

# Parenting to Prevent Abuse



*All Children Deserve to be  
Safe, Strong & Free!*



International Center for Assault Prevention



# Empowering Children to be "Safe,

## Parenting to Prevent Abuse



Most parents today express concerns about child abuse, how to recognize it and prevent it. Perhaps the single greatest deterrent to abuse is communication and talking to

children from the time they are very young through adolescence. Parents who communicate, encourage and model are much more likely to raise strong, empowered children.

Talking to a child about abuse, particularly sexual abuse, is a frightening proposition for many parents. While this fear is understandable, there are a number of ways parents can talk to children that will help them feel safer and more confident rather than fearful and mistrusting.

### **WHEN AND WHERE**

It is important to find the right time and place to talk with children about abuse and its prevention. Sometimes parents hear a frightening report on the news and, fueled by their own fear, put on their most serious faces and call a meeting with their children. While this method isn't always harmful, it certainly isn't the best way to help children learn abuse prevention strategies.

Talking about abuse prevention can be incorporated into everyday life situations. Educators call these "teachable moments." Parents can begin short and promising discussions with their children by using cartoons and children's television

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programs to talk about abuse. They should point out to children that hitting isn't right, that children have a right to be safe and not to be hurt by adults or others.

Bullying situations at school or in the neighborhood, or stories children read, also present opportunities to discuss prevention. As children grow, they begin to take on independent activities which provide moments to reinforce safety skills.

### **FINDING THE WORDS**

Words should be chosen for their "low fear quotient." For example, talking about "how to stay safe" is much less frightening than talking about "stranger danger." Using words like "safe and unsafe touching" instead of rape or sexual abuse, is more comfortable and encompasses a range of abusive actions versus just one.

Parents need to become comfortable with anatomically correct language. If children sense their parents are uncomfortable with words like penis, vagina, buttocks and anus, they won't use these words in order to describe abuse. Many abused children report that they didn't tell their parents because they didn't have words for what happened.

### **THE FOCUS**

The best way to increase confidence and reduce fear is to focus the conversation on what a child can do if faced with a dangerous or uncomfortable situation.

Applying this logic to abuse prevention is easy. Unfortunately, many adults tell children all about bad strangers and the terrible things that could happen. The child remembers how frightening strangers can be and does not remember the prevention lesson as clearly. Parents need to remember to focus on the skills the child is learning, not on the danger.

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### **SELF CONFIDENCE**

Self confidence plays a big role in our ability to do anything. Children, like adults, must believe in their own abilities in order to succeed.

Parents need to let their children know through hugging, pride in their voices and actual words that they believe in them and their abilities.

### **PRACTICE**

Effective safety skills don't happen overnight. Skills and information learned must be reviewed. Children, like adults, need "refreshers." Parents who review safety skills before their children go on independent activities leave those children with information that is fresh in their minds if they need it.

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## PREVENTION SKILLS

All children should have a variety of options available to them if faced with a threatening situation. The following list should be reviewed by parents and, when opportunities arise, discussed with each child.

**Run away from danger.** Run to school, to a neighbor's house, to a store, or home. Run to the nearest safe place. (Parents should help children determine all safe locations along regular routes each child travels.) Yell loudly and don't stop yelling until you are safe. This strategy requires practice since children often learn that yelling is not ok. In order to use a yell in a dangerous situation, adults and children alike must practice.

**Define safe and unsafe secrets.** Surprise parties and celebration gifts are safe secrets. They don't make a child feel afraid. Safe secrets eventually are told to someone. Unsafe secrets often make children feel scared or uncomfortable. Children need to be told that unsafe secrets should never be kept.

**Discuss the concept of safe adults.** Safe adults are those who will listen and believe the child and help. Remember that children need more than Mom and Dad. Teachers, grandparents, a friend's mom, a neighbor, all of these people might be safe adults to a child.

**Give children permission to say "No."** Children need to be given permission to say "no" to any adult who frightens them with requests or demands. We encourage our children to say "no" to drugs; we need to support them in saying "no" to adults who may exploit them.

Make sure children know that if they have a problem, no matter how scary or embarrassing, you will listen, believe and help. This is one of the most important messages, since children often think no one will believe them.

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### **SAFE TOUCHING**

We hear a lot about unsafe touching. Newspapers are filled with stories of sexual abuse. But hugging and kissing children in nonsexual ways is important to their development. Children need to be loved and hugged often; they like to feel close. They need to be reminded that safe touches like these never have to be kept secret.

### **SPANKING**

Spanking children is controversial. Although most professionals do not condone it, many acknowledge that it is a common practice for some parents. However, if spanking leaves a mark on a child's body or if the child is harmed in any way, it is considered abusive.

As a society, we are learning more and more about appropriate parenting techniques. If we expect children to use their words rather than their fists when they are angry or upset, we must learn to do the same.

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### **POTENTIAL DANGER**

Research clearly tells us that the great majority of children who are abused, perhaps 85%, are not abused by strangers. Rather, they are abused by people they know and trust. Often these are family members, youth group leaders, or other with whom they have developed strong relationships.

The trusting bonds make it more difficult for children to disclose abuse, particularly sexual abuse. Reassuring children that unsafe secrets need not be kept and that no one has the right to touch them inappropriately are valuable lessons.

### **AGE-APPROPRIATE INFORMATION**

At different ages, children need different information. Early Childhood and Elementary school age children need information about independent activities. Teens need information about dating safety, while elementary school children do not. It is important for parents to use and add appropriate information which is based on the age and independence of the child or teen.

### **“SAFE, STRONG AND FREE”®**

All parents want their children to grow up feeling **“Safe, Strong and Free.”** Parenting is a difficult task. It takes practice. Communication is the most important tool parents have to ensure their children's health and safety. Listening to children and talking honestly with them provides a good foundation for establishing prevention skills. Every child has the right to grow up free from abuse.

For more information about preventing abuse of children, local libraries have many books on the subject geared specifically to parents.

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