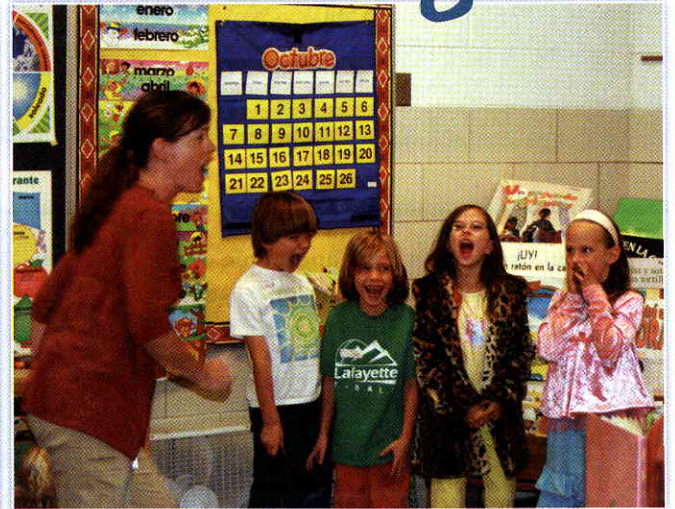


'I'm the Boss of My Body'



Raising kids to be less vulnerable to sexual predators

By Shannon Burgert

Statistics concerning child sexual abuse are frightening. One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused by the age of 18. Seventy percent of the time, the child doesn't tell anyone directly.

Parents tend to be good at making their kids wary of strangers, but strangers make up less than 10 percent of sex offenders. "More than 90 percent of the time an abuser is someone a child knows. It's someone who has regular access to the child in a trusting or caregiving relationship," says Victoria Strong, executive director of Front Range Center for Assault Prevention (CAP).

Fortunately, local advocates like Strong say child sex abuse is preventable. Strong takes the CAP program into schools to educate teachers, children and parents about how to prevent bullying, stranger abduction and sexual assault.

Unfortunately, thinking about the possibility of abuse is so disconcerting for many parents that they don't learn how to prevent it. Jen, a Boulder parent, says, "It's really one of those things you just don't want to think about." But when her daughter was 4 years old, Jen signed up for a Parenting Safe Children workshop with Feather Berkower, coauthor of *Off Limits: A Parent's Guide to Keeping Kids Safe from Sexual Abuse*. Jen has taken Berkower's four-hour training several times now, and says that each time, she feels more empowered.

RAISING SAFE CHILDREN

Who is vulnerable to sexual assault? The short answer: all children. But

the kids who are most at risk are children who are not taught body safety, whose parents don't spend a lot of time with them, who lack confidence or love, and who are expected to obey authority unconditionally.

Keeping your kids away from the "dirty old man" stereotype is playing into a societal misconception—and it leaves large gaps. While approximately 96 percent of offenders are male, up to 50 percent are juveniles. Of the rest, many are married with children.

Berkower says that parents need to filter every person who spends time with their children. Interview caregivers thoroughly, and talk about body safety. Those conversations may be uncomfortable, particularly with relatives and play-date parents, but Berkower asks, "If it's uncomfortable for you to talk about this, how uncomfortable do you think it is for your kid to live it?" Make the conversation a positive one, she suggests, by inviting caregivers onto your prevention team. "When we talk about sexual abuse, we take the access away from abusers," says Berkower. The same principles that minimize the risk of sex abuse will help children develop the self-awareness and confidence to prevent other forms of abuse, like bullying.

NO SECRETS

There are two key concepts to teach and model for children. First, there should be a no-secrets policy in the home. "Sex abuse almost always comes with needing to keep a secret," Strong says. When a perpetrator grooms a child for sex abuse—which tends to be a long process—it starts with keeping small secrets and making a child feel special. "Kisses and touches should never have to be kept secret," says Strong, and they should always be choices. She adds that "surprises" are OK—like Mom's birthday present.

One local resource for young sex-abuse victims is Boulder's Blue Sky Bridge, which offers support services and a child-friendly environment for interviews. Judy Toran Cousin, its executive director, explains that the organization also helps families find appropriate counseling and develop safety plans.

It's not enough to have a prevention program come to your child's school, advocates say. Cousin recommends that body-safety discussions be woven into conversations routinely. She says, "How often do you remind your child to wear a helmet while biking? It needs to be a regular discussion." ♦