

Tips for Parents of Elementary School Children

Adults need to explicitly teach children how to respond to situations in which they are being abused or being groomed for abuse—otherwise, they will not know what to do. We spend time and effort teaching our children how to behave in various school and community settings and in a variety of situations (e.g., what to do when bullying, conflicts, or peer pressure arise; how to make good choices; and how to be ready learners). We teach them these skills so that we know that our children will know what to do when faced with different situations. Likewise, we must teach our children the skills that they may need to respond to and report abuse.

Below are ten things that you can do with your children to help them be less vulnerable to sexual abuse:

1. Talk about body parts early.

Name body parts and talk about them with your children at an early age. Help children identify their body parts and teach them what the actual names are for their body parts. When children know the names of their body part and what they mean, they are more able to talk clearly if something inappropriate should happen.

It is important that you, as the parents/guardians, feel comfortable using these words. It is important to create an environment at home in which sexual topics can be discussed comfortably and openly. If you are not comfortable talking about parts of the body or sexual topics, you unwittingly teach your children that these are taboo or unsafe topics and they will be less likely to say anything when it is most important that they do talk with an adult.

2. Teach your children that some body parts are private.

Tell children that their private body parts are called private because they are not for everyone to see. One way to make sure that children know which body parts are private is to explain that these are the body parts that are covered by a bathing suit. Explain that mommy and daddy can see their children naked, but people outside of the home should only see them with their clothes on.

There also may be times when someone may need to touch your child's body (e.g., a doctor during an examination). Make it clear to your children that this is okay only if you are in the room with them and if you tell them directly that it is okay. You can explain that this is safe touch because it has to do with health and because you are in the room with them.

3. Teach your children boundaries.

Tell your children matter-of-factly that no one should touch their private body parts and that no one should ask them to touch somebody else's private body parts. The second part of this sentence is important because sexual abuse often begins with perpetrators asking the child to touch them or someone else.

Model healthy boundaries and teach your children to respect their bodies by modeling and teaching them to respect other people's bodies. Children need to be told not to do

something to anyone else that the other person does not want. For example, if your child is jumping up and down on you, you could say, "I do not want you to jump up and down on me right now. Please stop." Similarly, if one child is tickling a sibling, that sibling should be able to say, "Stop it," and you should ensure that your child respects this. Modeling this for your children and providing absolute rules make it easier for children to understand boundaries.

It is possible to unintentionally confuse children by insisting they hug a relative, for example, even when they do not want to, or by saying, "You must do whatever the babysitter tells you to do." Help your children practice setting healthy boundaries. When children say that they do not want to hug and kiss everyone at a family gathering, do not make your children kiss or hug any relative that they does not want to by teaching them to say politely, "I do not feel like kissing (or hugging) right now." You also may support your children by helping them find another way to show respect to family members (e.g., saying goodbye rather than hugging, shaking hands or giving high fives). Model saying, "No," and assure your children that their "No" will be respected. If others disrespect or ignore your child's limits, it is your job as the parent/guardian to explain your family rules and insist on your child's rights to set boundaries.

It also is important for you to respect your children's wishes and to let them know that no one, not even a parent/guardian, has the right to touch them without their permission. Ask your children before touching them (e.g., "Would you like me to help you with your belt?"). Do not assume it is all right to do so. Ask your children for a goodnight kiss, rather than demanding one.

4. Tell your children that body secrets are never okay.

Most perpetrators will tell the child to keep the abuse a secret. This may appear friendly (e.g., "I love playing with you, but if you tell anyone else what we played they won't let me come over again") or it may be a threat (e.g., "This is our secret. If you tell anyone I will tell them it was your idea and you will get in big trouble!"). Tell your children that no matter what anyone tells them, body secrets are never okay and they should always tell you or a trusted adult if someone tries to make them keep a body secret.

5. Tell your children that no one should take pictures of their private body parts.

There are many pedophiles who take and trade pictures of naked children online. Tell your children that it is never okay and no one should ever take pictures of their private body parts.

6. Teach your children how to get out of scary or uncomfortable situations.

Saying "No" is an important safety skill. Teach your children to say "No" in lots of different ways. Help them communicate "No" through speaking, shouting, shaking their heads, stomping their feet, making faces, etc. Have fun practicing "No."

Some children are uncomfortable with telling people, especially older peers or adults, “No.” Tell them that it is okay to tell an adult to leave if something that feels wrong is happening and help give your children the words to get out of uncomfortable situations. Tell your children that if someone wants to see or touch private body parts, they should say, “Stop!” and tell a trusted grown-up.

7. Have a code word your children can use when they feel unsafe or want to be picked up by you and brought home.

As children get older, you can give them a code word that they can use when they are feeling unsafe. This can be used at home, when there are guests in the house, or when they are on a play date or a sleepover.

8. Tell your children that they will never be in trouble if they tell you, or a trusted adult, a body secret.

Children often do not say anything to an adult because they think they will get in trouble. Perpetrators sometimes use this fear to keep children from saying anything to anyone. It is important that your children know and understand, that no matter what happens, when they tell you anything about body safety or body secrets, they will NEVER get in trouble.

Remind your children to tell you or a trusted adult if someone asks them to keep a secret from their parents/guardians or touches them on a private body part or in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or yucky. Have your children practice telling an adult. Make sure that your children know that **all** secrets about private body parts are bad secrets and your children should **always** tell you or a trusted adult about bad and uncomfortable secrets.

Teach your children early and often that there are no secrets between children and their parents/guardians and that they should feel comfortable talking with their parent/guardian about anything—good or bad, easy or difficult, happy or sad.

Help your children prepare to ask for help from a safe adult. Identify people in the various places your children spend time who they may turn to for help. Consider your children’s personality, their communication skills, and their ability to recognize concerning situations. Use role-playing or practice scenarios to help your children ask for help from a trusted grown-up.

Finally, if your children do disclose any history of sexual abuse, listen carefully, and take their disclosure seriously. Too often, children are not believed, especially if they implicate a family member as the perpetrator. Contact Child Protective Services or Montgomery County Police Department if you have any concerns about your children’s safety. If you do not intervene, the abuse may continue and your children may learn and believe that home is not safe and that you are not available to help them.

9. Tell your children about different kinds of body touches.

Many parents and books talk about “good touch” and “bad touch,” but this can be confusing, especially to young children, because there may be times when inappropriate touches do not hurt or feel bad. The term “secret touch” often is a more accurate depiction of what might happen. If any touch makes your children feel unsafe, sad, weird, or yucky, or if someone tries to touch your children’s private body parts, they should say, “Stop it!” and tell a grown-up. “Uh-oh” feelings are definite warnings to your children to ask for help from a trusted grown-up.

10. Tell your children that these rules always apply, even with people they know, family members, and with other children.

This is an extremely important point to discuss with your children. When you ask young children what a “bad guy” looks like, they will typically describe a cartoon-like villain. You can say something like, “Mommy and daddy may touch your private body parts when we are cleaning you—but no one else is allowed to touch you there. Not friends; not cousins, aunts or uncles; not teachers or coaches. Even if you like them or think they are in charge, they should still not touch your private body parts.”

Remind your children that they should always check with a parent, guardian, or caregiver before going anywhere or with anyone. Abusers may be people you and your children know.

It also is important to explain to your children the tricks that people may use with them. Some people who sexually abuse children use tricks or bribes to keep children from telling adults about the abuse. The abusive person might:

- ✓ Promise a gift,
- ✓ Allow a forbidden privilege or encourage illegal behavior (e.g., drinking or smoking),
- ✓ Tell the child that it is the child’s fault or that no one will believe him/her,
- ✓ Tell the child that if he/she tells anyone, the abusive person will hurt his/her family or pet, or
- ✓ Tell the child that if he/she tells anyone, the abusive person may get into trouble or have to go away for a long time.

Explain these tricks to your children and reassure them that you can and will handle the situation, even if your children did not object to the abuse at the time. Important messages to tell your children include, “As your parent/guardian, I will always believe you and love you, and I will always be here to keep you safe,” “It is never your fault if someone touches you in an uncomfortable way,” or “They just tell you that to trick you.”