

Creating Protective Environments: Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse

One in 10 children experience child sexual abuse (CSA) before the age of 18.¹ It is the responsibility of adults to protect children from abuse. Parents should have open discussions with their children but should take additional steps to assess the safety of places and people in their children’s lives. Even though a parent can teach children how to say "NO," **it is very difficult for a child to defy an adult**, so teaching children should be only one component of prevention efforts.

FACT SHEET

<p>The majority of CSA takes place when a child is alone one-on-one with an adult.² Get to know your child’s teachers, coaches, babysitters, daycare providers, youth group leaders, and any other adults in their life.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to youth-serving organizations about their hiring, training, and monitoring practices and other abuse prevention policies. • Think carefully about the safety of an isolated setting and choose group situations whenever possible. • If your child will be in a one-on-one situation with an adult, ask the adult about the specifics of planned activities beforehand, and pay attention to the adult’s ability to be specific. • Notice the child’s mood after the activity. • Make unannounced visits and ask questions. • Inform these adults that you and your child are educated about child sexual abuse.
<p>Watch patterns of behavior in adults and trust your gut.³</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offenders may appear to be likeable, socially adept, and charming. • Be wary of individuals who do not have adult friends and prefer to establish relationships with people much younger than themselves, or who fail to respect boundaries set by parents. • Be wary of adults who offer a child special gifts or adults who want to take your child on a “special outing”. • If your child seems uncomfortable or resists a particular adult, <i>ask why</i>. • Remember, some abusers exhibit no suspicious behavior at all.
<p>Talking to children about body parts, boundaries, and sex in an age-appropriate way makes children less vulnerable to abuse. Make sure they understand they can say "NO" if they feel uncomfortable.⁴</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach children the names of genitals, emphasizing that while genitals are private, they can talk to you if they have concerns or questions. • Explain that there are <i>no secrets</i> about bodies. • Teach that it is against the rules for adults to act sexually with children, and what parts of their body others should not touch. • Start conversations early and often, using everyday opportunities to talk about sexual abuse. • Explain that <i>abusers are more likely to be someone the child knows</i> than a stranger. 89% of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are known to the victim.⁵ • Explain about tricks and ask for them to talk to you if an adult tells them to keep a secret, gives them secret gifts or privileges, or tells them anything that makes them afraid or uncomfortable.
<p>Teach your child to trust you with their emotions and to tell you if physical contact with an adult occurs.⁴</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow your child to talk to you about problems without reacting angrily. • Remember, 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: <i>very few reports of sexual abuse are false</i>.
<p>Look for warning signs that your child is being sexually abused.⁶</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While physical signs are not common, if present a child need immediate medical and emotional support. Emotional and 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.

If you or someone you know suspects child abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency or department of social services. The [Darkness to Light National Child Sexual Abuse Helpline](https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Updated-Prevalence-White-Paper-1-25-2016_2020.pdf) can provide local resources and information at 1-866-FOR-LIGHT. You can also contact the [ChildHelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline](https://www.stopitnow.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/behaviors_to_watch_for_0.pdf) at 1-800-4-A-CHILD for 24/7 support. For more information or additional resources, visit <https://mcasa.org/prevention/preventing-child-sexual-abuse> or call 301-328-7023.

¹ Townsend, C., Rheingold, A., Haviland, M.L. *Estimating a child sexual abuse prevalence rate for practitioners: An updated review of child sexual abuse prevalence studies* (2016). Darkness to Light. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Updated-Prevalence-White-Paper-1-25-2016_2020.pdf
² *Child sexual abuse statistics* (2015). Darkness To Light. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from http://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/all_statistics_20150619.pdf
³ *Behaviors to watch for when adults are with children* (2018). Stop It Now! Retrieved October 26, 2021, from https://www.stopitnow.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/behaviors_to_watch_for_0.pdf
⁴ *Talking to children and teens* (2018). Stop It Now! Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/talking-to-children-and-teens>
⁵ Finkelhor, D. *Characteristics of crimes against juveniles* (2012). Crimes Against Children Research Center. Retrieved October 31, 2022, from https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/sites/default/files/media/2022-03/characteristics-of-crimes-against-juveniles_0.pdf
⁶ *Tip sheet: Warning signs of possible sexual abuse in a child’s behaviors* (2018). Stop It Now! Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/warning-signs-possible-abuse>