

Protecting Your Kids From Sexual Abuse

You can guard your child from sexual abuse by learning the facts, talking with your child about boundaries, and minimizing risk. Here are some ways to protect your kids:

Know the risks. Sexual abuse can happen to any child: boys and girls of any age, race, religion or economic background. In the U.S., one in ten kids will be sexually abused by age 18. Child sexual abuse may involve vaginal or anal intercourse, but can also include inappropriate touching or fondling, exposure to adult sexual activity or material, exhibitionism, voyeurism (“peeping”) or child pornography. Sex offenders are usually someone the child knows and trusts. Sometimes it is a person trusted by the child’s parent, too.

Learn to recognize grooming behaviors.

Predators often groom children over a period of time. This may include giving gifts, spending special time with the child, or testing boundaries. They may make inappropriate comments about the child’s body, tell sexual jokes, or share R-rated or pornographic material. Some abusers make threats to hurt the child or family members—or convince the child they’ll be in trouble if they tell.

Have conversations with your child at every age of development. Talk with your kids in a matter-of-fact way so they learn to come to you with questions or concerns.

- Start from birth by teaching your child the proper names for both male and female private body parts. Tell children that their private areas

are special, and that others should not touch or look at these parts.

- Teach kids to say “no” to any uncomfortable touch—even unwanted hugs or tickling. Help them identify other safe adults they can talk to if someone violates a boundary.
- Talk to your kids about possible grooming scenarios. Help your child identify what to do if someone shows them photos of naked people or gives a gift and then asks to keep it a secret.
- Use everyday experiences—television shows, music, video, and news stories—to start conversations about boundaries and sexuality.
- Play the “What If” game to test kids about all kinds of safety—like what to do in case of fire, a tornado warning, or an adult asking a child to come to a secluded area with them.

Talk to the other people in your life, too.

Sharing what you’ve learned, and the boundaries you’ve set, helps enlist others in protecting your kids—and discourages possible predators.

- Consider establishing a written code of conduct in your home that addresses mutual respect, personal boundaries, and internet usage. Share it with extended family members and babysitters.
- Support your child’s boundaries in real time. For example, “It doesn’t look like Mia is enjoying being tickled right now. Let’s create some space so she feels more comfortable.”
- Ask organizations to share their child protection policy. Make sure their policy addresses one-adult one-child interactions.



Monitor your child's internet and phone use. You should know who your child is spending time with in person and online. Let your child know that you will be monitoring his or her internet use, texts, and social media use. Explain why.

- Encourage kids to limit sharing of personal information online and to use privacy settings.
- Help your child brainstorm ways to handle possible situations they may encounter online, including an older person posing as a teen or bullying by peers.
- Consider restricting internet use by prohibiting use of devices and computers in bedrooms, or turning off the Wi-Fi at night.
- Become familiar with the social media platforms your child uses and how they work.
- Teach kids that sharing things digitally is always “public and permanent.”

Know what to expect of your child's sexual development. Curiosity about their own bodies, human development, and relationships is very normal in children. Talking to your child in a calm, matter-of-fact way will help your child feel comfortable coming to you with questions or concerns. If you are concerned about a specific behavior, or need more information to answer your child's questions, consult a pediatrician.

Here is some information on age-appropriate sexual behavior:

- Infants and toddlers develop a sense of trust through touch. They will often seek out physical contact.
- Kids under 5 touch their own genitals, sometimes in front of others.
- Kids under 5 have no inhibitions about nudity.
- Curiosity about others' bodies which may lead younger kids to ask to look at others' private parts (“play doctor”). Older kids may seek out sexual content in movies or the internet.
- Around age 9, children may start discussing sex with peers, develop sexual language, role play romantic relationships with friends, or experiment with some sexual acts.

Here are some sexual behaviors to be concerned about:

- A young child who has more knowledge about sex than his or her peers, has explicit language for sexual behavior, or imitates adult sex acts.
- A child or teen who coerces, forces or threatens other youth to engage in sexual contact.
- A child or teen who initiates sexual contact with younger kids or children with disabilities.
- Excessive masturbation or sexual play with others that continues after limit setting.
- Sexual behavior in public, or by phone or internet—especially if directed at older teens or adults.
- Sexual acts that are aggressive or hurtful to self or others.

Take Stewards of Children child sexual abuse prevention and response training. Knowledge is power—the power to protect. Visit MemphisCAC.org for information on getting training for yourself or your organization.

For more information about child sexual abuse prevention and child safe policy, contact the prevention team at the Memphis Child Advocacy Center: (901) 888-4363 or prevention@memphiscac.org.



The Memphis Child Advocacy Center supports safety for children through informed prevention, community collaboration, and a team approach to healing and justice for victims of child sexual and severe physical abuse.

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