

Creating Safe Environments: Working to Protect Children from Child Sexual Abuse



It is an adult's responsibility to protect children from sexual abuse. Even though a parent can teach children how to say "NO," it is very difficult for a child to defy an adult. It is also important to remember that abusers are much more likely to be friends and family members, not strangers. Here are some ways a parent can recognize and protect a child against grooming behaviors:

- **Teach your child about their bodies.** Teach children about abuse, and when appropriate, about sex. Teach that it is against the rules for adults to act sexually with them and about parts of their bodies others should not touch. Make sure they understand that they can say "NO" to anyone who makes them feel uncomfortable.
- **Pay attention to the people in your child's life.** Get to know your child's teachers, coaches, babysitters, daycare providers, youth group leaders, and any other adults in their life. The abuser may also be a friend, family member, or older youth. Make unannounced visits and ask questions. Reduce one-adult/one-child situations and inform these adults that you and your child are educated about child sexual abuse.
- **Watch patterns of behavior in adults.** Offenders may appear to be nice, likeable, socially adept, and charming. Be wary of individuals who don't have a regular number of adult friends and prefers to establish peer relationships with people much younger than themselves or who fail to respect boundaries set by parents. If your child seems uncomfortable and resists a particular adult, ask why. Some abusers exhibit no suspicious behavior at all. Trust your gut.
- **Look for warning signs that your child is being sexually abused.** Physical signs are not common, but should be investigated. Emotional or behavioral signs are more common, such as "too perfect" behavior, withdrawal, depression, and unexplained anger or rebellion. Age-inappropriate sexual behavior and language may be a red flag. Keep in mind that some children exhibit no signs.
- **Keep lines of communication open with your child.** Teach your child to tell you about physical contact with another adult and to trust you with their emotions. Allow your child to talk to you about problems without reacting angrily. Children may tell parts of an incident or pretend it happened to someone else to gauge your reaction. Children may shut down and refuse to say more if you react emotionally or negatively. Let your child know that you believe them: very few reports of sexual abuse are false.

If you or someone you know suspects child abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency, department of social services or call 1-800-332-6347. For more information or additional resources, visit www.mcasa.org or call 800-983-7278.

Sources:
 Dooling, N. (2011), Dr. Michael Welner, *The Ithaca Journal*;
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