

# KEEPING KIDS SAFE

## Tips for Talking to Your Kids About Child Sexual Abuse

**Our community feels strongly about protecting children from child abuse. Berkshire County Kids' Place has some tips for talking about safety with your child.**

### Starting the Conversation

For some parents, beginning the conversation about child sexual abuse can feel like a daunting and scary task. When we look back on our experience as children it can be hard to find examples of effective and emotionally safe communication with adults about our bodies, sexuality, safety and abuse. We know now, however, that talking to our children about all of these topics is a critical part of keeping them safe.

One good way to get started is with a general question that is comfortable and positive, such as, "What's your favorite part about being you?" This can give your child a chance to talk about something they are an expert on (themselves) and set an upbeat tone for both of you as the conversation moves forward. The next questions you bring to the conversation should also be areas that both of you are comfortable talking about and your child already knows something about. For these reasons, talking about general safety can be a good second step and segue into adding information about staying safe from child sexual abuse.

### Talking About Safety

Children usually know something about safety: rules for crossing the street, rules about touching the stove, or rules for wearing bicycle helmets. Children also need to know some safety rules for their bodies, for touching and for safely interacting with adults. Most importantly they need to know what to do when they feel unsafe. Talking with our children about what safe feels like, is a good place from which to start to build these rules. Establishing what safety is for a child allows you to talk about what they do when they don't feel safe and gives you a chance to discuss additional options beyond the ones they may already know. We recommend identifying three trusted adults a child can tell if they don't feel safe and including a person outside the family on that list.

When talking with a child about safety, it is also useful to discuss different options for different situations. Again, start with something your child already knows. What should be done if someone was hurt biking? Who would be a good adult to talk to? If a brother or sister made them feel unsafe, who would they talk then? If something was unsafe at Grandma's house, who could they talk to about that? In these conversations you may find that the list of adults they can tell grows well beyond three people. This is a good sign just remember that it should always include safe adults outside the family.

## **Body Parts and Privacy**

Children who know about their bodies and have clear expectations for privacy are better equipped to identify unsafe situations and unsafe touch. Use a conversation about which body parts are private to review their proper names. These include: penis, testicles, anus, vagina, labia, vulva and nipples. (It is good for both boys and girls to understand that nipples are private.) Many families choose to use names other than these to talk about genitalia. In these situations, children should learn proper names as well and feel comfortable talking with their parents about the different names they use in their home.

It can also be useful to review the concept of privacy with your child in this discussion. Be careful to send positive messages to your children about their bodies and the parts they keep private as you discuss privacy. One way to do this is to explain that, “Our private parts are so special that they are only for us.” This helps keep children from feeling shame about their bodies and enforces the sense that it is ok for them to talk with you about their bodies.

Children who feel good about themselves are more comfortable talking about their bodies, asking questions about events in their lives and using the safety rules you set with them. Keeping questions about what children like about themselves, as well as your positive feedback about your child as part of a discussion about bodies and privacy reinforces positive self-image and links a positive experience and message with the conversation. You can never talk with your child too much about what they like about themselves or how great they are!

## **Caring for Our Bodies**

Bodies are fascinating and confusing things to children and even teens. Establishing open lines of communication with your child at a young age about their body is a great way to make sure they have accurate information and learn about self-care. It also reduces the ability of adults or peers to manipulate your child with misinformation. Open the door to any questions, worries and concerns your child may have. When answering, be accurate, factual and reassuring. If you aren't sure about something, it's ok to say so. It can be a great opportunity to go to the library find out the answer together.

Talking about what we do to take care of our bodies is another good way to introduce a topic about which your child already knows and to introduce a discussion about boundaries. Make a list with your child of all the things that you/they do to take care of their bodies. Such a list might look like: bathing, brushing their teeth, going to the doctor, wearing clothes, eating healthy, toilet skills, and getting a good night's sleep. Talk with your child about who needs help doing these things, (babies do, young children, we all need doctors sometimes.) Be clear that adults never need help from children to take care of their bodies.

## **Good Touches & Bad Touches**

Remember, keep your conversations with your child upbeat and positive and anchored in what they already know. Come up with a list of touches that are good touches. A good touch is a touch that makes us feel good, safe, and/or happy. Hugging and holding hands are good touches. Talk with your child about the good touches they like. (A good book for talking about touches is *A Very Touching Book...for little people and for big people...*, by Jan Hindman.)

Bad touching is the second kind of touching to talk about with your child. Bad touches are touches that make us feel bad and hurt. Usually children have experiences of bad touches that you can talk about with them – a time a sibling hurt them, a cat scratched them, etc. Go over the rules about these kinds of touching and what they can do if they get a bad touch. Just like when you were talking about safety, you can talk about different options for different situations – sibling, cat, bully, adults, etc.

## **Secrets & Secret Touches**

Having rules about secrets is an important way to protect children from child sexual abuse. We like to start the discussion with the difference between secrets and surprises. At the Kids' Place our rule is that we have no secrets only surprises, where everyone gets to know in the end and there is a happy ending. Like with a birthday present. Secrets and surprises can be especially confusing for children because not everyone has clear rules. Talking about it can open up future conversations should your child be confused about a secret they've been asked to keep. What is most important is that your child know that one secret that is never ok is a secret about touching, especially a secret about an older or bigger person touching a child's private parts. Make a plan about what should happen if someone gets a secret touch. Talk about saying "NO," and how important it is that no matter what, telling an adult. Talk about telling adults until someone listens.

## **People We Love**

The most difficult thing for us to think about as parents when it comes to child sexual abuse is the fact that most commonly child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a close and trusted family friend or loved family member. When we talk with our children about ways to be safe, we need to make rules and plans that will help protect them in these situations as well. At the same time, children need to be able to love and trust the adults in their lives without fear. The best way to approach this is by making sure the rules and plans we make with our children can be applied to all situations. Above all it is important that we consistently send messages of respect for our children's bodies and boundaries. At times this can be socially awkward for us as adults. Should you be tempted to insist your child give Aunt Ruth a kiss goodbye, take a step back, and instead praise your child for setting the rules for their body.

## **Keeping the Conversation Going**

Make sure this isn't a one time conversation. Once your child knows it is ok to talk about their bodies, touches and rules, expect more questions. Look for the teachable moments. Integrating conversations about safety into your life on a regular basis can be a way of making it less stressful for both you and your child. It is a topic that can be approached without anxiety or fear – one that can instead reaffirm & strength your child's knowledge, skills and positive sense of self. Never miss an opportunity to tell how great it is they know so much about their body or how great they are.

## **Disclosures**

It is possible that having started the conversation about safety with your child, he or she may feel comfortable enough to tell you about something that has already happened to them. As hard as it may be to hear what they tell you, stay calm and let your child know how good and brave they are to have told you. Let them know that what happened is not their fault. In talking with them, use matter of fact language and tone, showing concern without alarm. Your love and support is the most important gift you can give your child at this moment, it's ok not to have all the answers. If you have questions about what happened, try to avoid phrasing them in probing ways. Instead you might ask, "And then what happened?" If your child uses unclear terms, it is ok to ask what the term means, but let the child tell you in their own words.

It is common for parents of child sexual abuse victims to be concerned for the mental, emotional and physical health of their child. Children are resilient and, with support and love from you, can heal from the trauma of abuse. Consider consulting with a pediatrician and a mental health practitioner about your child, as it can be both helpful and reassuring. As a child advocacy center, the Kids' Place not only participates in child abuse investigations, but also provides pediatric sexual assault examinations and a range of counseling and support services to victims of child sexual abuse and their non-offending family members. If you feel like you need support, please give us a call: 413-499-2800.