

10 Tips for Protecting the Children You Love from Sexual Abuse...*

by the Staff of the Philadelphia Children's Alliance

As parents, we'd like to think that there are no dangers facing children in our society today. But as staff members of the Philadelphia Children's Alliance, we can't ignore the fact that a staggering proportion of American children are affected by sexual abuse. Research from the Centers for Disease Control shows that by their eighteenth birthdays, one in four girls and one in six boys will have been sexually abused. Furthermore, children who have been sexually abused often suffer long-term consequences, including increased risk for substance abuse, eating disorders, behavioral problems, prostitution, depression, and physical health issues. The phenomenon is quietly enormous, and although it may be difficult to safeguard children everywhere, it is important to know that parents do have power to protect their children.

In celebration of National Child Abuse Prevention Month in April, here are some suggested ways to decrease the risk of sexual abuse occurring to your loved ones:

1. Make your home a "No Secrets Zone"

Kids are naturally intrigued by secrets and oftentimes parents inadvertently ask them to keep secrets for seemingly harmless reasons. As one Forensic Interviewer explains, "When I allow my niece to eat a huge candy bar right before dinner, I am always tempted to tell her to make it 'our' secret." The problem with this—aside from massive sugar shock and possible wrath from her sister-in-law—is that secrets are also the fuel that keeps sexual abuse going. Perpetrators use secrets to keep kids silent and to continue the abuse. Make sure that your child knows that secrets are never okay and that no one should ask them to keep a secret. It can be difficult to explain, but teach your child the difference between a secret and a surprise. Secrets are something you are never supposed to tell and can make you feel bad; surprises, like birthday gifts, are good and can be revealed at a certain time.

2. Respect your child's personal boundaries

When you arrive at Grandma and Grandpa's house for a holiday and they run to give your children kisses, inevitably, kids at a certain age will protest. Their "yucks!" are then followed by our insistent prompts to "Go ahead and give Grandpa a kiss." You might be trying to avoid hurt feelings and to teach respect, but children

must be able to show love and affection in ways that feel comfortable to them. Do not force kids to give hugs or kisses if they don't want to. When you force unwanted physical contact, you send kids the message that adults do not have to respect their physical boundaries and you leave them vulnerable to abusive situations. Listen when a child says "no." There are other ways to show affection and respect—a high five, a handshake, anything—that your child may find more appealing.

3. Teach kids the proper names for body parts

When you're in the middle of the supermarket and your daughter starts screaming, "Mommy, my vagina hurts," it might seem like a good idea to come up with a cute and discrete code word for that body part. The list of creative nicknames we've heard over the years goes on and on: "peach," "pocketbook," "princess," etc. Yes, these names might spare you from public embarrassment, but what if your child is being sexually abused and tells her teacher that her uncle touched her "cookie"? It suddenly becomes very hard for that teacher to discern just how serious the problem is. By teaching children the correct names for their body parts—especially their genitalia—you enable them to communicate more effectively with others about their bodies and any contact that they do not like. We know it can feel uncomfortable to constantly use the words penis and vagina, but it would feel infinitely worse to know that your child was trying to speak out to stop abuse and no one understood her.

4. Monitor "one-on-one" situations

One-on-one situations with an adult leave kids at risk for abuse. For working parents reliant on childcare or parents that are desperate for a revitalizing date night, this can be especially tricky to negotiate. It's not realistic to say that your children should never be alone with a babysitter or another adult, but when they are, whenever possible, make sure that they can be readily observed by others. Keep blinds open in the house, doors to rooms open, and try to check in at irregular intervals to give potential perpetrators the message that you and others are watching.

5. Recognize that sexual offenders come in all shapes and sizes

We all want to think that we would be able to spot a sexual offender by their fangs and monstrous physique, but anyone who has seen “To Catch a Predator” knows that offenders come in all shapes and sizes. If we could spot sex offenders just by appearance, we would never allow those people around our kids and sexual abuse would never happen. The truth is that offenders look just like the rest of us and they aren’t just strangers. CDC statistics show that over 90% of children are sexually abused by someone they know. Spend time teaching kids how to respond to any situation that feels uncomfortable; the “keep away from strangers” lecture is not enough.

6. Make the most of opportunities to discuss the topic with your kids

When the Forensic Interviewers at PCA prepare to interview children about suspected sexual abuse, they often ask caretakers how the child’s disclosure first came out. You would be amazed at how many times unsuspecting parents learn about the occurrence of sexual abuse in their family because they watched a relevant episode of *Dr. Phil* or *Oprah* and were inspired to ask their child if that ever happened to them. The fact is that 30% of victims never disclose their abuse to anyone, but the rest may simply be looking for an opportunity to tell someone about what has happened. Some children may not volunteer the information, but many will respond honestly when asked directly. By capitalizing on these moments and asking your child if something like that has happened to him or her, you open the door for increased communication and give your child the message that if something is going on or they feel uncomfortable, he or she can come to you to talk.

7. Not all background checks are created equal

When one of our staff members came back to work after maternity leave, she contacted a reputable nanny-placement agency to help her find a day-time caretaker. Friends of hers raved about this agency because they supposedly had the best nannies and because they conducted extensive background checks on all applicants. However, when she perused the “background check” on her chosen nanny, she was appalled to find that it included only her driving and credit history. There was no national criminal history check or a Childline

check, which identifies child abuse that did not meet police criteria. Ultimately, she ended up doing those checks herself. Her friends and everyone at PCA were shocked to learn that those checks were not a part of routine procedure. The moral of the story is, “Don’t assume that anyone else is doing the work to protect your child for you.” Ask what is included in background checks for all caretakers, nannies or others. If you want to conduct your own research, arrange for the caretaker to go for the FBI fingerprinting that is needed to show a national criminal record and ask for his or her Childline profile, which documents in-state child abuse history. For Pennsylvanians, go to <http://www.pa.cogentid.com/index.htm> for the FBI check and contact your county’s child welfare agency to obtain Childline check forms. Parents living elsewhere can simply search on-line for “FBI fingerprinting check” and you will be directed to all of the information that you might need.

8. Avoid “Good Touch/Bad Touch”

How could a conversation about good and bad touching be wrong? Well, it’s not really the conversation that’s wrong; it’s the terminology that can become confusing for kids. As adults, we understand that a “bad touch” generally refers to sexual abuse and we know what it entails. But for most children a “bad touch” is something that causes pain. Sex offenders know this and rarely commit acts that cause physical pain to the child; if the child is hurt, he or she will often tell someone and the offender will be exposed. Therefore, if the touch doesn’t hurt, kids who are being sexually abused may not understand that it is still a “bad touch.” Likewise, a “good touch” for a child is only something that feels good. Children that have been fondled or touched such that their genitalia become stimulated sometimes believe the touching felt “good,” and therefore, do not identify the encounter as something that they should disclose. By replacing these terms with “safe and unsafe touches,” kids are often less confused and more able to identify and speak out about touching that makes them physically or emotionally uncomfortable.

9. Be clear and cover all bases

When talking about body safety, it is just as important to tell kids that it is not okay to touch others as it is to tell them that no one should touch them. Most kids are taught that no one

should touch their private parts, but when a perpetrator asks a child to touch him or her, kids are ill equipped to cope and do not know what to do. Be clear with them about the different kinds of touching that are not safe so that they are able to identify it if they experience it.

10. If you don't know, ask!

Talking to kids about body safety can be difficult and uncomfortable, but it is too important to avoid. If you need guidance in broaching this topic with the children you love, the Philadelphia Children's Alliance is here to help. The Alliance is an independent non-profit organization that promotes healing and justice for child abuse victims by conducting state-of-the-art forensic interviews, providing victim support services and collaborating with other agencies to facilitate an integrated response. We are equipped with all sorts of resources, so help is just a phone call away at (215) 387-9500 or visit us on the web at www.kidalliance.org. Don't live in Philadelphia? There are Children's Advocacy Centers all over the country like ours. Go to www.nca-online.org to find the one closest to you.

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