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Stop It Now! prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.



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For Parents of Children with Disabilities: How to Protect Your Child from Sexual Abuse in Program Settings*

**Program settings refer to residential, educational and recreational programs in which your child might be involved.*

NOTE: These tip sheets provide parents and caregivers of children with disabilities the information they need to keep their child safe from sexual abuse. Every child, disability, means of communication, and family situation is unique. Use this information with your situation in mind. This is a lot of information to absorb. And we know that the fear and anxiety we feel when even considering our child could be sexually abused makes it hard to act. We encourage you to start by defining your support team—the people who help you to care for your child including your child's pediatrician, respite providers, teachers, and family members. Then use these tip sheets to reach out and start a conversation. Share any concerns you have about your child, such as changes in behavior. Just as we want our children to have "safe" adults to go to, we also need "safe" people to support us.

Parents worry about their children and want them to grow up safe and free from harm. It is an unfortunate reality that children experience sexual abuse and children with disabilities and other special needs experience abuse at even higher rates. When we don't know about the increased risk or when the people we rely on to help care for our children aren't knowledgeable about the sexual abuse of children with disabilities or special needs, we aren't able to work together as effectively to keep children safe.

Here are some things you can do to keep your child safe from sexual harm in program settings:

Talk with staff and administrators to determine if they are knowledgeable about developmentally expected sexual behaviors and about sexual abuse in children with disabilities.

- Programs and professionals working with your child should know basic facts about sexual abuse including:
 - Ninety-percent of the time children are sexually abused by someone they know.
 - More than one-third of the time children are sexually abused by someone under the age of 18.
 - The vast majority of sexual abuse (up to 88%) is never reported to authorities.

Use these statistics to initiate a conversation with administrators about what they are doing to lower the risk of sexual abuse by staff or between children.

- Children with disabilities may have special needs that increase their risk of being sexually abused. Examples include: the need for support for daily living activities (including bathing, toileting, feeding, and mobility); social isolation, and; communication barriers. Ask service providers how their policies and practices reduce these risks.

- Expect service providers to be able to tell you how their policies and practices address your child's specific vulnerabilities. For example, do they respond directly to varying communication needs with policies that allow deaf and hard of hearing children to have full and consistent access to communication technology that enables them to communicate any issues or concerns?
- Know that it is OK to question administrative staff if something does not seem right, and to seek out assistance if needed.
- Situations where two people are alone pose the highest risk for sexually harmful or abusive behaviors to occur. Talk with service providers about what they do to minimize opportunities for adults to be alone with children or to interact with children beyond the sight or hearing of others.

Talk with administrators about what are they doing to create a safe environment for children.

- All organizations who work with children are encouraged to have comprehensive policies and practices as part of their commitment to creating safe environments for children. Review [Nine Questions Parents Need to Ask When Selecting a Program for Their Child](http://www.stopitnow.org/parent_questions_school_policy) (www.stopitnow.org/parent_questions_school_policy) to learn not only what questions to ask but what answers to expect from administrators.
- Ask administrators if they have a written policy that defines the kind of touches that staff can give to children and when, as well as the types of touches children are allowed to refuse and when? Clear policies can reduce confusion and create a safer environment for both children and staff.
- Once you know what their policies are, observe whether they follow their policies. To be effective, policies need to be implemented and embedded in the culture of the organization and not just a written document filed away somewhere.
- Think of an example situation administrators might encounter and ask them how they would handle it. For example, how do they respond to finding two children together in the bathroom with their clothing off? Do they respond only to the specific incident or use it as an opportunity to teach children about appropriate boundaries and behavior?

Ask administrators about the training and guidance employees receive to help them recognize and respond to developmentally appropriate sexual behaviors and prevent sexual misconduct or abuse.

- Do they provide training? How often? Which staff are trained? What key concepts does the training cover? Ideally everyone who interacts with or cares for children should receive some specialized training on an annual or semi-annual basis.
- What guidance do they provide about establishing healthy boundaries in the work setting? Boundaries are especially important because of the unequal power between staff and children. Does the program make it clear that having and maintaining clear boundaries is the responsibility of the staff not the children? How do they help staff who are having difficulty setting boundaries? Do they have clear, written guidelines to define what interactions are prohibited between staff and children?

Get to know the people who care for your child.

- Introduce yourself to the staff who care for your child. Take time to get to know them. Ask about their background including how long they have worked there, what drew them to the field, etc. Let them know that you are paying attention and that you are involved in your child's care. If possible, vary the time of day and day of the week that you visit so that you have the opportunity to meet the different staff who work with your child.
- Get to know the parents of other children in your child's program. You may want to offer to check in on their child and ask them to do the same for you.
- Notice how your child responds to various staff. How do individual staff handle the need to balance allowing children some choice and decision making while also ensuring children's safety?
- Share what you know about your child with staff, including what works and what you've tried that hasn't worked as well. Conversely, when you find someone your child relates to especially well consult with them and ask them to be a resource to you.
- Advocate for your child. Tell staff about your child. Let them know you are interested in their insights on your child and that you consider them an important part of your child's care team.

Monitor changes in your child

- You are the expert on your child. If you notice changes or you get the sense that something is different, you might want to explore it a little. Sometimes it's easy to dismiss behaviors as being related to your child's disability but changes in behaviors can also signal that something new is going on with your child.

- Some changes are the byproduct of your child growing older or developing physically. Some changes in your child result from changes in the environment. Share your observations about changes in your child with the professionals with whom they regularly interact.
- Regularly check in with your child about how things are going. Ask open ended questions like “tell me about your caregivers?”, “tell me about [the name of a specific caregiver]”. Also regularly ask “are you afraid of anyone?”, “has anyone made you do anything you didn’t want to do?” or “has anyone said things that made you feel sad or upset?”

Ask if and how social skills are taught to children.

- All children need help learning how to relate appropriately to others. Does the service provider address healthy relationships, inappropriate touching, sex and sexuality, and other relationship skills? Do they use a formal curriculum or training materials to teach social skills? Ask to review these materials so you will know what is being taught and so you can use similar language and concepts to reinforce these when your child is at home with you. Children need accurate information about sex and sexuality including information about their bodies, about appropriate versus inappropriate touching, and about what to do if someone makes them uncomfortable.

Reference: *Teaching Children with Down Syndrome about their Bodies, Boundaries, and Sexuality: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* by Terri Couwenhoven, M.S.



“Special thanks to Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center and the Coalition Against Sexual Abuse of Children with Disabilities.”



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CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTERS

Midwest Regional Children’s Advocacy Center receives its funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice, Delinquency and Prevention.

