

A SAFER FAMILY. A SAFER WORLD.

A Resource for Parents and Caregivers of Children 0-12 on Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

This booklet is for parents, caregivers and other caring adults to help them prevent the sexual abuse of children. Some of parents' worst fears are that their children might be hurt or abused. We cannot always control the way other people treat our children, and our children cannot control the way others treat them either. However, the good news is that we can always control our own behavior, and we can help our children learn to do the same. As a parent or caregiver, you are the best person to teach your children how they should be treated and how they should treat others. They see you doing it every day!

In this booklet, you will find ideas for talking about sexual abuse and safety. These talks can make your relationships stronger and can help prevent abuse. However, even when families do talk about these things, sometimes children still can be sexually abused. This booklet also talks about what to do if this ever happens.

We all play a part in creating safer families and a safer world.
Please contact us if you need help – we are always glad to talk.

Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress

www.hcsats.org

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HOW DO I...

- ▶ It can be helpful to teach your children **the proper names of their body parts**, including their genitals. By teaching these words, you let them know that it is okay to use those terms and that they can tell you when they have a problem with any part of their body.
- ▶ Teach them that certain **parts of their body are private**. The private parts of the body are usually the same parts covered by a swim suit.
- ▶ Children often have questions about where babies come from, how they develop, toileting, body parts, and how to keep their bodies clean. **They need these questions answered.** It is a good idea to think ahead of time about how you want to answer these questions in a way that is straightforward and age appropriate.
- ▶ How do you know when kids are ready to talk about these things? **If they are asking, that is a good sign they are ready!** It's okay to just give a little basic information for a younger child, and wait to see if they have more questions. It's always important to make sure what you say is correct and honest.
- ▶ Occasional **sexual behavior and play** is common for young children, like acting out family roles or playing doctor. A child exploring and touching their own body is also common for this age group. You can set limits and teach touching rules, as discussed in the next section. If you are not sure about whether a child's sexual behavior is normal or concerning, you can call our center.
- ▶ There are lots of **great books** that families can read together about bodies, babies, and safety. Check out our website at www.hcsats.org and click on "Resources" for book lists.

"Everybody's body is different and special."

"Your body belongs to you. It's important to take care of your body and keep it healthy and clean."

"I'm not sure how to answer that question but I'm really glad you asked me. I'm going to get us a book about that so we can learn together."

"The baby grows in the woman's uterus."

"It's okay to look at and touch your own body. You can do that in your bedroom or in the bathroom."

...TALK ABOUT HEALTHY SEXUALITY

Find opportunities to model consent. It can be helpful for children to have the chance to decide how they want to share their body, or if they want to at all.

"I hope you have a great day at school today. I would like to give you a hug, but we could also high five. How do you want to say goodbye to me?"

"He looks really sad. Do you want to ask him if he wants a hug or what you can do to help him feel better?"

Teach kids how to understand language that means no, and how to recognize others' feelings.

"The cat usually likes to be petted on her back. If she is walking away or putting her ears back, it means she doesn't like it and you need to stop."

"When you are wrestling with him, look at his face. Does it look like he is still having a good time? Is he smiling, laughing? When you stop for a second, does he tell you he wants to keep playing that game?"

Include body safety rules in your other family safety rules.

"It is not okay to touch other people's private parts, or to show people your private parts. That's because these parts are private. Other people should be following these rules too."

"If you have a feeling inside you that something is unsafe or uncomfortable, it is okay to make up a reason that you need to leave."

Leave the conversation open for kids to report.

"If anyone ever touches your private parts, or breaks any other rules for our family, you can always talk to me or [another trusted adult] about it. You will not be in trouble."

"My job is to help keep you safe. So you can always talk to me if anyone ever makes you feel hurt, sad, confused, or uncomfortable. Even if it's someone that I like or you like."

Tell others what you are teaching your child. Share this information with other parents, your child's teachers, daycare providers, babysitters, grandparents, and relatives.

"We are trying to teach our child about consent. We would like you to ask her before a hug or a kiss, so she can learn she has the choice about how she shares her body. We don't make her hug or kiss anyone if she doesn't want to."

"We are teaching him about body safety rules. We have told him that he can talk to us if anything or anyone makes him uncomfortable."

...TEACH CONSENT, BOUNDARIES, AND TOUCHING

Children hear many things outside the home that influence the way they think people should act. Some of the things they hear are unhealthy, and **can teach children to treat others badly**. You can talk to kids about what they are seeing on TV or hearing from friends. You can **challenge ideas about gender roles** and **children's lack of power**. It is important that children don't hear adult and teen sexual comments. Children should also not watch TV or movies with adult sexual content.

It's important to treat boys and girls equally, with the **same rules and expectations**. Some harmful messages about boys are that they should always be powerful, in charge, and can't show emotions. Harmful messages about girls are that they are weak, too emotional, and their looks are most important. Sexual abuse may be more likely to happen in communities that believe strongly in messages like these.

Boys can...

- be sad
- be sensitive to others' feelings
- talk things out
- take care of others
- be polite
- be a good friend
- play with whatever toys they want to

All Kids
Can Do All
of These
Things!

Girls can...

- play rough
- be angry
- be strong
- rescue people
- be leaders
- make the rules
- play with whatever toys they want to

Parents have the right to create rules and expectations for their children. It is also important for children to know that **sometimes they can say no**, and that **their voice will be heard**. This may protect them from abuse. An abuser might take advantage of a child who doesn't know how to say no to adults. You can show your child you respect their opinions even when you enforce rules. Allow your children to sometimes disagree with you, to practice saying no, and to make choices for themselves. It's important for children to be able to speak up if someone is being unsafe.

"I made a mistake and I'm sorry. I didn't realize that embarrassed you. Thank you for telling me how you were feeling."

"I respect what you are saying and I will stop because you asked me to."

"What can you do if someone touches you in a way you don't like? What about if someone asks you to do something that is against the rules?"

...CHALLENGE SOCIETY'S MESSAGES

Talking to kids about these topics is just one part of prevention. Another important part of prevention is watching out for **concerning behaviors from adults and teens**. It's important to always know who your child is with, where they are, and who else will be there. Avoid having older children watch younger children for long periods of time with little supervision. **Abuse usually happens by someone the child knows**, and usually happens in secrecy. Be aware that children can be abused by other children and by adults, including people living in your home or even people working at schools and youth programs. If someone's behavior makes you uncomfortable, **trust your instincts** and don't let your child spend time alone with that person. Abusers often seem very nice, so that they can develop a close, trusting relationship with a child.

Examples of concerning behaviors in adults:

- ▶ **Special attention:** giving affection and compliments to one child (or a small group of children)
- ▶ **Special treatment:** giving children gifts and special privileges, or letting them break the rules
- ▶ **Child-focused:** touching them frequently while playing, seeming to relate to children better than adults, developing a close relationship with a child without including the parents/caregivers
- ▶ **Poor boundaries:** not stopping when child looks uncomfortable or when asked to stop; talking about sexual things or personal relationships
- ▶ **Secrecy:** asking the child to keep secrets, looking for places and situations to be alone with the child

How to talk to someone who has concerning behavior and boundaries with children:

- ▶ "It looks like he is not really enjoying that game anymore."
- ▶ "I feel uncomfortable when you talk to the kids about _____."
- ▶ "Please have the door open when you are playing. Even though you are here I still need to see him."
- ▶ "It really bothers me when you talk about their bodies and call it 'flirting.'"

One way to prevent sexual abuse before it happens is **to speak up when you see concerning behaviors**. This can be a great example for your child to see you do this. Most people will be understanding and will stop the concerning behavior. On the other hand, an abuser might get defensive or say you are being too sensitive. They might continue the behavior despite your concerns, or get more secretive. If this happens, watch this person if they are around children. Talk to a friend or family member. Call our center (or your local sexual abuse program) for advice.

...WATCH FOR SIGNS OF ABUSERS

You can start **NOW**. Show your children you are there for them any time they have a question or a concern, no matter how small. Listen and hear them. When they do come to you with a concern or problem, tell them first that you are glad they told you. They may feel more comfortable going to you with a big problem if they felt you heard them in the past with little problems.

Despite our best efforts to protect children, sexual abuse can still happen. Your response and support is very important. Children can and do recover from sexual abuse. There is help for your child, and for you too.

- ▶ If you suspect your child has been sexually abused, but you are not sure, supervise them closely. Watch for changes in their moods. Try to leave the conversation open: "you can always talk to me if anything is bothering you." Call our center (or your local sexual abuse program) to get advice.
- ▶ If your child tells you that they have been sexually touched or abused, it's normal to feel upset or in disbelief. It's important to stay calm and believe the child. You can tell them that you are glad they told you.
- ▶ When abuse has been reported by a child, do not allow unsupervised contact with the abuser. You can call local police or Child Protective Services to make a report. You can seek a medical exam to make sure the child's body is okay and to collect evidence. You can call our center for support.
- ▶ If you are worried about your child acting out sexually or touching others inappropriately, seek professional help. Talk to the child about the body safety rules and what kinds of touch are OK and not OK. Teach and enforce the rules as you would with any other rules about safety and respect. Call our center (or your local sexual abuse program) to get advice.

Additional Resources:

- Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs: www.wcsap.org
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.org
- For more information, check out our website at www.hcsats.org. Click on "Resources"

Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress
Offices in Seattle, Redmond, Bellevue, and Shoreline
Services include: medical exams, crisis help, and counseling

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 **Seattle Children's**
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...RESPOND IF A CHILD HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED