

For Parents of Children with Disabilities:

How to Protect Your Child from Sexual Abuse in Program Settings



Parents worry about their children and want them to grow up safe and free from harm. It is an unfortunate reality that children experience sexual abuse, and children with disabilities and other special needs experience abuse at even higher rates.

Keeping children safe means being knowledgeable about these increased risks and how to minimize them. As caregivers, we need to be informed, and we need to ensure that the people who help care for our children are informed, too. Then we can work together effectively to keep children safe. Here are a few ways to get started.

Talk with staff and administrators about developmentally-expected sexual behaviors and sexual abuse of children with disabilities.

- Programs and professionals working with your child should know basic facts about sexual abuse, including the fact that 90% of the time children are sexually abused by someone they know.
- Children with disabilities may have special needs that increase their risk of being sexually abused. Examples include: the need for support for daily living activities (including bathing, toileting, feeding, and mobility); social isolation, and; communication barriers. Ask service providers how their policies and practices reduce these risks.
- Situations where two people are alone pose the highest risk for sexually harmful or abusive behaviors to occur. Talk with service providers about what they do to minimize opportunities for adults to be alone with children or to interact with children beyond the sight or hearing of others.
- Know that it is OK to question administrative staff if something does not seem right, and to seek out assistance if needed.

Talk with administrators about what they are doing to create a safe environment.

- All organizations that work with children are encouraged to have comprehensive policies and practices as part of their commitment to creating safe environments for children. Review *Nine Questions Parents Need to Ask When Selecting a Program for Their Child* (www.stopitnow.org/parent_questions_school_policy) to learn what questions to ask and what answers to expect from administrators.

Ask administrators about the training and guidance employees receive to help them recognize and respond to developmentally-appropriate sexual behaviors and prevent sexual misconduct or abuse.

- Do they provide training? How often? What guidance do they provide about establishing healthy boundaries in the work setting? Do they have clear, written guidelines to define what interactions are prohibited between staff and children?

This tip sheet was created in collaboration with Stop It Now!

Additional Reference: "Teaching Children with Down Syndrome about their Bodies, Boundaries, and Sexuality: A Guide for Parents and Professionals" by Terri Couwenhoven, M.S.

Get to know the people who care for your child.

- Take the time to get to know the staff who care for your child. Ask about their background, including how long they have worked there, what drew them to the field, etc. Let them know that you are paying attention and that you are involved in your child's care. If possible, vary the time and day that you visit so you can meet the different staff who work with your child.
- Advocate for your child. Tell staff about your child. Let them know you are interested in their insights and that you consider them an important part of your child's care team.

Monitor changes in your child.

- You are the expert on your child. If you notice changes or you get the sense that something is different, explore it a little. Sometimes it's easy to dismiss behaviors as being related to your child's disability, but changes in behaviors can also signal that something new is going on.

Ask if and how social skills are taught to children.

- All children need help learning how to relate appropriately to others. Does the program address healthy relationships, inappropriate touching, sex and sexuality, and other relationship skills?

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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