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Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children

PREVENTION TOOLS

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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: Behaviors to Watch for When Adults Are With Children & Signs That a Child or Teen May Be At-Risk to Harm another Child

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 and know that some adaptations may be required based on your child's needs. 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.

It is hard to believe that someone we know could also sexually abuse a child yet, nearly 90% of the time children are sexually abused by someone they know, like, trust, or even love. More than a third of all sexual abuse of children is committed by other children or youth. It is an unfortunate reality that children with disabilities and other special needs experience abuse at even higher rates than other children.

Being knowledgeable about how to recognize early warning signs and situations that increase the risk of sexual abuse will help you keep your child and other children safe. Use this knowledge to set clear standards for appropriate, respectful behavior for the people who care for and interact with your child so you can recognize and respond when someone is not able to follow your expectations.

Behaviors to Watch for When Adults Are With Children

Personal Space

Personal space is the private area of control that defines each person as separate. Ideally, that boundary helps us stay in charge of our own personal space. People who routinely disrespect or ignore boundaries increase children's risk for sexual abuse. Pay attention and monitor more when an adult:

- Refuses to let a child set his own limits (e.g. by providing personal care beyond what the child needs);
- Misses or ignores cues about personal limits or boundaries (e.g. by not adjusting treatment or behavior based on the child's verbal or non-verbal responses);
- Ignores a child's need for and right to privacy.

Relationships with Children

Some people who sexually abuse children seem to be overly focused on or spend all of their time with children. Pay attention and monitor more closely when an adult:

- Spends significant time with children and shows little interest in spending time with peers;
- Treats a children more like peers by sharing personal or private information or allowing children or teens to get away with inappropriate behaviors;
- Has a “special” child friend, maybe a different one from year to year;
- Seems “too good to be true” (e.g. frequently babysits different children for free; takes children on special outings alone; buys children gifts or gives them money for no apparent reason).

Inappropriate Behavior

Some people are unclear about what is appropriate with children and therefore engage in inappropriate behaviors around children. Be prepared to intervene when an adult:

- Insists on or manages to spend uninterrupted time alone with a child;
- Encourages silence and secrets in children;
- Makes sexually explicit comments or jokes around children, points out sexual images, or describes children using sexual words like “stud” or “sexy”;
- Is overly interested in the sexuality or sexual development of a particular child or teen (e.g. talks about a child’s developing body or makes fun of children’s body parts).

When you are aware of behaviors to watch out for, you have an opportunity to intervene in response to the very early signs that someone is unclear about how to behave and interact with children. When you see these signs, you have an opportunity speak up and set a limit. You have an opportunity to keep a child safe.

Signs That a Child or Teen May Be At-Risk to Harm another Child

More than a third of all sexual abuse of children is committed by someone under the age of 18. Children, particularly younger children, may take part in inappropriate interactions without understanding how it might be hurtful to others. For this reason, it may be more helpful to talk about a child’s sexually “harmful” behavior rather than sexually “abusive” behavior.

Pay attention and monitor more closely when you observe the following types of behaviors in your child or another child you know.

Confused about social rules and interactions

- Experiences typical gestures of friendliness or affection as sexual.
- Explores own natural sexual curiosity with younger children or those of differing size, status, ability, or power.
- Seeks out the company of younger children and spends an unusual amount of time with them rather than with peers.
- Takes younger children to “secret” places or hideaways or plays “special” games with them (e.g. playing doctor, undressing or touching games).
- Insists on physical contact with a child when the child resists the attention.

Anxious, depressed or seeming to need help

- Does not want to be alone with a child, or group of children, or becomes anxious about being with a particular young person.
- Was physically, sexually or emotionally abused and has not been offered adequate resources and support for recovery.
- Seems to be crying for help or behaves as if he wants to be caught; leaves “clues” or acts in ways that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues.

Impulsively sexual or aggressive

- Links sexuality and aggression in language or behavior (e.g. makes sexual threats or insults).
- Unable to control inappropriate sexual behaviors involving another child after being told to stop.
- Engages in sexually harassing behavior.
- Shares alcohol, drugs, or sexual material with younger children.
- Views sexual images of children on the Internet or elsewhere.
- Forces sexual interaction, including direct contact and non-contact (like exposing genitals) on another adolescent or child.



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Midwest Regional
CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTERS

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