

BODY TALK

A TOOL FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Many parents wonder what to teach their children about their bodies, but don't know how and when it is appropriate.

Sometimes, parents are so uncomfortable speaking to children about their bodies, sexuality, and sexual abuse, they end up not talking to them about it at all.



If something bad does happen, parents expect their children will turn to them and tell what happened immediately.

Yet parents often forget to - or are unable - to lay a foundation for open communication. Parents need to be the ones to set the groundwork for proper communication.



WE

**MUST TALK TO KIDS ABOUT THEIR BODIES
&
BE COMFORTABLE WITH THE TOPIC BEFORE
WE HAVE THE CONVERSATION**



LAY THE FOUNDATION

Children who have been abused may not tell what happened unless they feel safe and supported. Empower them early on and make sure they clearly understand the following when it comes to abuse:

- 1.They ALWAYS have rights when it comes to their own body. They have the right to decide who is allowed to see or touch it.
- 2.If they tell you someone has bothered them, control your own reactions. Do not blame, punish, or shun them. Get the advice you need to know how to support them.
- 3.Reassure them that you will help protect them, and then follow through.
- 4.Make sure they know that abuse is NEVER their fault.



THE DILEMMA OF SHAME AND SECRECY

Perpetrators of child abuse sometimes threaten their victims to keep them from telling. Even when there are no explicit threats, feelings of shame and guilt can keep children from asking for help. Children sometimes believe they are the ones who acted inappropriately – and this message is often reinforced by perpetrators.



Children can feel anguish over “betraying” someone they know, love, or trust. In some cases, another cause for concern may be the fact the perpetrator is the primary, or only, source of income. Disclosing the abuse could mean losing shelter, food, and stability for the family.

We can safeguard our children by teaching them to trust and act upon their own instincts. Instead of always teaching them to “listen to” or “obey” an adult, give children the option not to listen or obey if they feel uncomfortable about something.

New studies suggest that gender non-conforming children may be at even greater risk. An estimated 50% of transgender people experience sexual violence at some point in their lifetimes.



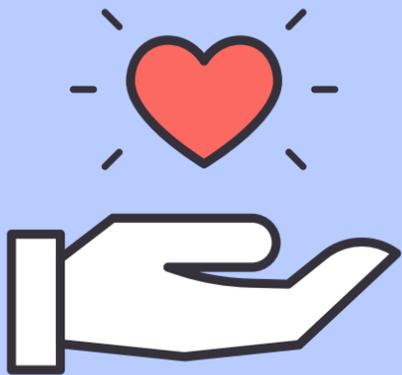
1. Model healthy boundaries. Children should be taught that no one can look, touch, or handle them in a way that feels uncomfortable. Look at interactions with relatives and non-relatives, since disrespecting a child's right to control their body can set a lifelong pattern of falling into compliance.
2. Help them develop good sensory awareness. Teach them to trust "gut" feelings that might signal that something is wrong, and how to get help. Help them identify when touch feels uncomfortable, unsafe, scary, painful, or makes them feel "dirty" or "gross". Take opportunities to talk about how it makes them feel and help them "listen to what their body is telling them."
3. Teach them how to avoid being lured and what traps to avoid. Most perpetrators groom their victims and the families, avoiding the use of force. Assure children that they do not have to engage in anything that:
 - a. causes them to feel funny
 - b. goes against family rules
 - c. involves a secret
 - d. seems like an unearned special favor
 - e. or seems like it would separate them from others
4. Offer opportunities for children to practice saying no - whether it is to grandparents, parents, authority figures or other children. Back up your child by saying, "maybe Alexa is not ready to hug you." Honor their decisions regarding who is and isn't safe for them.
5. Make sure children understand they can yell "stop" and should get away as quickly as they can. Teach them how to tell someone so they can be kept safe. Also, teach them that if they do not get help the first time, to keep telling until someone does believe them and takes action to protect them.



REMEMBER!

- NO child is immune to the risk of molestation. Sexual trauma exists in all cultures, socio-economic status, or religion. It can occur within the "perfect" family.
- Sexual traumas vary widely from overt sexual assault to covert desires that can also be frightening and confusing for a child.
- Many parents avoid discussion due to lack of knowledge. Educate yourself so you can tell the children in your life what they need to know to stay safe.
- If a parent has been a victim of abuse, or lacks models for healthy adult sexuality, it may be more difficult for that parent to know how to protect their children.
- Healing can be greatly aided by the support of a professional trauma therapist.
- All children deserve protection, and most sex offenders are "nice" people that you already know!

SAFETY FOR ALL



Acknowledge the harm caused to everyone. If the abuse has been perpetrated within the family, the loss of trust, intimacy, support, acceptance, and love is felt by each individual member of the family. These are all very good reasons to seek out the support of a mental health professional.

- Levine, P.A. & Kline, M. (2008). *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids: A Parent's Guide for Instilling Confidence, Joy, and Resilience*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Levine, P.A. & Kline, M. (2006). *Trauma Through a Child's Eyes: Awakening the Ordinary Miracle of Healing*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Stotzer, R. L. (2009). Violence against transgender people: A review of United States data. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 14, 170-179

