# TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

## *Parent Resource Kit*

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FOUNDED IN 1959 BY SARA O' MEARA + YVONNE FEDDERSON
PREVENTION EDUCATION

Dear parent/caregiver,

Talking with children about body safety, healthy boundaries, and preventing sexual abuse doesn't have to be scary or complicated. Everyday conversations can help kids understand their rights, recognize concerning behaviors, and know they can turn to safe adults for help.

Prevention education can strengthen children's safety knowledge, but kids cannot prevent abuse on their own. Adults play an essential role in creating safe environments, modeling healthy relationships, recognizing concerns, and taking protective action.

One action parents and caregivers can take is to have ongoing, age-appropriate conversations to help children understand healthy boundaries, recognize unsafe behavior, and know they can speak up when they need help.

Childhelp's Prevention Education program for adults, Connect to Protect Kids, teaches safety through the **3 Keys to Protecting Children: Commitment, Action, and Connection**. This framework can help adults protect children while also providing a useful framework to help build children's knowledge and skills.

1. **Commitment**
   - Have conversations early and often, using age-appropriate language and examples.
   - Teach that every child has the right to be safe, and that sexual abuse is never a child's fault.
   - Understand grooming and other concerning behaviors so conversations can focus on what people do, rather than what an unsafe person might look like.
2. **Action**
   - Approach conversations with curiosity. Ask children what they think and know.
   - Help kids recognize safe and unsafe behaviors.
   - Empower kids with choices. Let them know they can set boundaries, change their minds, leave an uncomfortable situation when possible, and seek help from a safe adult.
3. **Connection**
   - Be a safe adult. Be supportive and available, model respect, and take action to protect kids.
   - Make it safe to tell. Regularly remind children that they can talk to a safe adult about anything, even if they feel embarrassed, broke a rule, or were told to keep it secret.
   - Build a network of safe adults. Help children identify several adults based on how those adults behave, and teach kids they can keep telling until someone listens and helps.

## RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN THIS KIT:

- Start conversations: Use the ***Body Safety Conversation Guide*** for tips and prompts.
- Discover safe adults: Explore ***Safe Adults Are Key*** to learn how to be a safe adult.
- Learn more: Review ***What Is Child Sexual Abuse?*** to build your own knowledge and skills.
- Interrupt concerning behavior: Display the ***Recognizing Grooming & Boundary Violations*** poster to help you recognize and respond to potentially harmful behaviors.
- Respond confidently: Keep ***Responding to a Disclosure*** available for guidance if a child shares a concern.



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# BODY SAFETY *Conversation Guide*

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Child sexual abuse is preventable when adults focus on creating safe environments, recognizing concerning behaviors in adults or other youth, respecting children's boundaries, and being available when children need help. Adults can also play a critical role by having open, ongoing conversations with children to help them build safety knowledge and know where to turn for support.

Like the **3 Keys to Protecting Children** for adults, our youth-focused program teaches kids the **3 Keys to Personal Safety**. This is a great way to frame age-appropriate conversations about body safety, boundaries, and child sexual abuse. You can teach kids the following key points:

**1. You have the RIGHT to be safe.**

- Your body belongs to you, and some parts of your body are private.
- Healthy relationships respect boundaries. No one should involve you in sexual behavior or ask you to keep secrets about touching, activities, or even conversations.
- Sexual abuse is never your fault, no matter who was involved, what happened, or how you responded.
- If something unsafe or confusing happens, you are not alone and help is available.
- It is never too late to tell or get help.

**2. You have POWER.**

- You can learn to recognize safe and unsafe behaviors, including whether someone respects your boundaries and follows safety rules.
- You can learn to recognize warning signs of grooming.
- You can recognize healthy relationships and notice unhealthy behaviors that are manipulative, controlling, secretive, or unsafe.
- Your boundaries matter. You have the right to say no, move away, change your mind, or get help if something feels uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Talking with safe adults and staying connected to people who support and protect you are powerful safety tools.

**3. You can SPEAK UP.**

- You can speak up in different ways, such as saying no or getting help from a safe adult.
- You can identify several safe adults who listen, respect boundaries, take concerns seriously, and help protect you.
- If the first person you tell doesn't listen or help, you can keep telling until someone does.
- Speaking up can also mean helping a friend get support from a safe adult when something unsafe or harmful happens.

Some children may feel embarrassed, uninterested, or reluctant to discuss body safety. Avoid forcing the conversation. Keep discussions brief, use everyday opportunities, and remind kids that you are always available to answer questions. If harm happens, remember that children may freeze, comply, be confused, or not recognize concerning behaviors when they first happen. A child who does not say no, leave, or tell immediately has not failed to protect themselves.

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# BODY SAFETY *Conversation Guide* Continued

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## TALKING WITH YOUTH AT DIFFERENT AGES:
## EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

When talking with children of early-elementary school age, it's important to keep conversations simple, concrete, and reassuring.

| TOPICS TO FOCUS ON | PROMPTS TO HELP START CONVERSATIONS | THINK & PRACTICE |
|---|---|---|
| • Correct names for private body parts<br>• Body autonomy and boundaries<br>• Importance of asking permission before touching<br>• Difference between surprises and unsafe secrets<br>• Identifying and talking to safe adults<br>• Telling and continuing to tell a safe adult about confusing or harmful behaviors | • "Your body belongs to you."<br>• "You can tell me if someone does something you don't like or don't understand."<br>• "Safe adults follow safety rules and respect people's boundaries, like asking permission for hugs."<br>• "If anyone asks you to keep a secret or says you can never tell, you can still tell me or another safe adult."<br>• "You can always ask questions about your body or about someone's actions."<br>• "You won't be in trouble for talking to me or another safe adult." | • "Who are three safe adults you could talk to?"<br>• "If someone didn't listen the first time, who could you tell next?" |



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# BODY SAFETY *Conversation Guide* Continued

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## TALKING WITH YOUTH AT DIFFERENT AGES:
## UPPER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

As children get older and enter upper elementary grades, you can begin to have conversations that add more complex topics. Remember to keep discussions developmentally appropriate.

| TOPICS TO FOCUS ON | PROMPTS TO HELP START CONVERSATIONS | THINK & PRACTICE |
|---|---|---|
| • Healthy vs. unhealthy relationships<br>• Gifts, favors with strings attached, or secrets<br>• Special treatment or attempts to get children alone<br>• Safety rules<br>• Concerning behaviors children may see online<br>• Children's right to change their minds<br>• Telling a safe adult even if they think they did something wrong | • "Sometimes a person seems trustworthy and then slowly starts breaking rules and crossing personal boundaries."<br>• "Someone can seem really nice and still make an unsafe choice. That's why we pay attention to what people do, not just whether we like or trust them."<br>• "If anyone breaks a safety rule, online or offline, you can tell me. You are not responsible for getting an adult in trouble." | • "What is it about a person's behavior that makes them a safe adult?"<br>• Provide "What if" scenarios and ask, "What do you think makes this unsafe?" and "What would you do?" |



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## TALKING WITH YOUTH AT DIFFERENT AGES:
## MIDDLE SCHOOL-AGE YOUTH

As children enter pre-adolescence and middle school grades, talk with them more directly about body safety and sexual abuse prevention topics such as grooming, pressure, healthy vs. unhealthy relationships, consent, and sexual boundaries.

| TOPICS TO FOCUS ON | PROMPTS TO HELP START CONVERSATIONS | THINK & PRACTICE |
|---|---|---|
| • Grooming as a pattern of behaviors from an adult or another, more powerful youth<br>• Healthy relationships, online and offline<br>• Consent and power differences<br>• Sexual comments/jokes<br>• Requests for intimate images<br>• Isolation, boundary testing, secrets, gifts/favors<br>• An adult treating a young person like a romantic or peer partner<br>• Harmful peer behaviors<br>• Helping a friend | • "Sometimes unsafe behavior doesn't start out looking unsafe. Someone might begin by being really helpful, giving someone special attention, or making a person feel important."<br>• "What could be a warning sign that someone's attention has crossed a boundary?"<br>• "Why is it sometimes hard to talk to an adult?" | • "What would make you concerned about the way an adult or older teen was treating someone your age?"<br>• "What would you tell a friend if someone asked them to keep actions or conversations a secret?" |

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# BODY SAFETY *Conversation Guide* Continued

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## TALKING WITH YOUTH AT DIFFERENT AGES:
## HIGH SCHOOL-AGE YOUTH

As youth enter adolescence and high school grades, conversations can become more mature. Discussions can center on topics such as relationships, power, and consent. This is also an important time to discuss self-advocacy, and advocating for or looking out for others.

| TOPICS TO FOCUS ON | PROMPTS TO HELP START CONVERSATIONS | THINK & PRACTICE |
|---|---|---|
| • Healthy vs. exploitative relationships<br>• Consent, boundaries, authority, and power differences<br>• Grooming, manipulation, sexual coercion and pressure<br>• Sexting and sextortion<br>• Helping friends and peers<br>• Knowing that previous consent doesn't eliminate the right to change one's mind<br>• Seeking help without blame or shame | • "You deserve to have others respect your boundaries. If someone crosses a boundary, it is never your fault."<br>• "Even if you broke a rule or made a choice you regret, you can always come to me. My priority is always to help you stay safe."<br>• "You can change your mind about something you thought was okay at first."<br>• "You can come to me if anyone pressures you to share intimate images, or if you've shared them and someone is pressuring you to send more." | • "Why might someone have a hard time recognizing grooming while it's happening?"<br>• "If a friend told you something happened with an adult or another young person, how could you help?" |

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## SAFE ADULTS ARE KEY

Protecting children from abuse and other types of interpersonal harm is a shared responsibility between children and the adults in their life. Because harm is often caused by people children and families trust, it's essential to teach children that safe adults are defined by their actions, not by who they are or how they look. It's also critical that adults make protecting children an everyday priority. One way to do this is by being a SAFE adult. This brief guide explains what a SAFE adult is and how to put these behaviors into practice.




A **SAFE** adult:

**S**upports children by being trustworthy and available whenever a child has questions, feels unsure or unsafe, or needs to share that they have been hurt. A safe adult doesn't just listen. They act, connecting the child with help when it's needed.

**A**cts in ways that are healthy and safe with children, protecting them from harm rather than putting them at risk. A safe adult respects rules and boundaries and never creates situations that make a child vulnerable.

**F**osters relationships built on trust and respect, and models healthy boundaries and consent. This not only protects children, but also teaches them, and other adults, what respectful relationships look like.

**E**nsures environments are safe for children. A safe adult also holds other adults accountable, challenging boundary violations or inappropriate behavior and ensuring organizations do the same.

It's important for adults to understand this framework and strive to be SAFE adults for the children in their lives. It's equally important to teach children how to identify safe adults and to talk to one if they have been hurt or feel unsure whether a person or situation is safe. Every child should be able to identify several safe adults both at home and in other places they spend time.

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# WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse involves sexual contact, activity, or exploitation that is abusive, coercive, exploitative, or inappropriate for a child's age or developmental level. It may involve an adult, adolescent, or another child and can include both contact and noncontact behaviors. When sexual behavior involves other children or youth, developmental differences, power, coercion, and the circumstances of the behavior are important in distinguishing developmentally typical behavior from harmful sexual behavior.

Child sexual abuse can include:

- Sexual touching or contact, including making a child touch another person sexually.
- Noncontact sexual behaviors, such as exposing a child to sexual acts or sexual material, inappropriate sexual exposure or discussions, or voyeurism.
- Sexual exploitation, including involving a child in sexual images, online enticement, sextortion, or other forms of online sexual exploitation.

## *It may not look the way adults expect.*

Child sexual abuse does not always involve physical force. While sexual abuse may involve manipulation, pressure, or threats, a person may also use special attention, affection, gifts, secrecy, or other tactics to gain access to a child and gradually cross their personal boundaries. This process is often referred to as *grooming*.

It's also important to recognize that the person causing harm is usually someone the child or family knows (approximately 90% according to the Centers for Disease Control). This is why prevention should focus on behaviors, boundaries, and protective practices, rather than roles or relationships.

Adults must also understand that sexual abuse may occur between two youth when an older or more powerful youth harms a child. Adults should take concerning sexual behavior between children seriously, protect everyone involved, avoid labeling children, and seek appropriate guidance and support.

## *Child sexual abuse is preventable.*

Children can learn important safety skills, but they cannot prevent sexual abuse on their own. Adults should create safe environments, model and enforce healthy relationships and boundaries, recognize concerning behavior, and take action when something is unsafe.

Keep in mind: Sexual abuse is *never* a child's fault. A child's behavior, choices, relationship with the person, or delay in telling never makes the child responsible for the abuse.

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# Recognizing GROOMING & BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

## What is Grooming?

Grooming can involve gaining trust, crossing boundaries, creating secrecy, and manipulating **children or the adults around them**.

A concerning behavior doesn't automatically indicate grooming, but may warrant attention, intervention, or additional safeguards.

It's important to recognize behaviors and patterns and not trust that stereotypes will help us identify someone who may be seeking to harm a child.

## Watch for Concerning Behaviors

Pay attention to **patterns of behavior,** including when someone...

- seeks unnecessary one-on-one access to a child or creates reasons to be alone with them
- treats a particular child as unusually "special" such as giving them excessive gifts, privileges, or special attention
- communicates with a child privately outside appropriate channels
- asks a child to keep secrets
- ignores physical or emotional boundaries
- uses sexual jokes, comments, or conversations around children
- gradually introduces increasingly intimate behavior
- undermines parents/caregivers or other protective adults
- disregards organizational safety rules or policies
- pressures children into affection or physical contact
- makes a child feel responsible for the adult's feelings

## Environmental safeguards are also important for child safety.

**Ensure organizations create safe spaces by:**

- Monitoring and addressing boundary concerns
- Minimizing unnecessary one-on-one contact between adults and children or between two youth
- Supporting children's body autonomy
- Requiring all adults, no matter their position, to be properly screened, trained, and to follow all safety rules and policies
- Taking all concerns seriously

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### Get Support & Resources:

Childhelp National Hotline
childhelphotline.org
800-422-4453

### Make a Report:

Find your state's reporting information at: childhelp.org/resource-library

**Preventing ABUSE BY building CONNECTED, PROTECTIVE COMMUNITIES**

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# RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Many children delay telling about or reporting abuse, and many never disclose. However, sometimes a child will tell a safe adult, and when they do, the response matters. Disclosing abuse can be a scary and overwhelming experience for a child. A calm, supportive response can help them feel safe and begin the process of healing.

*How disclosures may happen*




## If a child discloses abuse, here are some general guidelines to help you respond:

**LISTEN AND BELIEVE**

- Give the child your full attention and let them share at their own pace and in their own words. Respond calmly and supportively without putting words in their mouth.
- Be mindful of your reaction. Avoid expressing shock, disbelief, or anger.
- Avoid expressing anger or making negative comments about the person the child identifies as it may be someone they care about.

**REASSURE AND SUPPORT**

- Let the child know you believe them and thank them for telling you.
- Reassure them. Say, "This is not your fault," and "I am here to support you."
- Don't make assumptions or promises such as, "I'll make sure this never happens again."
- If the child is in immediate danger, call 911.

**KNOW YOUR ROLE**

- Understand you are there to support the child, not to investigate.
- Ask limited, open-ended questions only if needed to make a report ("Tell me more," or "What happened next?" etc.).
- When you are done talking, write down the child's exact words to help you make a report.

**MAKE A REPORT**

- Report a disclosure or suspected abuse to your local child protection agency. This helps connect children with protection, support, and appropriate services. The reporting agency can determine what additional steps may be needed.
- Even if the person who allegedly caused the harm is someone you know or care about, your priority should always be to protect the child.

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# RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

## In the Moment: Words Matter

Child welfare practices distinguish between an adult's initial conversation with a child and a forensic interview conducted by trained professionals. Limiting questions during an initial disclosure allows a proper forensic interview later and helps reduce the number of interviews a child may experience.

When a child shares a concern, listen without interrupting or asking for details. Ask only the limited questions needed to understand immediate safety concerns or make a report. If clarification is necessary, use open-ended prompts such as "Tell me more about that." Avoid leading questions or conducting your own investigation; allow trained professionals to gather additional information and determine next steps.

**Helpful Phrases:**

- "Thank you for telling me."
- "I believe you."
- "You don't have to figure this out on your own."
- "This is not your fault."
- "You can tell me in your own words."
- "I can't promise to keep this a secret, but I can promise to only share with people who need to know to keep you safe."
- "I will tell you what I can about what happens next when I know more."
- "What would help you feel safe and supported right now?"

**Avoid Saying:**

- "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"
- "Why didn't you stop it?"
- "Are you sure?"
- "I can't believe they would do that."
- "I won't tell anyone."
- "Tell me every detail."

## After the Conversation

**Address Immediate Safety and Make a Report**

- Determine whether the child is in immediate danger or needs urgent medical assistance and call 911 if needed.
- Do not confront the person alleged to have caused harm or independently contact anyone whose involvement could compromise the child's safety or a potential investigation. Seek guidance from the reporting agency about safely involving caregivers.
- Seek support from the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline if needed.

**Document What Happened**

- Record the date, time, and location of the conversation with the child, including anyone else present.
- Write down the child's words as accurately as possible, including any exact quotes you can recall.

**Protect a Potential Investigation**

- Do not ask the child to repeat the disclosure to others.
- Do not conduct your own investigation or collect additional information.
- Share information only with people who need it to protect the child.

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# RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

## Making a Report

- Abuse reporting responsibilities and procedures are established by state law.
- Reporting requirements vary by state. Some states require certain professionals to report suspected child abuse, while others extend reporting obligations to all adults. Learn the requirements in your state, including how and when to make a report.
- Regardless of whether you are legally designated as a mandated reporter, suspected child sexual abuse should be reported promptly to the appropriate authorities so that children can receive protection and support.
- You do not need to investigate, establish proof, or have every detail before contacting the reporting agency, and children do not need to directly disclose abuse for adults to take concerns seriously or make a report. Share what you know and allow professionals to follow up.
- To find your local reporting agency information, visit www.childwelfare.gov/state-child-abuse-and-neglect-reporting-numbers. For help with reporting, contact the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 24/7 by calling, texting, or chatting: 1-800-422-4453 or ChildhelpHotline.org. Note: The Hotline offers information and support but does not accept official child abuse reports.
- When you make a report you will be asked to share what you know. **Be prepared to share:**
  - The child's name, age, and current location
  - What the child said or what caused concern
  - When and where the suspected harm occurred
  - If known, the name of the person who harmed the child and their relationship to the child
  - Any immediate danger, injuries, or medical needs
  - Whether other children may be at risk, if known
  - Your name and contact information (Note: Reporters' identities are generally protected, although confidentiality and disclosure rules vary by state.)

## Supporting the Child

As a caring adult, your role does not end when the report is made. Continue to provide reassurance without repeatedly questioning the child or asking them to recount what happened, and let them know they can come to you for support.

Children benefit from a safe and supportive adult who believes them, respects their needs, maintains a positive, healthy relationship, and helps them access appropriate services.



**Need Help?**
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