



# Keeping Your Elementary Age Child Safe

## Introduction for Parents

It is well known that the problem of child sexual abuse is widespread in our society today. Statistics reveal that 1 of every 4 girls and 1 of every 6 boys in this country will be sexually abused by the time they are eighteen years of age. This is a frightening and sobering statistic! Parents do well to educate themselves about the issue and take an active role in educating their children/youth in personal safety.

Child sexual abuse can be defined as the use of a child for sexual purposes by an adult or by an older, more powerful person, such as an older child. It is a crime in all fifty states. This includes acts such as rape, incest, intercourse, sodomy and fondling a child's private parts. It also includes asking children to touch someone else's genitals, exposing oneself to a child, making obscene phone calls to a child, taking photos of a child for sexual purposes, communicating with a child in a sexual way via email or the internet or showing a child sexually explicit materials.

A large percentage of sexual abuse is perpetrated by a person the child knows and trusts, and most often abuse is committed by a family member or a relative. It is also committed by friends of the family and people who have access to children including teachers, coaches, religious and youth leaders. Child abusers often prey upon children who are vulnerable, those who may be "loners" with few friends, doing poorly in school or have a disruptive/broken family situation. Predators of children engage in a process called "grooming" in which they work hard to develop a relationship with the child and gain their trust. They offer gifts, travel, or focus on the interests of the child and often form trusting relationships with the family of the child. Offenders come from all walks of life and from all social and ethnic groups and are often known as "nice, friendly" folks. It is imperative that parents are aware of the adults that have access to their children and immediately investigate any behavior that seems indicative of such manipulation, such as excessive or expensive gift giving, excessive time spent with the child, etc.

Many children do not reveal abuse when it occurs. Studies indicate that only between 2 and 4 victims out of 10 actually report abuse to someone. Some of the reasons are: they are afraid of hurting someone's feelings, they have been taught to obey adults, they or their family have been threatened by the offender, they have been convinced that the abuse is normal and okay, they feel guilty because they feel that the abuse is their fault or they don't know the words to use to tell. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse and more often than not are simply afraid to tell.



It is the purpose of the following information to help you talk to your children/youth about personal safety and give them some tools to help prevent this terrible crime from happening to them. We also hope that this information will give our young people the permission and the words to tell an adult they trust if abuse does occur so that they may be helped and healed from this life-altering occurrence.

## Talking About Personal Safety with Children

Being informed about the issue of child sexual abuse is one very important way to help protect your child. Talking to your child about their personal safety in regard to private body parts is also a vital step to enable your child's protection. The subject of private body parts is often embarrassing or uncomfortable for parents and these feelings are not uncommon. It is difficult to know how to raise the issue with the child. Talking about bad touching in the context of common family safety rules is one easy way to approach the subject. Address these rules just as you would other family rules, such as:

- Never play with matches. (fire safety)
- Look both ways before you cross the street. (traffic safety)
- Always wear a seat belt. (car safety)
- Always wear a helmet when you ride your bike or skateboard. (riding safety)



Never tell anyone on the phone that you are home without your parents and don't give out personal information over the phone. (phone safety)

Personal safety/touching safety can be discussed and taught right along with other family rules. Talking to your children about touching rules in an age-appropriate manner will not frighten your children, but will provide them with the information and skills they need to protect themselves just like the other ways we teach them to be safe.

## What to Teach

Three issues are important for your child to understand before you teach them specific touching safety rules.

1. Teach children appropriate names for the private parts of their bodies (not slang or "family terms"). Children often don't report abuse because they don't have the proper words. This can be as simple as talking about the private parts of their bodies covered by their bathing suit.
2. Teach children that they are the "boss of their body." Children should know that they are in control of who touches their bodies and in what way. Children should not be touched, tickled, or roughhoused if he/she says stop.
3. Teach children that there are two kinds of touches.
  - a. Good touches – These are touches that make children feel loved, cared for and safe. Touches by parents/guardians such as hugs, holding hands, a pat on the back are all examples of safe touches. Touches by parents/guardians/doctors that are to help the child are also safe touches, such as helping with baths (age appropriate), removing a splinter, or a visit to the doctor or dentist. These touches are okay.
  - b. Bad touches – These are touches that hurt children's bodies or feelings. Hitting, kicking, punching, biting, and slapping are examples of unsafe touches. Unsafe touches also include touches by a bigger person on the child's private parts that are not to keep the child clean (age appropriate) or healthy. These touches are not okay.

Safe Touching Rules (private parts safety): **Say to your child -**

1. It is not okay for a bigger person to touch your private parts except your parents or doctor.
2. It is not okay for someone to ask you to touch their private parts.
3. It is not okay for someone to ask you to take your clothes off or to take photos/videos of you with your clothes off.
4. It is not okay for someone to show you photos or videos of people without their clothes on.

Children also need to know what to do if someone violates or tries to violate the safe touching rules. First of all, children need to know that it is NEVER their fault if this happens. If children feel they will not "get in trouble" for telling, they are more apt to report. Teaching the "Three R's" provides even the youngest of children with skills to help them resist unsafe touching.

1. **Refuse** - Say words that mean NO!

"I don't want to do that!"

"Leave me alone!"

"I don't like that!"

"I'm not allowed to play touching games!"

It is okay to say NO, even to an adult you love. You can love someone and not like how they are touching you.

2. **Resist** - Run away! Get away from the person!

3. **Report** - Tell a trusted adult (parents, teacher, policeman, priest, aunt, etc.) until someone believes you. It is never too late to tell someone about unsafe touches, no matter how long the touching has been going on. Children need to understand that if the first person he/she tells doesn't believe them, to keep telling until someone does believe. Children also need to be taught that it is never right to keep unsafe secrets or "yucky" secrets. It is okay to break a promise and tell about an unsafe touch.

You can also phrase this as **NO, GO, TELL!**



## How to Talk to Young Children About Touching Safety without Scaring Them

Parents, teachers and other caring adults often teach children guidelines for bike, water and street safety. Children do not become fearful of bicycles, swimming pools and crosswalks as a result of this instruction. Touching safety can be approached in the same straightforward, matter-of-fact manner. Ideas for talking with children about safety follow:

1. **Include touching safety rules when you talk about other types of safety.**
  - *If you are touched by a person in a way that you don't feel right about, tell me or about it. We will believe you and help you.*
2. **Repeat simple safety guidelines often.**
  - *We don't keep secrets about touching in our family.*
  - *Grownups don't usually need to touch children in private areas unless it's for health or hygiene reasons.*
  - *Never go away with or get into a car with a grownup you don't know, no matter what they tell you.*
  - *Trust your inner-voice (instincts, judgments) if it's telling you something doesn't seem right.*
3. **Establish your own set of family rules.**
  - *Do not let others know if you are home alone.*
  - *Your opinion is important when we try a new baby-sitter or have a problem with a baby-sitter.*
  - *You can say 'no' to anyone who wants you to break one of your family rules. I will back you up.*
  - *You can ride in a car with \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_, but not with anyone else without asking first.*
4. **Play "What Ifs" to practice decision making.**
  - *What if you were playing (someplace you aren't supposed to play) and a man or woman tried to make you get into their car.*
  - *What if you and I got separated at the shopping mall?*
  - *What if someone we know really well touched you in a confusing way and asked you to keep it a secret?*
  - *What if an older person offered you money (or something you really wanted) if you would break our family rules?*
5. **Help children develop assertiveness skills.**

**Practice responding verbally:**

  - *I don't want to be tickled.*
  - *Leave me alone.*
  - *I'll tell.*
  - *I'm not allowed to do that. No.*

**Practice responding non-verbally:**

  - *Taking someone's hand off them, running away, moving away, standing tall, shoulders back, looking the person in the eye, shaking their head.*
6. **Teach children that adults aren't always right.**



- *Most adults touch children in appropriate ways, but some adults are mixed up and don't make good decisions about touching children.*
- *If you aren't sure about something a grownup says or does, ask me to help explain it.*

**7. Teach children that there are certain things that adults, older children and babysitters shouldn't do.**

- *No one has the right to put their hand down your pants, force you to touch them, touch your body if you say 'no', or touch your private parts.*

**8. Help children develop a dignified vocabulary for parts of the body.**

Most people learn names for body parts and body functions in this order: family words, slang, neutral, and finally, medical terminology. Children with no words other than slang or family names might be embarrassed to ask for help with a touching problem. The correct terms for body parts are dignified and enable children to express themselves clearly. A possible substitute for anatomical terminology might be private body parts or the parts of a body covered by a bathing suit.

**9. Teach children that touching safety rules apply all the time -**

Not just with strangers, or men, or with baby sitters. While rules about strangers are important in safety instruction, it is uncommon for a child to be sexually abused by a stranger.



## Media Safety: Guidelines for Internet and Television Use

### Internet

The Internet is a wonderful tool. It makes information easily accessible from home and facilitates fast communication via email. In addition, it can be educational and fun. But the Internet can also be dangerous. It hosts many forms of pornography, chat rooms where sex offenders pose as children, and countless commercial Web sites that use explicit sexual content to sell products. Children—especially teens—are at risk of coming across these inappropriate Web sites when they're online. Teens are naturally interested and curious about sexuality and may be tempted to explore sites with sexual content. Since teens seek more independence, they may participate in chat rooms as a way of getting to know people outside of their families, schools, and communities. Here are some tips to help safeguard your children when they use the Internet.

**Follow these guidelines for Internet use.**

- Spend time online with your children. Learn how they use the Internet and talk to them about their use.
- Keep the computer where everyone can see it, for example, in the living room or family room. This helps you monitor children's use.
- Monitor your children's involvement in chat rooms.
- Find out what online safety policies are in place at school. Lobby to have safeguards put in place if they don't exist.
- Survey the Internet sites your children have visited by clicking on your Internet server's history button.
- Consider getting a software or online filtering program that blocks sites that aren't suitable for children.

It can also be helpful to maintain access to your children's accounts so that if you become concerned about their online behavior, you can check their email now and again. Since this entails a privacy issue, let your children know that you will do this to monitor their safety. Discuss the circumstances under which you would feel the need to check.

**Make explicit agreements with your children about Internet use.**

- Agree on which Web sites they are allowed to visit – and not allowed to visit.
- Agree on the length of time they can be online.

- Agree on a set of rules.
- Agree ahead of time to consequences for not following agreements and rules.

**Include the following basic rules in your agreement with your children.**

- Never give out personal information (name, age, address, phone) or use a credit card online without your permission.
- Never share their passwords with anyone, including friends.
- Never arrange to meet in person someone they met online unless you agree and go with them.
- Never reply to uncomfortable messages they receive. Always tell you when they receive any.
- Never download games without your permission.
- Never download pictures from an unknown source.
- Never open attachments from an unknown source.

It can be helpful to write down the agreement in the form of a contract and have each child sign it. It is also important to watch for the warning signs below.

**Teach your children about the dangers.**

When your children begin to use the Internet independently, especially chat rooms and email, they will need to understand the following:

- Online information is not private. Others can get access to any information shared online.
- People they meet online may not be who they say they are.
- What they learn online may or may not be true. They need to ask for your help in deciding whether a Web site is to be trusted.
- Computer sex offenders deliberately pose as children or teens. They seek to earn children's trust by showing interest and listening to their problems.
- Many Internet sites host pornographic materials. Children may come across these sites by accident. And since it is easy to gain access to these sites, they are also easy to find.

**Warning signs that a child may have been exposed to a computer sex-offender or inappropriate online activity:**

- Spends long periods of time online in the evenings.
- Has or hides pornography or suspicious sexual material on the computer.
- Receives phone calls from people you don't know, or makes calls to numbers you don't recognize.
- Frequently turns off the monitor or changes screens when you come in the room.
- Uses someone else's account.
- Withdraws from family life and interactions.

As with warning signs for sexual abuse, these behaviors don't necessarily mean that your child is in contact with an offender, but they are signs that you need to investigate and more closely monitor your child's online activity. If your child becomes a victim of online sexual abuse, it is important to remember that just as with other forms of sexual abuse, it is not his or her fault. If you come across suspicious online activity or child pornography—which is illegal—you can report it to the Cyber Tipline (see the Resource Guide).

## Television



Television offers many educational and entertaining programs. However, it's important to be aware that explicit sexual content is on the rise. Sexual imagery is used to attract viewers to products and programs. And sex is typically not depicted realistically or shown to be risky or have potentially negative consequences. Many television shows and commercials make it seem normal for young people to have sex, and television contributes to new, looser norms of sexual behavior, especially amongst teens. In addition, many programs—in particular music videos—reinforce a belief that sexual harassment and sexual violence against women are okay.

Young children may be viewing material on a daily basis that is inappropriate, and that they cannot understand or deal with. And teens may be watching programs that influence their behavior and attitudes in unhealthy ways. It is critical that parents be aware of their children's viewing habits and help them create healthy ones.

## Guidelines for healthy television watching

- Watch television with your children and discuss program content. Listen to your children's opinions without judgment and share your own values. Encourage children to question the behavior modeled and the values portrayed.
- Teach children to analyze commercials and to spot exaggeration and lies.
- Limit the amount of television your children watch. (The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends one to two hours per day.)
- Keep the television in a family room rather than in a child's room.
- Be clear about what programs they can and cannot watch.
- Help children plan their viewing time, make deliberate choices, and turn the television off rather than keep it on out of habit. Discourage channel surfing.
- Model healthy television habits with your own viewing.
- Model alternative activities for relaxation and fun.
- Do not use television as a babysitter.

In addition, express your opinions about likes and dislikes to networks, stations, and sponsors. Parental feedback can have a positive impact on television content. The Internet and television are powerful forces in your children's lives, for better or worse. Monitor their influence on your children in the same way you would a new acquaintance. Make sure that they are welcome, appropriate guests rather than uninvited, disturbing intruders.

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## What Parents Need to Know About Bullying

Bullies. Every classroom seems to have one. In another age, bullying was considered a rite of passage; but that was before the massacres at Columbine and Virginia Tech. We now know that bullying can have long-lasting effects, both for bullies and their victims. Children have even committed suicide as the result of bullying,

“Children who are bullied have higher rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and other mental health conditions. Children who are bullied are more likely to think about suicide, and some of these wounds may linger into adulthood,” warns the [Mayo Clinic](http://www.mayoclinic.org) in a recent online report.

Almost half of all schoolchildren are bullied at some point, according to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. Bullying can happen to any child, but young children and those with few friends are the most at risk. Bullying need not be physical (punching, hitting, kicking or destruction of property); teasing, name-calling, racial slurs, gossip, malicious rumors, and other verbal abuse can be even more damaging. Internet and cell phone access has moved bullying out of the school yard and onto the Internet. Called cyberbullying, electronic harassment makes it easy for children to malign, embarrass or threaten their peers anonymously.

When the school year starts and as it proceeds, it's important for parents to tune in to their children and watch for the warning signs of bullying:

- Bruises, scrapes or other injuries
- Ripped or missing clothing or personal possessions
- Few friends or statements such as “nobody likes me”
- Headaches, stomachaches or other physical complaints
- Trouble eating
- Trouble sleeping or nightmares
- Anxiety when preparing for school or talking about school
- Fear of going to school or playing hooky
- Trouble concentrating on schoolwork; declining or failing grades
- Fighting or behavioral problems
- Depression, listlessness
- Suicidal statements such as “you'd be better off without me”

With the advent of cyberbullying through emails, instant messaging, Facebook and blogs, bullying has become so prevalent that the American Academy of Pediatrics is urging pediatricians to include signs of bullying in patient assessments.

<http://markspsychiatry.com/what-parents-need-to-know-about-bullying/>

## What Parents Can Do About Bullying

Children who are bullied suffer higher rates of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem and are more likely to have suicidal thoughts than kids who aren't victimized by classroom bullies, warns a recent Mayo Clinic report. With nearly half of all school-aged children subjected to bullying at some point during their school years, parents need to know how to deal with this ever-growing threat to their children's physical and emotional health. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents take the following steps to protect their children from bullying:

### **If your child is the victim of bullying:**

- Teach your child to stand up for himself by saying things like "I don't like what you are doing." Teach him to stay calm and walk away from bullies.
- Tell your child when and how to ask for help. Suggest they find an adult and tell them about the problem if they are being bullied.
- Encourage your child to develop friendships with other children. Children who are socially isolated are more apt to be bullied.
- Support activities that interest your child.
- Alert school officials and teachers if your child complains about bullying. Be an advocate for your child and see that the situation is resolved.
- Ask other adults to watch out for your child's safety when you cannot be present.

### **If your child is a bully:**

- Emphasize to your child that you are firmly against bullying.
- Be a positive role model for your child. Show him how to get what he wants without teasing, threatening or hurting another person.
- Set firm and consistent limits on aggressive behavior.
- Be clear in defining age-appropriate consequences for bullying behavior and be consistent in implementing those consequences.
- Use effective, nonphysical discipline such as loss of privileges.
- Work with school officials, teachers, counselors and the parents of victims to develop practical solutions.

Bullying can have a disastrous long-term impact on a child's emotional development.

<http://markspsychiatry.com/what-parents-can-do-about-bullying/>

## Resources

For more information on any of these topics, please go to:

<http://www.eriercd.org/pdf/resources.pdf>

or call the

Diocesan Office of Protection of Children and Youth

814-824-1195

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