

Talking to Preschoolers about Sexual Abuse

The following suggestions may help parents and teachers initiate conversations about abuse with young children.

- **How to define sexual abuse.** Day One does not use the words "sexual abuse" or "sexual assault" in our preschool programs. A story of a bully taking another child's toy is used to explain that no one has the right to use their age or size to hurt another person.

From the discussion of a bully, it is easy to begin to talk about someone using their age or size to touch the child's body. You can begin with an example of the younger child being hit or pushed. Let your child know that you are there to help them whenever someone makes their body feel unsafe. Also, let the child know that they always have the right to tell someone to stop touching or hitting them.

- **All children should know the correct terms for their body parts.** If a child has a problem with one of the private parts of their body -- breast, buttocks, penis, testes, vulva, or vagina, using the proper name will make it easier for adults to understand their problem. Parents should always call all body parts by their correct name.
- **Children should be taught that some parts of their body are private.** The parts of the body covered by a bathing suit are not usually shared with other people. Let children know that they should talk to a trusted adult about any touching to the private parts of their bodies.
- **Listen to what your children are saying and take them seriously.** If you are not sure what your child means, ask him/her to tell you more. Young children are often not sure if they have a problem. They are afraid that if they tell you something and it is not a problem, you will think they are immature. Therefore, they often drop hints or ask "what if" questions to test out your responses.
- **Never tell your children that they must or should participate in personal interactions with others.** Always ask your children if they would like to give someone a kiss or hug. If your child says "no," accept the "no" and suggest a wave or smile as a greeting or good-bye. Children need to know that you really do believe that they have the right to decide who they touch and who touches them.
- **Make sure that any prevention or intervention strategies that you give your children are age and developmentally appropriate.** Children have a hard time saying "no" to older people. Let them know that they can say "no," but that you understand it might be difficult or might not work. Also, young children usually do not have the ability to leave a situation that is making them feel uncomfortable. Children can easily be confused about the appropriateness of a touch.