

## Creating Protective Environments: Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse

Approximately **1 in 10 children** experience child sexual abuse (CSA) before the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> It's the responsibility of adults to protect children from abuse. Parents should have open discussions with their children but should take additional steps to review and understand 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 go against an adult**, so teaching children should be only one piece of prevention efforts.

FACT SHEET

<p><b>The majority of CSA takes place when a child is alone one-on-one with an adult.<sup>2</sup> Get to know your child's teachers, coaches, babysitters, daycare providers, youth group leaders, and any other adults in their life.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to youth-serving organizations about their hiring, training, and monitoring practices and other abuse prevention policies.</li> <li>• Think carefully about the safety of an isolated setting and choose group situations whenever possible.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• Notice the child's mood after the activity.</li> <li>• Make unannounced visits and ask questions.</li> <li>• Inform these adults that you and your child are educated about child sexual abuse.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Watch patterns of behavior in adults and trust your gut.<sup>3</sup></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offenders may appear to be likeable, socially skilled, and charming.</li> <li>• Be cautious 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.</li> <li>• Be cautious of adults who offer a child special gifts, or adults who want to take your child on a "special outing."</li> <li>• If your child seems uncomfortable or doesn't want to spend time with an adult, <i>ask why</i>.</li> <li>• Remember, some abusers show no suspicious behavior at all.</li> </ul>
<p><b>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.<sup>4</sup></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach children the names of genitals, emphasizing that genitals are private and that they can talk to you if they have concerns or questions.</li> <li>• Explain that there are <i>no secrets</i> about bodies.</li> <li>• Teach that it is wrong for adults to act sexually with children, and what parts of their body others should not touch.</li> <li>• Start conversations early and often, using everyday opportunities to talk about sexual abuse.</li> <li>• Explain that <i>abusers are more likely to be someone they know rather than a stranger</i>. 89% of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are someone the child knows.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Explain what tricks are and ask 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.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teach your child to trust you with their emotions and to tell you if physical contact with an adult occurs.<sup>4</sup></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow your child to talk to you about problems without reacting angrily.</li> <li>• Remember, children may tell parts of an incident or pretend it happened to someone else to get a sense of your reaction.</li> <li>• Children may shut down and refuse to say more if you react emotionally or negatively.</li> <li>• Let your child know that you believe them: <i>very few reports of sexual abuse are false</i>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Look for warning signs that your child is being sexually abused.<sup>6</sup></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While physical signs are not common, if present a child needs immediate medical and emotional support. Emotional and behavioral signs are more common, such as "too perfect" behavior, withdrawal, depression, and unexplained anger or rebellion.</li> <li>• Age-inappropriate sexual behavior and language may be a red flag.</li> <li>• Keep in mind that some children exhibit no signs.</li> </ul>

If you or someone you know suspects child abuse, please contact your local law enforcement agency or [department of child protective services](#). The [Darkness to Light National Child Sexual Abuse Helpline](#) can provide local resources and information at 1-866-FOR-LIGHT or via a crisis textline (Text "LIGHT" to 741741). You can also contact the [ChildHelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline](#) at 1-800-422-4453 for 24/7 support via phone and text. For more information or additional resources, visit: <https://mcasa.org/prevention/preventing-child-sexual-abuse>

<sup>1</sup> Updated source: Darkness to Light. The Issue of Child Sexual Abuse. (2025). Retrieved November 14, 2025 from [https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Statistics\\_The-Issue.pdf](https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Statistics_The-Issue.pdf)  
<sup>2</sup> = Updated source: Darkness to Light. Risk Factors and Consequences. (2025). Retrieved November 14, 2025 from [https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Statistics\\_Risk-Factors.pdf](https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Statistics_Risk-Factors.pdf)  
<sup>3</sup> 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](https://www.stopitnow.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/behaviors_to_watch_for_0.pdf)  
<sup>4</sup> 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>  
<sup>5</sup> 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](https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/sites/default/files/media/2022-03/characteristics-of-crimes-against-juveniles_0.pdf)  
<sup>6</sup> 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>