexual abuse treatment programs, childrens' hospitals and medical societies may be sources for referrals.

- Talk with other parents to ascertain whether there are unusual behavior or physical symptoms in their children.
- Remember that taking action is critical because if nothing is done, other children will continue to be at risk.
Child sexual abuse is a community interest and concern.
- Make sure that your child knows that if someone does something confusing to them, like touching or taking a naked picture or giving them gifts, that you want to be told about it. Reassure the child and explain that he or she will not be blamed for whatever an adult does with a child.

Observe Physical and Behavioral Signs

Children who may be too frightened to talk about sexual molestation may exhibit a variety of physical and behavioral signals. Any or several of these signs may be significant. Parents should assume responsibility for noticing such symptoms including:

- Extreme changes in behavior such as loss of appetite.
- Recurrent nightmares or disturbed sleep patterns and fear of the dark.
- Regression to more infantile behavior such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, or excessive crying.
- Torn or stained under-clothing.
- Vaginal or rectal bleeding, pain, itching, swollen genitals, and vaginal discharge.
- Vaginal infections or venereal disease.
- Unusual interest in or knowledge of sexual matters, expressing affection in ways inappropriate for a child of that age.
- Fear of a person or an intense dislike at being left somewhere or with someone.
- Other behavioral signs such as aggressive or disruptive behavior, withdrawal, running away or delinquent behavior, failing in school.

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