

# HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

**Before beginning a conversation with your child, resolve to:**

- not victim-blame
- not use scare tactics or lectures
- make sure you are listening to your child as much as you are talking; listen to their comments, questions, answers, and pay attention to body language
- use proper terms for body parts
- not blame your child or their friends for past mistakes,
- accept vague answers, not press for details, and not force him/her to accept your point of view,
- provide your child with accurate and age-appropriate information, and
- bring up issues of all types of abuse including sexual abuse and incest; the younger a child is the more concrete they are and therefore they need specific examples of each type of abuse.

Several of the steps below do not require that you mention the words "sex" or "sexual abuse." Your morals and values will affect what you say to your child about sexual relationships, but regardless of your values, you need to give your child information about protecting him/herself from sexual abuse.

1. **Make sure your child knows that you will not blame him/her for the actions of others.** The primary reason that children give for not telling their parents about abuse is that they are afraid their parents will blame them for the abuse. Try not to use statements like, "If you leave your bike in the front yard, and it gets stolen, it's your fault." Children need to know that they are responsible for their actions, but not the actions of others, even if they think they did not practice perfect prevention. If your child hears or sees others being victim-blaming, let your child know that you do not blame victims of any type of crime or abuse.
2. **Make sure your child knows that abuse is something that you can, and want, to talk about.** Often children do not tell their parents about being abused because they think their parents will be hurt or embarrassed by the topic, or will think the abuse is not a serious problem. Take every opportunity you can find to let your child know that you can talk about body parts, sexuality, sexual abuse, violence, bullies, and harassment. If you and your child see or hear harassing or abusive things on TV, in music, in advertising, or from other people, talk about it together.
3. **Make sure older children understand the definition of *sexual abuse* and *sexual assault*.** Often children think that only rape is sexual abuse, and that it can only be sexual abuse if the offender is a stranger or an adult male.

4. **Make sure your child knows that you believe he/she has the right to make choices about his/her life and his/her body.** Find opportunities for your children to make decisions about their lives and bodies. Depending upon your child's age, you might let him/her decide if you may accompany them into the doctor's examining room, or help them with a bath. You can use examples of children trying to talk playmates into games or sports that might be scary to other children. Also, use examples of children and adults wanting to give a child a hug or a kiss when the child does not want the touch.
  
5. **Provide a definition of consent, and explain that consent can only be given when the person feels that they could have said "yes" or "no" freely.** Talk about power and force. Force does not have to be physical or violent. Discuss types of power that an adult, teacher, coach, police officer, larger person, employer, bully, or popular person might have. Let the child know that verbal pressure does not have to be something that sounds bad -- it could be something good that the child wants, like a toy or candy.
  
6. **Provide your child with basic information about protecting him/herself:**
  - Their bodies belong to them and they **can** say "no" to any type of unwanted touching. Remember that it is often difficult for a child to use an assertive "no," and that they are not responsible for the abuse if they did not say "no."
  - There are different types of touching, and children should trust their instincts. It is often not the touch that makes the situation an assault, but rather the way the touch is done. Hugs, kisses, pats, stroking can be both acceptable and unacceptable touches.
  - If anything confusing, uncomfortable, or frightening happens, the child should talk it over with a trusted adult. Children should know that they should always talk to a trusted adult about any touching to the private parts of the body. Adults should be the ones who decide if what a doctor, nurse, coach, friend, relative, or another child did is right or wrong. Children will often tell a similar-aged friend about abuse before telling an adult. Children need to know that it is OK to talk to peers about problems, but if the problems involve sexual abuse, a trusted adult should always be told. Make sure that your child knows that if another child shares anything about sexual abuse with him/her, they should tell a trusted adult even if the other child does not want them to.
  - Children should know that they do not have to be touched for an incident to be sexual abuse. Sexual abuse includes words, having others show a child their body, pictures or videos.
  
7. **Provide your child with a list of trusted adults that he/she can go to for help or advice.** Often, older children and teens will not come to their parents for help; they should know that there are other adults who can help them. Select adults with whom you and your child feel comfortable, and ones that you

think will know how to handle a problem: clergy person, youth leaders, relatives, family friends, school personnel, friends' parents.

8. **Talk with your child about sex role stereotypes.** Begin the conversation with a discussion of a movie, book, TV show, or advertisement showing sex role stereotypes. Let your child know that he/she should not base relationships on these stereotypes. Stress that they should not allow stereotypes to force them into relationships that make them feel uncomfortable.

Even if your children say they know all about sexuality and sexual abuse, or roll their eyes and pretend not to listen, it is important that you keep bringing up the subject. It is not necessary to have a discussion each time you approach the subject. Each time you try to initiate a conversation, you are reminding your child that you are available to discuss these issues.