

Some Tips on How to Protect your Child from Sexual Abuse

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By Katy

As survivors, we are perhaps even more acutely aware of the need to protect our children from sexual abuse (CSA). However, our personal knowledge of the horrors of child sexual abuse does not necessarily mean that we are any better equipped to teach our children about child safety or to identify the warning signs of sexual abuse in children. In fact, many of us are so worried about “history repeating itself” that our anxiety gets in the way, and we either avoid the subject altogether and keep our fingers crossed – or we become very overprotective and try to wrap our children in so much cotton wool that they are not given the skills to protect themselves.

This article is intended to give you some ideas about how to protect your children from sexual abuse.

Why do you need to know about this? This couldn't happen to your child, right??

“It's not denial. I'm just selective about the reality I accept.”

Unfortunately, ANY child is at risk of sexual abuse. Hoping... denying.... pretending.... that this **can't** happen to your child is not lowering your child's risk of being sexually abused, and it does not prepare them to get help quickly and effectively if the worst does happen.

The reality of CSA is a terrifying concept - but its something that every parent needs to face because **knowledge is power.**

The Facts:

The stark reality of the statistics is that approximately 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before the age of 18 and it can affect any child regardless of age, gender, family income, culture, race, religion, physical appearance, sexuality, intellect, disability etc.

Most sexual abuse (85%) is perpetrated someone within the child's social sphere - for example, a relative, a family friend, a teacher, youth worker, religious leader, neighbour. Despite the stereotypical image of the abuser propagated by the media, abusers usually do not look like monsters and it is relatively rare for them to be strangers.

The majority of children never report the abuse, and often this is because they are afraid of their parents' reactions, because they fear getting in trouble, or because they don't know *how* to tell. The

child who keeps the abuse secret is more likely to experience severe physical and emotional consequences, both in childhood and later in life.

Children from a young as three years old can be taught skills that lower their vulnerability of sexual abuse and which also increase their ability to tell if something does happen. You, as the parent, play the most vital role in educating your child about their safety and about what's right and wrong. Similarly, you have a big role to play in identifying risk factors and signs in order to aid prevention and detection of abuse.

What is child sexual abuse (CSA)?

"Sexual abuse is when a child or young person is pressurised, forced or tricked into taking part in any kind of sexual activity with an adult or young person" (NSPCC)

- CSA can involve many activities including:
- Fondling / touching / kissing of genitals or other area's of the body.
- Penetration with penis, digit, or object.
- Exposing genitals or sexual material to a child.
- Talking to a child inappropriately, graphically, and explicitly about sex.
- Asking a child to touch their own genitals or another persons.
- Non-forced sex with an underage child.

Myths about CSA

"The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie - deliberate, contrived and dishonest - but the myth - persistent, persuasive and unrealistic" (JFK)

There are so many myths around child sexual abuse that it's difficult to know where to start. On the whole, many of us believe these myths....because it's comforting! If we believe that we can identify a paedophile from across the street then we can keep our children away from them. If we believe that CSA only happens within "problem families" then we can be secure in that knowledge that our children are safe because we're "a normal family".

It's important to identify the myths so that you can reject them as unhelpful and look to the more useful and viable information that really can make a difference. ALL of these statements are incorrect and should be rejected:

- **Myth:** Only pretty little girls are sexually abused.
- **Myth:** All molesters look like dirty old men. You can just *tell*.
- **Myth:** Mostly child abusers are strangers.
- **Myth:** Only men really rape children.
- **Myth:** My child would tell me if anything like this happened to them.

- **Myth:** This could never happen to my child.
- **Myth:** Sexual abusers are monsters and just look evil.
- **Myth:** Teaching about CSA scares children, so its best to keep quiet.
- **Myth:** If my child had been abused, I would just know.
- **Myth:** Only homosexual men hurt little boys.
- **Myth:** It can't happen in my family.
- **Myth:** Sexual abuse is a family matter and should be dealt with as such.

WHAT CAN YOU DO??

Teach your children the proper names for parts of the body:

Even as adults, many of us get embarrassed about naming areas of our body - and more often that not, we may refer to our genitals as out "private parts" or "down there" or "the lady area"! I'm sure we all have our own pet names for these areas - I, for example, was taught to call my vagina my "*Merry Christmas*", and my brother was taught to call his penis his "*didler*"!

But what's wrong with teaching children the proper names for their body parts? By teaching a child the proper names for their body parts, they will be in a position to name what's happening to them should someone touch them in an abusive way. By using the proper terms, everybody will be in a position to know exactly what they are referring to, and minimizing the chance of misinterpretation. For example, its far less confusing if a child is able to say "*He touched my vagina with his penis*" than it is if she said, "*He touched my Merry Christmas with his didler*"!

By not referring to the sexual organs at all, or by referring to them as their "private parts", this can have implications for what a child thinks is okay and not okay to talk about. Teaching them in an open way from a very young age about correct biological labels will help children to feel that its not taboo or embarrassing to talk about their sexual organs if there is a need to - and obviously in an abusive situation, this can be the difference between telling and not telling about abuse.

Resources for learning about the body:

[Amazing You!: Getting Smart About Your Private Parts by Gail Saltz](#)

[My Body Is Private by Linda Girard](#)

["What's Happening to My Body" Book for Girls, by Lynda Madaras](#)

["What's Happening to My Body" Book for Boys, by Lynda Madaras](#)

Safe Touch / Unsafe Touch

The number one fundamental rule is to teach children that there body belongs to them! They had a right to decide what they do with their body, and who touches their body, and how someone touches their body. They need to be afforded the same rights as we are.

Teach your child to respect their body's by teaching them to respect other people's body's. Children need to be told not to do something to anyone else that that person doesn't want. For example, if they are jumping up and down on you, you can say "I don't want you to jump up and down on me. Please stop." Similarly if they are tickling a sibling, that sibling should be able to say "Stop it" - and ensure your child respects this. Modeling and absolute rules make this easier for children to understand.

Respect their wishes - and let them know that no one, not even you, has the right to touch them without their say so. Ask your child before touching them i.e. "Would you like me to help you with your shoes?". Don't just assume it's okay. Ask them for a goodnight kiss - don't demand one! Don't make them kiss any relative they don't want to - and teach them to say politely "I don't feel like kissing right now".

- Talk to them about "What is GOOD touch?".

Good touch is touch that feels safe - or touch that makes us feel warm and makes us smile. It's touch that makes us feel cared for. Try to explain to children that some good touch actually hurts i.e. cleaning a cut - but that it's good because it's making them better.

- Talk to them about "What is BAD touch?"

Bad touch is touch which hurts their body or feelings. For example, if someone kicks you or pushes you.

- Talk to them about "What is UNWANTED touch?"

Unwanted touch may be touch which would usually be good touch, but something which you do not want right now. For example, being swung in the air may usually be fun, but after a big meal, they might not want it.

- Talk to them about "What is SEXUAL ABUSE touch?"

Calling it sexual abuse touch makes it clear that this is a totally different type of touch - and it does not confuse the issue by using incorrect terminology. Sexual abuse touch is touch that makes the child feel scared, anxious or uncertain on any part of their body that would normally be covered if they wore a swimming costume - or touching someone else on any part of the body that would normally be covered if they wore a swimming costume. Explain to them that this touch may feel "nice" or exciting, but that it may also feel strange. If they are asked not to tell anyone about this touch then that is sexual abuse touch. Make it clear that sexual abuse touch can also happen if they are touched with their clothes on - i.e. if someone rubs them over their pants.

When you touch your child, ask them to tell you what type of touch it is. Ask questions like "Right now, would it be okay if an adult touched you on the hand?" and "Right now, would it be okay if an adult touched you on your tummy?". Try to encourage them to explain their answers.

Safe Touch Resources:

God Made Me: The Safe Touch Coloring Book by Beth Robinson

The Right Touch: A Read-Aloud Story to Help Prevent Child Sexual Abuse by Sandy Kleven

Saying "NO!"

From an early age, children are taught allegiance to adults and to *"Do as you're told!"*, and certainly very young children can find it difficult to differentiate between rules they have to follow, and rules they don't have to follow.

Teach your child that they have the right to say NO! As the majority of child abuse is based on coercion rather than force, teaching your child to say NO! strongly and forcefully really can make a big difference in many situations. Children will need practice how to say "NO!" in this way, and so its a good idea to practice this with them. You can make a game of it.....it doesn't have to be frightening for them.....but it could help to give them the confidence to say "NO!" if someone tries to abuse them.

Obviously there are times that children are not permitted to say "no" and this is where the difficulty and confusion can occur. Make it clear to children that they have the right to say "no" to anyone who wants to touch their vagina, penis, breasts, buttocks - or anywhere that is normally covered if you put a swimming costume on. Make it clear that they have the right to say "NO!" loudly even if this is an adult and that they will not get into trouble. Tell children to trust their feelings and if something doesn't feel okay - then say "NO!".

There may be times when someone may need to touch their body - i.e. a doctor during an examination - but make it clear that this is only okay if you are with them and if you say it is okay directly to them. You can explain that this is safe touch because it is to do with health.

You could play the **"OK NO! game"** with them where you come up with some scenario's and ask them if it is okay to say "NO!" in these situations. Ask them to explain their answers. For example:

Is it okay to say NO if your mum asks you tidy your room?

Is it okay to say NO if your dad asks you to brush your teeth?

Is it okay to say NO if your uncle asks you to sit on his lap and you don't want to?

Is it okay to say NO if your teacher touches your penis?

Is it okay to say NO if an adult pats you on the head?

Is it okay to say NO if an adult tickles your vagina, even if it feels nice?

Is it okay to say NO if an adult asks you to do something you feel is wrong?

Is it okay to say NO if an adult asks you to keep a secret from your parents?

Is it okay to say NO if an adult tells you to put your seatbelt on?

Is it okay to say NO if your sister asks you to touch her vagina?

Is it okay to say NO if your teacher asks you to pull down your pants to smack you if you've been bad.

Making this into a game and checking it out with them regularly can help - and they can practice saying "NO!" at the same time. For older children, you may want to change this into the "WHAT IF...?" game - whereby you can make the scenario's more complex which reflect the situations they may be confronted with.

Teach your children about "bad" secrets

"No one keeps a secret so well as a child" (Victor Hugo)

The majority of abusers teach their victims to keep what's happening to them a secret. From young children, we teach our children not to tell tales.....to maintain trusts that are afforded to us....to not air our dirty laundry in public. It's no wonder that children find it confusing!

Teach your child that any secret which makes them feel uneasy is a bad secret and its okay to break it. Any secret that makes them feel bad or sad or frightened is a bad secret and its okay to break it. Tell your child that any secret that they can't tell you is a bad secret and its okay to break it. Be consistent! Children do not have to keep any promise that makes them feel bad inside.

Teach your child the difference between a secret and a surprise: A surprise is something you will be allowed to tell at a later stage; a secret is something you're asked to never tell.

Bad Secrets Resources:

'The trouble with secrets' Karen Johnsen

Secrets that Hurt: Sexual Abuse Activity Book, by Jim Boulden and Joan Boulden.

No More Secrets for Me, by Oralea Wachter and Jane Aaron. (2002). Little Brown & Company.

Watch out for warning signs in adults

Children display signs that all is not well, but there are signs which are displayed from the abusers themselves. Try to remember that abusers typically do not look how you would expect an abuser to look. Contrary to popular media stereotypes, they do not look like monsters, or the type of face that stares out of you from a mugshot. Abusers are good at gaining trust....that's how they operate.....and therefore they can seem to be the nicest people...the most helpful...the most thoughtful....the most loving. Of course, don't go around suspecting someone may be an abuser because they are nice and good! But the point is not to rule them out if you have suspicions because they display characteristics that you don't feel are the typical monster-like features of a paedophile.

- **Watch for adults who:**

Refuse children privacy or invade their privacy.
Insist on physical affection even when the child looks uncomfortable.
Insist on “special time” alone from other adults and children.
Spend a lot of time with children instead of adults.
Buy children expensive gifts for no apparent reason.
Appear to put a lot of effort into getting close to children.
Have had previous allegations against them before.
Make you feel uneasy.....even if you can't put your finger on why.
Your child or other children seem afraid of.
Your child or other children do not want to be alone with.

- **Question people who are trusted to look after your children and monitor.**

Ask any organizations about criminal background checks and professional recommendations / references.
Ask about training of staff / policies if suspected abuse.
If a child seems uncomfortable, or resistant to being with a particular adult, ask them why. Be persistent.
If an adult is taking a child on an outing, make sure to get specifics of it. Ensure they know that you are the type of parent that asks questions!
Always make a point of asking your child about their day. Use open questions, and be persistent if they seem reluctant to give answers.
Think about whether activities would be preferable in a group. Ask why something it one-to-one.

“Molesters Do Not Wear an Ugly Mask. They Wear A Shield of Trust.”

Stranger - Danger

Although the vast majority of risks to your child do not come from strangers, it is vital that you teach your children about stranger danger. Some remarkably simple techniques can help your child to keep themselves safe!

Help your child to identify a stranger. When you are out and about - ask your child "Are they a stranger?". Make it clear that just because you may know the persons face, they could still be a stranger (i.e. lady who works in the shop!).

Tell your child never to talk to strangers unless they are with an adult they trust and never to go anywhere with a stranger. Identify trusted adults.

If a stranger approaches them and asks them to go somewhere with them - teach your child to MAKE A FUSS. Tell them to make a noise, runaway to somewhere where there are a lot of people, scream etc.

Tell someone as soon as possible!

YELL, RUN, TELL!!

Teach your child their own address and phone number. Make sure they have another number of another trusted adult written down somewhere that they can keep with them.

If you go somewhere where you may become separated from your child, have a "meet place" i.e. by the fountain.

By them a travelcard (if old enough) and a phonecard for emergencies.

Make sure they know how to dial the emergency services and what to say.

Have a "safe" word if you are unable to pick your child up. Make sure your child knows not to go with the adult if the safe word isn't know.

Teach your child the buddy system - i.e. walk in pairs or groups.

Resources for Stranger Danger:

[Stranger Danger coloring page to download](#)

[Safest with a buddy coloring page download.](#)

[Stranger Danger by P. Pancella.](#)

[Stranger Danger: The Reluctantly Written but Absolutely Necessary Book for Todays Boys And Girls!By Patricia Stirnkorb](#)

[Stranger Danger: How to Keep Your Child SafeBy Carol Soret Cope](#)

[Safe at Home with Pooh \(Disney's My Very First Winnie the Pooh\)By Kathleen Weidner Zoehfeld](#)

Internet Activity

Its a very scary statistic, but 1 in 5 children have been sexually solicited on the internet, and 1 in 2 have been exposed to sexually explicit material on the internet. Children of today are generally very computer literate, often more so that we are, and although the internet can be a valuable resource, it can also be a dangerous hunting ground for paedophiles to make contact with children and teens.

Use a filter to block inappropriate material. Cookies can be disabled. For info on how to block certain content, please contact your ISP or [see here.](#)

Keep the computer in a shared family area and be around to monitor use.

Bookmark approved sites for young children and tell them to stick to these areas.

Spend time teaching your child how to use the internet.

Make a contract with your child about their internet use. For a standard contract [see here.](#)

Limit the amount of time that your child is permitted to spend online.

Block your child from being able to enter private unmoderated chat rooms. NEVER agree to meet anyone from a chat room.

Monitor your credit card and phone bills for unfamiliar account charges.

Report any obscene or threatening messages to your ISP.

Tell children NEVER to give out any personal information online, name, address, age, phone number, email, IM address, school, location, or photographs.

If your child has a new online "friend," insist on being "introduced" online to that friend.

If your child becomes secretive about online use, question why.

Resources:

[Kidsmart](#)

[Wired Kids](#)

[Wired Safety](#)

[The Police Notebook.](#)

[How to block content](#)

IF THE WORST SHOULD HAPPEN?

Let me get one thing clear. No matter what a wonderful parent you are, and no matter how well you have prepared your child for the risk of abuse - and equipped them in terms of child safety - sometimes child sexual abuse will happen anyway. You cannot be with your children ALL OF THE TIME. Its impossible. All you can do is lessen the risks - and, if the worst *should* happen, be in a position where you are able to identify the abuse as quickly as possible. Its a widely accepted belief among mental health experts that, on average, the longer the abuse continues, the worse the potential consequences for the physical and mental well-being of the victim. Similarly, the way that you react and deal with your childs' abuse, can have an enormous impact upon their recovery.

Recognizing the signs of CSA

Please remember that children will only show *some* of these signs. Also these signs do not have to mean that your child has been abused. These are indications of possible abuse, but they are not fact. Its important to be *aware*, without jumping to invalid and unsubstantiated conclusions. A child who is being sexually abused *may* show the following:

- **Behaviour changes:**

- Being excessively clinging or uncharacteristically crying when you try to leave them.
- Having difficulty sleeping; not wanting to go so bed; having nightmares or night-terrors; fear of the dark.
- Returning to previously immature behaviors i.e. sucking thumb, bed-wetting, needing teddy, soiling etc.
- Problems at school i.e. discipline issues, poor attention, change in working performance etc.
- Fear of a specific person or place. Isolating themselves.

- Being "too perfect" and too well behaved; quiet; desperate to please; over-achieving.
- Radical mood swings.
- Being evasive when asked questions, or having memory loss.

- **Health Issues:**

- A change in eating habits i.e. eating too much / too little; purging; becoming a fussy eater.
- Incontinence.
- Self-destructive behavior i.e. head-banging, self harm, alcohol use, drugs, genital mutilation.
- Genital discomfort, bleeding, irritation, redness, thrush, itching, discharge, odour.
- Persistent urinary tract infections.
- General ill-health complaints i.e. chronic headache, stomach cramps, sore throat etc.
- Depression / anxiety / suicidal ideation.

- **Inappropriate sexual development / behavior:**

- Excessive genital touching or masturbating in public.
- Non-age appropriate language i.e sexually graphic.
- Being sexually precocious and sexually suggestive.
- Hides secondary sexual characteristics i.e. covers up, wears baggy clothes, straps breasts.
- Attempts to be unattractive i.e. stops wearing make-up, stops washing, puts on weight.
- Fear of undressing or refusal to undress in gym class
- Initiate inappropriate sexual contact with other children.

What should I do if I suspect?

As hard as it may be, try to stay calm. Children look to their parents to know what to do, and if they see you freaking out, this is likely to increase their fear and uncertainty also.

IF you suspect - no matter how vague your suspicion - **GET HELP!** Don't try to deal with this all by yourself because dealing with this in secrecy only exacerbates feelings of shame in your child. Of course, treat it with the sensitivity it deserves, but involve the experts right from the start.

- **REPORT IT:**

The first step, even before you talk to your child, is to report your suspicions to your local child protection team - and let them investigate it. Of course your instinct may be to try to talk to your child yourself and get an admission from them - but in doing this you run the risk of eliciting a unsubstantiated disclosure which could make prosecution impossible. Furthermore, many children may be especially fearful of making the initial disclosure to a parent for fear of upsetting you, or making you angry, or disappointing you, and so they may be more likely to disclose to a professional. Your job at this time is to be the loving parent....letting them know that you still love them, that they are special, that you're not angry etc.

- **Listen to your child and to what they say they need:**

At this time, trust your child to know how they want you to help. The tendency of most parents is to want to make it all better...to "fix" what's been done to them - and unfortunately, this is not something that can be fixed. Children can learn to come to terms with the hurt they've experienced, but they have to do so at their own pace. Let them talk to you as much or as little as they want to. Don't try to steam-roller them into disclosing all of the gory details to you unless they want to - and be sensitive to the fact that some children may prefer to talk to another trusted relative or a mental health professional. This is not a rejection of you. Make it clear that you are there to listen whenever or however they need.

- **Reassure your child:**

Your child may have a lot of fears about what would happen if anyone found out about the abuse. Their abuser may have told them that no one would believe them, or that they would get in trouble, or that mummy wouldn't love them anymore. Make it clear from the beginning that you believe them. Make it clear that no matter what happened, this was not their fault. Reassure them that they have done the right thing in telling, and that you are very proud of them for being so brave. Let them know that you love them and always will.

- **Do not confront the perpetrator:**

No matter how much you may want to, do not confront the perpetrator. Leave this for the professionals. Your energy, at this time, has to go into making your child feel safe and loved - and expending energy on the perp is going to limit your ability to do that. The child may have very mixed feelings about their abuser, especially if the abuser is a family member, and so seeing you get mad at them may make the child feel guilty and retract what's happened. Confronting the abuser could also be dangerous for you because desperate people will do desperate things. And lastly, you could inadvertently warn them about any evidence against them.

- **GET HELP FOR YOURSELF:**

The abuse of a child is one of the worst things that a parent can ever have to deal with. Its important that you get help for yourself because without it you are unlikely to be able to support your child in the way they need. There are support organizations for parents of abused children, and also your social services should be able to put you in contact with people who can help.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Websites:

Darkness to light

Child Help USA

Mothers of sexually abused children

Prevent Child Abuse

Love and Logic (Parenting website)

Kidscape

National Children's Alliance

NSPCC

Helplines:

USA

Darkness to Light's helpline on CSA Prevention 1-866-FOR-LIGHT

Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline 1-800-4-A-CHILD.

The National Children's Alliance 1-800-239-9950.

Prevent Child Abuse America 1.800.244.5373

UK

Childline (for kids) 0800 1111

NSPCC - to report abuse / get advice 0808 800 5000

Mosac - support non-abusing parents 0800 980 1958

Australia

Kids help line 1800 551 800

Parenting Line 1300 365 859

New Zealand

Kidsline - 0800 543 754

Parentline - 07 839 4536

WellStop - 04 566 4745

Parentline 1800 30 1300

For kids oz (1800 55 1800.

08081000900 Stopit now

WRITTEN RESOURCES

BOOKS FOR PARENTS:

Helping Your Child Recover from Sexual Abuse, by Caren Adams and Jennifer Fay.

A Parent's and Teacher's Handbook on Identifying and Preventing Child Abuse, by James A. Monteleone.

The Safe Child Book: a Commonsense Approach to Protecting Children and Teaching Children to Protect Themselves, by Sherryll Kraizer

A Better Safe than Sorry Book: a Family Guide for Sexual Assault Prevention, by Sol Gordon

Protecting the Gift: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe (and Parents Sane) by Gavin De Becker .

Protecting Your Children on the Internet: A Road Map for Parents and Teachers by Gregory S. Smith

The Safe Child Book: A Commonsense Approach to Protecting Your Children from Abduction and Sexual Abuse

by Sherryll Kerns Kraizer

Protect your child from Sexual Abuse: A Parents Guide by Janie Rossi.

FREE DOWNLOADS FOR PARENTS:

NSPCC Booklet: Protecting Children.

Stop-it-now: Preventing CSA leaflet

Keep your child safe booklet.

BOOKS FOR KIDS:

It Happens to Boys Too, by Jane Santullo and Russell Bradway. (1987).

A Terrible Thing Happened: A story for children who have witnessed violence or trauma by M. Holmes.

The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal With Anxiety & Worry by Lisa M. Schab

Girls: The Truth About Sexual Abuse--A Book for Teen Girls, Young Women, and Everyone Who Cares About Them

by Patti Feuereisen

Secret: Sexual Assault Information for Teenagers Only, by Jennifer Fay and Billy Jo Fierchinger.

Its My Body by Lori Freeman.

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing”
Edmund Burke.

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