

Talking with Your Child About Sexual Abuse

What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse is any act that involves sexual molestation or exploitation of a child by a parent, a household member or family member, a person who has permanent or temporary care or custody of the child, a person who has responsibility for supervision of the child, or a person who, because of the person's position or occupation, exercises authority over the child; or sex trafficking of a child by any individual. Sexual abuse includes touching as well as non-touching behaviors such as exposure, voyeurism, and child sexual abuse material. Some sexual behaviors between children may be age-expected, innocent exploration rather than abuse. Consult a health or mental health care professional if you have concerns regarding healthy and unhealthy sexual behavior in children.

If A Child Tells You

- Children very rarely make up stories of abuse. While it may be hard to hear, trust your child is telling you a story that needs to be told.
- Remain calm. An appearance of shock, fear, anger or disgust can frighten a child.
- Listen carefully and avoid interrupting.
- Show love and support as you normally would with words, gestures, and physical affection.
- Congratulate your child. Tell them they did the right thing by sharing, that they showed great courage, and that you will be there to help them in any way that you can.
- Reassure your child that he or she has done nothing wrong and that what happened was not their fault.
- Call Child Protective Services or the Police to report the abuse. They will work with you to help make sure your child is safe.
- Do not confront the offender. By confronting the offender, you provide an opportunity for that person to make up an excuse, threaten your child or other victims, or escape the situation.
- After the initial disclosure, let your child talk about it at their own pace as they need to. Consider the need for counseling for your child and your entire family.

Talking About Difficult Issues

Children and young people are bombarded with information and misinformation every day. Peers, television, music, videos, the internet, school ...are all vying for our children's attention! Ongoing communication in the family can help to nurture qualities within them that render them less likely to be targets of abuse. Good communication ensures that when something is difficult or something goes wrong, the Congregation, family, and community are there to help.

Good Communication...

- Starts early. Children want to hear information from their parents. Evidence suggests that teens are more likely to turn to "outside" sources including peers or the media for information. If we answer questions openly and respectfully from an early age they are more likely to turn to us with tough questions as they get older.
- Is open and honest. Listen to what your child has to say, provide time for reflection, and ask what they think they should do. Help them learn to think through situations rather than always giving them the "answer." Children want moral guidance and direction, and parents have an obligation to provide it.
- Starts with the parent. Sometimes we need to be the ones who initiate conversations. Use natural teaching moments to talk about sensitive topics such as child abuse or substance abuse. Depending on the age of your child, comment or ask for their thoughts or opinions when you

see stories on the television, news or hear songs on the radio that address healthy or unhealthy relationships. Show your child that you value their thoughts while also sharing your values with them.

- Requires honesty and patience. We need the courage to wait for our children to say what they are feeling, thinking, and believing. We need the integrity to say, “I don’t know, but let’s find out.”

Straight Talk

- Teaching children the proper names for their private body parts will help them communicate with you if they should ever have a question related to illness, hygiene or abuse.
- Talking with children calmly and matter-of-factly about body parts demonstrates that these parts are good and special and that you as the parent feel comfortable talking about these parts. The most natural time to teach children this language is when they are toddlers and are learning the names for the other parts of their bodies.
- Teach and model characteristics of healthy relationships including empathy, expressed feelings, equality, and boundaries. When children learn what is “healthy” they are more likely to recognize and question unhealthy behaviors.
- Empathize with your child that while it is always ok to say “no” to any kind of touch, this can be very hard to do.
- Encourage your child to come to you and other helpful adults with questions about bodies and touch.
- Teach your child that adults and older children should never ask them to keep a secret about touch.
- Abuse is never the child’s fault. Help your child understand that they will not get in trouble if they tell you about a touching secret, and that it is never too late to tell.

Signs of Abuse

- Change in child’s behavior, for example, a talkative child becoming quiet or withdrawn
- Stated desire not to be around a particular adult
- Copying adult sexual behavior
- Sexualized play, or has a sexual knowledge beyond normal maturity
- Swelling or bleeding around genitals or mouth
- Urinary tract infections
- Sexually transmitted infections

Additional Signs in Adolescents

- Depression or mood changes
- Poor self image
- Running away
- Suicide attempts
- Alcohol or other drug abuse
- Manipulative or secretive behavior
- Showering Excessively

Not My Child

Most parents find it difficult to believe that sexual abuse could happen to their child, yet statistics reveal that sexual abuse is common. Evidence suggests:

- One in four girls and one in six boys will experience sexual abuse before they reach age 18.

- Over 90% of sexual abuse is committed by someone the child knows and trusts, such as a family member, close friend, teacher, counselor, or older child.
- Sexual abuse does not discriminate by race or socioeconomic background.
- Abusers rarely abuse only once. Sexual abuse is often ongoing unless someone intervenes to stop it.
- Only one in ten children who are sexually abused ever tell anyone. Those who do tell often tell months or years after the abuse began.

Important Skills

We can't expect children to protect themselves from abuse when most offenders are people they trust. Nevertheless, we can reduce their risk for being targeted as potential victims.

- Many children don't tell when they are abused because they feel ashamed, embarrassed or guilty, or because they feel as though they won't be believed.
- Create an environment in your home where children feel comfortable sharing information and asking tough questions without being judged. Listen carefully and consider your child's point of view and, if necessary, share your differing point of view in a respectful way.
- Nurture an understanding of healthy relationships in your child. Model behaviors that emphasize fairness, respect and equality. Demonstrate the importance of sharing feelings. When age-appropriate, allow your child to have privacy when bathing, dressing, and toileting.
- Use natural teaching moments to share information about privacy, touch, and boundaries. For example, for a child who is relentlessly poking a sibling, we might say, "Your sister has the right to tell you how you may and may not touch her. Please respect what she is telling you."
- Be sure your child can name at least three or four adults whom they feel comfortable going to with sensitive questions or concerns.
- Recognize that most sexual offenders are participating members of our families, schools, congregations, and communities.
- Understand that most sexual offenders are never caught and will not be listed on sexual offender registries.
- Evidence suggests that children are more likely to disclose abuse when a parent or loved one initiates a conversation about sexuality or abuse. Find out when your child's school will be teaching about healthy relationships so that you can be involved and start the conversation.
- Learn and exchange current information with your friends and neighbors regarding child sexual abuse so that you will be better able to protect your child.

Report Abuse!

Any person who has reason to believe a child has been subjected to sexual abuse, physical abuse, or neglect, must make a report to child protective services or law enforcement as soon as possible even if the potential victim is now over 18 years old and even in cases where the alleged perpetrator is deceased. Maryland's Child Protective Services' Hotline is 1-800-91-PREVENT (1-800-917-7383).

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