

How to Talk to Your Child to Reduce Vulnerability to Sexual Abuse

It may be hard to think of our children as having sexual feelings. But, just as they are curious about bugs, airplanes and animals, they will be curious about their bodies and other people's bodies. As parents, it is very important to share information with our children, including information about sex and sexuality, to help them prepare for all aspects of their life. Many times parents feel awkward, uncomfortable, or even that it's unnecessary. But we don't help our children if we ignore the reality of their sexual development.

Instead of planning for "the big talk," make teaching your child about sexuality and relationships a part of everyday life. Teaching our children about sex and sexuality and talking with them about personal space, boundaries, touching, and saying no helps protect them from sexual harm or abuse. View this as an ongoing conversation that changes as your child grows older and is exposed to different situations. Here are some tips for how and what to communicate to your child:

Sexual Development

- All children, even those with severe disabilities, need to understand basic concepts: differences between boys and girls, accurate names for body parts and where babies come from. Present these topics matter-of-factly, so your child knows that it's okay to talk to you about their questions.
- All children, even those with severe disabilities, need to be prepared for the physical changes in their bodies that accompany puberty. Talk to your child's pediatrician or medical specialist to determine when and how your child's disability may affect sexual development.
- Learn about developmentally-expected sexual behaviors (www.stopitnow.org/age_appropriate_sexual_behavior) to help you prepare your child and differentiate between expected behaviors and those that may be cause for concern.

Privacy, personal space and boundaries

- Teach your child about private body parts. It is often helpful to define "private" body parts as the parts covered by a swimsuit. Use pictures or instructional dolls to show what you mean.
- Teach your child about privacy and how some things are only done in private. Help your child define private spaces in the places where they spend time.
- Model respect for your child's personal space and physical boundaries by asking permission or declaring what you are going to do before touching them. Sometimes we inadvertently teach children to be helpless, passive or compliant by doing things and making decisions for them.

Touching

- It can be challenging to teach children about touch, especially if you, therapists or medical personnel touch them in ways that might not be welcome but that are required for their care.
- Advocates recommend using concrete concepts like "red flag" and "green flag" to help children understand touch that is okay (green) versus touch that is not okay (red).
- Once you've helped your child define specific touches as green or red, look for opportunities to practice determining whether touches are green or red and how to respond to red touches.
- It is very important for children to understand that touching rules are for everyone. Just as it is not okay for someone to give them a red touch, they should not give others red touches.

Sexual Behaviors

- It is common for children of various ages to engage in sexual behaviors both alone and with playmates. Use your knowledge of your child and of developmentally-expected sexual behaviors to recognize sexual behaviors outside of what is commonly expected.
- When you find your child engaging in age-appropriate sexual behaviors, such as exploring their own body or playing "doctor" with another child, calmly acknowledge what you've seen and set clear expectations. (Ex. "It looks like you and Janie are comparing your bodies. Now get dressed. And remember, we keep our clothes on when we're playing.")
- When you see concerning behaviors, you may need to be clearer or firmer in defining and enforcing rules. Adapt your expectations to how your child responds to rules in other areas of life.
- If you see a pattern of concerning behaviors that don't change after clear and repeated directions, discuss this with the professionals on your child's care team. Consider also seeking professionals who are experienced working with children who have problematic sexual behaviors.

Safety Skills

- Saying "no" is an important safety skill. Teach your child to say "no" in lots of ways, and have fun practicing speaking, shouting, shaking his/her head, stamping feet, making faces, etc. Share your child's way of communicating "no" with their care team, and ask them to respect it.
- Help your child prepare to ask for help from a safe adult. Identify people in the various places your child spends time who they can turn to. Talk with these safe adults about how your child will approach them if they need help.
- Explain the difference between a secret and a surprise. Surprises are joyful and generate excitement in anticipation of being revealed after a short period of time. Secrets exclude others, often because the information will create upset or anger. Explain that adults should never ask children to keep a secret and, if they do, to tell you or another safe adult.

Talking About Sexual Abuse

- Children need to understand the range of behaviors that are considered sexual abuse. Be explicit about what is not okay for someone to do or ask your child to do.
- When talking about sexual abuse, use examples that include people your child knows, including caregivers, relatives, peers, siblings, people in authority, etc. This is important; more than 90% of the time, children are sexually abused by someone they know.

For more tips and information about the Coalition Against Sexual Abuse of Children with Disabilities, visit www.ChicagoCAC.org/CASACD/



Chicago Children's Advocacy Center and our partners are the front-line responders in Chicago to reports of child sexual abuse, as well as reports of physical abuse of children under 3 years old.

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