

Protecting children from sexual abuse

Protecting children from sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility, talking about it empowers children and the community to help break the silence and prevent the abuse of children.

It is difficult for people to know how to begin talking to children about preventing sexual abuse. It is a scary and uncomfortable issue to confront, and very challenging to talk about. This information sheet will provide you with some tips and things to consider when discussing this topic with children. There is a ten step summary at the end of this information sheet. It is important to have these discussions in a calm, matter of fact way, much like how we teach children to cross the road safely or how to deal with school bullies. Children need accurate, age appropriate information and the confidence that adults they trust will support them. An essential part of prevention is to provide children with an open and comfortable environment where they are encouraged to communicate any worries/fears they may have. Parents and caregivers can use these tips to give children the courage to say no to uncomfortable touches or other inappropriate requests.

Concerning behaviours in children

The following is a list of behaviours that can indicate that a child is feeling unsafe or has been abused. It is important to note that if a child is exhibiting any or a combination of these behaviours, it does not necessarily mean that the child has been sexually abused. If you read through the list and think that your child is exhibiting some of these behaviours, TALK to your child about it. It is OK to ask if your child if they are being hurt or feel unsafe etc. You may also choose to call the sexual assault crisis line to talk to a counsellor. .

- Sudden changes in moods/behaviour
- Difficulty sleeping – nightmares
- Regressed behaviour – bedwetting, separation anxiety and insecurity
- Changes in eating patterns
- Lack of trust with familiar adults, fear of strangers, fear of men
- Lack of appropriate role boundaries in family
- Acting out – aggression, lying, stealing, self harm
- Withdrawing from friends/family/social activities
- Over attention to adults of a particular sex
- Displaying unusual interest in the genitals of others
- Acting out adult sexual behaviour with dolls or other people
- Open displays of sexuality
- Precocious knowledge of sexual matters

Common issues children face when thinking about telling

If parents/caregivers can understand why it is difficult for children to tell, they can take steps to help make it easier for children. Below are listed some of the common barriers children experience when thinking about disclosing sexual abuse;

- Is this my fault?
- Will anyone believe me?
- Will I get in trouble?
- Is there something wrong with me?
- Will people still like me?
- Can anyone tell what has happened to me?
- I am afraid

- What will happen once I tell?
- Everyone is upset because of me, I wish I never told

Education and Awareness

Parents and caregivers should familiarise themselves with the following topics so that they are comfortable in talking about them with children.

Boundaries and saying NO

Talk about and model healthy boundaries. Sometimes we unintentionally confuse children by insisting they hug an adult that they don't want to, or say things like 'do whatever the babysitter says'. Help children practice setting healthy boundaries. When children tell you that they don't want to hug and kiss everyone at family gatherings, support them by helping them find other ways of showing respect to family members (for example a high five, a hand shake etc).

Teach children that it is ok to say no to an adult when they don't feel comfortable

Give concrete examples. Is it ok to say no when someone asks you to pack up your toys/tidy your room? Is it ok to say no when an older family member wants to hug you and you feel yucky? Assure children that their "no" will be respected. If other people ignore your child's limits then it is your responsibility to explain and insist on your family's rules and boundaries. Talk about the different ways to say no using eye contact and body language (assertiveness).

Safety

Talk to children about keeping safe. Explain to them what safety is and that they have the right to feel safe at all times. Explain to them that rules can help us to feel safe. For example children should always cross the road with an adult and obey traffic signs to stay safe from cars. There are rules for privacy and private parts that keep children safe from uncomfortable touches. Develop a safety network for children. Ask children to think of 5 adults that they trust, who can help them if they feel unsafe. Make sure that at least 2 of these adults are from outside of the family, and explain to children why this is important (in case the person hurting you is in your family, and you need to talk to someone who is outside of the family).

Parts of the Body. Private vs public

Make sure you use correct names as this helps to normalise, reduce shame and embarrassment around body parts which assists any disclosures that may arise. Talk about privacy and rules around privacy in regards to our bodies. Use age appropriate concrete examples to get children thinking.

Feelings and Early Warning Signs

Identifying and talking about feelings (what does a happy face look like, how would you feel if you were happy. What does a sad face look like, how would it feel). How do they experience feelings in their bodies. Help children to identify their 'early warning signs', so that they learn to trust their feelings. Early warning signs are signs that we feel in our bodies that tell us that there is something wrong. For example butterflies, racing heart etc are signs that we are in danger. Encourage children to trust their instincts and get help.

Good touches/uncomfortable touches

Use concrete examples and ask children to think about how they would tell the difference between good and bad touches. Good touches make us feel safe, bad touches hurt our bodies and feelings. Teach children that it is ok to say no to uncomfortable touches. "your body is yours and yours alone, you always have the right to say no".

Secrets/surprises/tricks/bribes

Talk to children about the differences between a good secret/bad secret, tricks and bribes. How can you tell that it is a good secret? How does it feel in your body? Explain to children that some people use tricks or bribes to keep children from telling. They might be given a gift or special privileges, or they might be told that it is their fault (the abuse) or that no one will believe them if they tell. Explain to children that these are tricks used to silence children, and reassure them that you will listen, believe and protect them.

Communication

Encourage open communication and talking about feelings. “Nothing is so bad that you can’t talk to someone about it”. Teach children to seek help if someone is making them feel uncomfortable or hurting them. “Tell until someone believes you, keep telling until you feel safe”. Act upon disclosures of abuse. Children rarely lie about being assaulted, and it is often difficult for them to speak up for fear of getting in trouble etc. Listen and believe.

Cyber safety tips

- Use a filter to block inappropriate material on the internet.
- Keep the computer in a shared area so that family members are around to monitor use.
- Talk to your child about safety and dangers of the internet – tell them never to give out any
- personal information to anyone on the internet.
- Limit internet time.
- Block all chat rooms.
- If children become secretive about internet use, talk to them about it.