



Stop It Now!®

Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children

PREVENTION TOOLS

Have questions?
Need resources?

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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: Family Safety Planning to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse

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.

Creating a family safety plan is a good place to start when thinking about how to keep your child safe from sexual harm or abuse. All children, by virtue of their size and development, are vulnerable to sexual abuse. Children with disabilities are often more vulnerable. By being proactive about safety, there are many ways to reduce your child's vulnerability and keep your child safe. Be sure your Family Safety Plan (www.stopitnow.org/family_safety_plan) addresses the needs of all members of your family, not just your child with a disability.

Learn about sexual development and developmentally expected sexual behaviors.

- All children, including those with disabilities, are sexual beings and have sexual feelings. Review resources about developmentally expected sexual behaviors (www.stopitnow.org/age_appropriate_sexual_behavior) so you are knowledgeable about what behaviors are common or developmentally expected in children of various ages. These resources often focus on chronological age, so just as you adapt your expectations in other areas of your child's development you may need to adapt your expectations about sexual development.
- Seek input about your child's sexual development from the professionals who know your child including your family doctor, social workers, and teachers.
- Be aware that some aspects of your child's sexual development may follow chronological age (e.g. physical changes associated with puberty) while others may follow emotional and cognitive development (e.g. asking questions about where babies come from, interest in other children's bodies).

Plan to address your child's specific vulnerabilities.

- Set clear guidelines for personal privacy and behavior that take into consideration your child's needs for help with personal care.
- Adapt safety "rules" to your child's specific situation. Be explicit about what is okay and what is not okay. For example, if your child needs help with toileting, explain that it is okay for his care team to help with unzipping and pulling down his pants, wiping his bottom, and helping him pull up his pants after using the toilet but it is not okay for his care team

to pull his pants down or touch his genitals while holding him on their lap. Similarly, if your child needs help with undressing to shower, it is okay for his care team to undress him right before he steps in the shower but it is not okay to undress him in another room and then walk him to the shower with no clothes on.

- Ask your child's care team for their suggestions for ways to both meet your child's needs for privacy and appropriate touch and the care team's need to effectively care for your child. Agree together on appropriate rules to reduce your child's vulnerability to harm or abuse. Work together so you are consistent in how you teach, respond, and redirect your child as needed.

Talk about sexual abuse with your child's caregivers.

- Have explicit conversations with all caregivers about your specific family rules about privacy and touch. Ask your child's caregivers to respect your child's personal space and to provide only the level of personal care your child needs.
- Share your commitment to keeping your child safe from sexual abuse with your child's caregivers. Talk openly about the information you have shared with your child about sex and sexuality and about privacy and touch.

Set clear expectations for your child's caregivers.

- Check out our tip sheet entitled *For Parents of Children with Disabilities: How to Talk to Your Child to Reduce Vulnerability to Sexual Abuse* for a list of questions and helpful information to use to learn about what services providers can do to create a safe environment for your child.
- Monitor your child's response to the people in his life. Pay extra attention if you notice behaviors that indicate concerning reactions or if your child tells you he has concerns about his caregivers.
- If members of your child's care team have issues or concerns with your family rules, ask for their suggestions about how to meet both your child's needs for privacy and appropriate touch and caregivers' need to effectively care for your child. Agree together on adapting your rules as appropriate.
- Monitor your child's care team to see if they are able to follow your family rules about privacy, touch, and personal behavior. Remind them of your expectations and ask for their cooperation.
- Consider alternative sources for care if you have concerns about members of your child's care team.

I Identify "safe" people for your child.

- All children need "safe" adults in their lives who they can turn to for help and support. Work with your child to identify two or three safe adults in each of the places where your child spends significant time (e.g. school, bus, facilities). Demonstrate for your child how he can let a safe adult know he needs help. Use role plays, structured play with dolls, or even situations portrayed in movies or television to act out ways of getting help.
- Practice with your child's safe adults. Have your child communicate he needs help and ask the adult to respond. This helps both your child and the adult practice and learn in less stressful situations.
- Expect to continually update your child's "safe" adults as your child's schedule or caregivers change.

Prepare to respond to sexual behaviors in children.

- Expect that your child will have sexual feelings and will engage in sexual behaviors, regardless of the type and extent of his disability. This way you can be prepared to be proactive in addressing sexuality and sexual behaviors in your child by calmly responding and redirecting behaviors as needed.
- Initiate conversations with your child's care team about your child's sexual development and any sexual behaviors you are observing. If the care team is not knowledgeable about developmentally expected sexual development, share information with them. Ask them to support you in responding appropriately to your child's sexual behaviors and to share with you any behaviors they observe.
- Adapt what you have learned about teaching your child boundaries or rules in other areas of development to teaching healthy boundaries about sexual behaviors.
- Consider common sexual behaviors in children of your child's developmental stage and plan for how you might teach your child safe rules or boundaries around these behaviors. For example, you might tell your child "It's not okay to take your clothes off when you play with other children" or "We keep the door closed when we are changing clothes".

Talk with your child about sex and sexuality.

- Children need developmentally appropriate information about sex and sexuality. Teach your child the proper names for body parts and about privacy and rules about touching. In addition to answering questions, look for opportunities to share information. For more suggestions about what to teach your child, check out our tip sheet *For Parents of Children with Disabilities: How to Talk to Your Child to Reduce Vulnerability to Sexual Abuse*.

Know your local resources.

- Learn about the agencies in your area. Know who to contact to make a report if you know or suspect that a child may have been sexually abused. You can call the National Child Abuse Hotline **1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)** for information on who to call in your area.
- These resources may have helpful information that you can use to prepare for talking with your child.
 - *Teaching Children with Down Syndrome about their Bodies, Boundaries, and Sexuality: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* by Terri Couwenhoven, M.S.
 - Hands and Voices for Deaf Children
www.handsandvoices.org/resources/OUR/timetodo.htm
 - Autism Speaks' Autism Safety Project
www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/autism-safety-project/abuse
 - Autism Society: Teaching Sexuality resources
<http://support.autism-society.org/site/Search?query=sexuality&sa=Go&inc=10>
 - National Autism Association's Autism Safety Site
<http://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/naas-autism-safety-site/>
- Make a list of resources you can call for advice, information, and help and include the phone numbers. Below are resources that may be helpful to find information specific to your child's needs in your state. Also, talk to your pediatrician or school staff for other relevant resources in your area.
 - Federal government website for comprehensive information on disability programs and services in communities nationwide. www.disability.gov/
 - National Organization on Disability offers resources and information for people with disabilities, www.nod.org/disability_resources/
 - University of Washington's National Resources for Parents of Children and Youth with Disabilities www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/Parents/naparent.html
 - American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities www.aaidd.org/content_535.cfm?navID=146
 - National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities www.nichcy.org/
 - Institute on Disability and Human Development; National Resources www.idhd.org/CCD.html



"Special thanks to Chicago Children's Advocacy Center and the Coalition Against Sexual Abuse of Children with Disabilities."



Midwest Regional
CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTERS

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

