

PROTECT YOUR CHILD FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

INTRODUCTION

Protecting children from sexual abuse is a difficult task. Supervision and education are most important. Children are seduced and abused just out of sight of unwary caregivers. Others are seduced over the computer monitor within the child's own room. We can't always be there to protect them, but we can teach children about ways to protect themselves.

Your child is vulnerable to sexual abuse. To protect your child you must first acknowledge the possibility that someone may hurt or take advantage of your child.

As many as one out of every four children will be a victim of sexual abuse.

- Sexual abuse may be physical, verbal or emotional and includes:
- Sexual touching and fondling
- Sexual intercourse and oral sexual behaviours
- Exposure to adult sexual activity or pornography
- Causing a child to pose, undress or perform in a sexual fashion for self, others or in order to photograph or video record
- Making a child engage in sexually explicit conversations over the telephone or into a recorder
- Engaging a child in sexually explicit conversations in internet chat rooms
- Sexual abuse involves pressuring, enticing or forcing a child into sexual awareness or activity.

Sexual abuse also happens between children where older children prey on younger. Whether by adult or child, the abuse often begins gradually and increases over time.

The use of physical force is rarely necessary. Children are trusting and dependent. They want to please others and gain love and approval.

Children are taught not to question authority and they believe adults are always right. Molesters know this and take advantage of these vulnerabilities in children. Sexual abuse is an abuse of power over someone much younger.

SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION TIPS FOR PARENTS

As parents, we have the awesome responsibility of keeping our children and teens safe!

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- Keep the lines of communication open. Talk to your children on a daily basis.
- Know where your children are at all times. Familiarize yourself with their daily activities as well as their friends, and their friends' families.
- Be careful about babysitters and any other care providers (don't be paranoid just be careful).
- Begin teaching your children at a very young age about things they can do to help keep themselves safe.
- Make sure to use a non-threatening approach that equips children with confidence and empowerment, not fear (i.e. do this or else you will be punished is threatening and enforcing instructions be fear instead of understanding).

WHAT PARENTS SHOULD TEACH THEIR CHILDREN

- Instruct your children to always inform you of their whereabouts.
- Tell them to ask permission before leaving their play area or going into a neighbour's house or to friends.
- Instruct your children that no one has the right to touch their body.
- Teach your children names for the different parts of their body and explain the difference between physical affection and abuse. (Good touches and bad touches.)
- Tell him or her that if anyone tries to make him or her do something that makes them "feel funny": Say NO! get away; and tell someone that they trust.
- Teach your children not to keep secrets from you especially if they have been told something bad will happen if they tell.
- Instruct your children never to open the door to a stranger or someone they don't trust, and never to let someone at the door know if they are home alone.
- Instruct your children never to give any information to a stranger over the telephone. If they are home alone, tell them to say that their parent can't come to the phone right now.
- Monitor their activity on the Internet.
- Tell your children never to go anywhere with or take anything from someone they don't know or someone they don't trust. Emphasize that grownups should not be asking children for help in finding directions or a lost pet, etc. they should ask another grownup!
- Instruct your children to always travel with another person and never to take shortcuts through alleys or wooded areas.

- Teach your children that if they get separated from you in a public place, they should not wander around looking for you. They should immediately go to a checkouts counter, the security office or lost and found and tell the person in charge that they have lost their parent and need help in finding them.

BE ALERT TO BEHAVIORAL CHANGES

Many children cannot or do not tell about being sexually abused. Physical evidence of abuse is rare. Therefore, we look for behaviour signs. Unfortunately, there is no one behaviour alone, nor a combination of behaviours that definitely determines a child has been sexually abused.

The following are general behaviour changes that may occur in children who have been sexually abused: (remember a headache, Physical complaints, other pains and sleep disturbance may also be signs of illness)

- Sexual activity or pregnancy at an early age
- Fear or dislike of certain people or places
- Low self-esteem
- Self-destructive behaviour
- Hostility or aggression
- Eating disorders
- Physical complaints
- Withdrawal from family, friends, or usual activities
- Excessive bathing or poor hygiene
- Discipline problems
- School problems
- Sleep disturbances
- Headaches
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Running away
- Delinquent acts
- Drug or alcohol problems
- Suicide attempts

SIGNIFICANT SYMPTOMS

Children who have been sexually abused frequently have more significant symptoms:

- Copying adult sexual behaviour
- Persistent sexual play with other children, themselves, toys or pets
- Displaying sexual knowledge that is beyond what is normal for their age
- Unexplained pain, swelling, bleeding or irritation of the mouth, genital or anal area; urinary infections; sexually transmitted diseases
- Hints, indirect comments or statements about the abuse may be the child's way of disclosing their abuse

WHY CHILDREN DON'T TELL

Often children do not tell anyone about sexual abuse because they:

- Are too young to describe their experience
- Were threatened or bribed into keeping the abuse to themselves may be afraid of being punished for doing something wrong.
- Feel confused by conflicting feelings, positive and negative, about the abuser and the abuse
- May be afraid of rejection, either by the parent or, in some cases, by the offender.
- Fear no one will believe them because they would be telling on an adult
- May be afraid of the negative reactions from friends and/or other family members.
- Blame themselves or believe the abuse is punishment for being "bad"
- May fear that people will treat them differently if they know about the abuse.
- Feel too ashamed or embarrassed to tell
- Worry about getting into trouble or getting a loved one into trouble
- May be afraid of upsetting his parents and/or breaking up the family.
- May be afraid of being sent or taken away.

The child's silence enables sexual abuse to continue, protecting the molester. Disclosure is an extremely difficult, often fearful experience. Your understanding and loving support can help the child stop the abuse.

Feelings

Children who have been sexually abused feel many different (and often overwhelming) emotions, including:

Anger

- At the abuser
- At other adults around them who did not protect them
- At other adults because they must know what is happening
- At themselves (feeling as if they caused trouble)

Confusion

- Because they may still love the abuser
- Because their feelings change all the time

Fear

- Of the abuser
- Of causing trouble
- Of losing adults important to them
- Of being taken away from home
- Of being different

Guilt

- For not being able to stop the abuse
- For believing they "consented" to the abuse
- For "telling," when they do
- For remaining silent when they don't tell

Isolation

- Because "something is wrong with me"
- Because they feel alone in their experience
- Because they can't talk about the abuse

Sadness

- About being betrayed by someone they trusted
- About having something taken from them
- About losing a part of themselves

Shame

- About being involved in the experience
- About their bodies' response to the abuse

PROTECTING CHILDREN

Supervision and education are most important. Children are seduced and abused just out of sight of unwary caregivers.

Others are seduced over the computer monitor within the child's own room. We can't always be there to protect them, but we can teach children about ways to protect themselves. We should start early and provide them with safety information at each stage of their development.

The following guidelines offer topics to discuss with your children:

- Teach your child the proper names for body parts.
- Teach your child about private parts of the body and how to say no to ANYONE wanting to see or touch these parts.
- Discuss safety at and away from home.
- Teach the difference between good touch and bad touch.
- Teaching about Internet safety.
- Encourage your child to talk about uncomfortable or scary experiences.
- Give straight-forward answers about sex.
- Stress personal safety.
- Start to discuss rules of sexual conduct that are accepted by the family before your children learn other values.
- Continue personal safety discussions. Include conversations about rape, date rape, sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy.

The teen years are particularly difficult for families. These are years when children begin to explore adult activities and adult relationships, often without guidance from adults.

Young people encounter pressures to engage in activities but do not know how to effectively say "No". They, particularly boys, have not learned to listen with their ears. Some young people also have difficulty accepting responsibility for their involvement in sexual activity and afterwards blame the other participant.

Exploring a adult relationships can leave both young people traumatized, one feeling violated, the other betrayed. Parenting under these conditions is like walking through a minefield.

LISTENING TO CHILDREN

Sometime, someplace, a child may trust you enough to tell you about sexual abuse.

How you react is very important to the child's emotional health and recovery. The following suggestions will help those disclosing sexual abuse:

Do:

- Keep calm. Emotional responses can be confusing to the child. Children can mistake negative emotions as being directed towards them.
- Believe the child. Children who are sexually abused are further traumatized when they tell if they feel you don't believe them.
- Be positive Let the child know you are proud of them for telling.
- Explain to the child that he or she has done nothing wrong. The child may have feelings of guilt and responsibility.
- Most children are enticed or tricked into acts of exploitation, and they think they should have been smarter or stronger.
- Listen to and answer the child's questions honestly.
- Respect the child's privacy. Do not to discuss the abuse with people who do not need to know what happened.
- Do not discuss the abuse with anyone while within hearing range of the child.
- Arrange a medical examination. Make sure the child is not physically injured.
- Do not guess. Let professionals make an independent judgment about treatment.
- It can reassure you and your child that there has been no permanent physical damage and may verify important evidence.
- Be responsible. Notify police and child protective services. They can help protect the child's safety and provide resources for further help. "reason to suspect" means that you have received information of abuse. It does not mean that you are certain that abuse has occurred or have proof of abuse.
- Consider the need for counselling or therapy for the child. Pretending the incident never happened will not help the child deal with the trauma.

Don't:

- Panic or overreact when the child describes the experience. They need your help and support to make it through their disclosure to you.
- Criticize the child.
- Display emotional outbursts such as "I told you not to go into anyone's home!" will only hurt your ability to help.
- Challenge the child with "Why" questions. "Why didn't you tell me this before?" or "Why did you let it happen?".
- Pressure the child to talk or avoid talking about the abuse.
- Let the child disclose information at his or her own pace.
- Probing for information can be harmful. Silencing the child will not help her or him to forget. You can take action to protect the child without having all the details.

- Confront the offender, especially in the child's presence. The stress on the child will be harmful.
- Premature confrontation with the offender may prevent authorities from obtaining vital information later (control emotions, your first response will probably be to seek revenge and to inflict physical punishment on the perpetrator).
- Blame the child. Children commonly assume there is something wrong with them but **SEXUAL ABUSE IS NEVER THE CHILD'S FAULT.**