



## TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Several recent episodes of alleged child sexual abuse in our community's schools and other organizations have been publicized through local media coverage. Understandably, these stories have raised concerns with parents and other adults regarding the best way to talk with their children about what they may be hearing or experiencing, and how best to provide protection in the future. Given that most children do not always voluntarily disclose abuse, this concern is valid. Child protection is an adult responsibility, and the importance of safe, supportive caregiver-child relationships cannot be overlooked.

[\*The Stewards of Children, The 5 Steps to Protecting Our Children™\*](#) training program provides a framework of personal empowerment for responsible adults to take action against child sexual abuse. These steps encourage adults to educate themselves to eliminate or reduce isolated one-on-one adult-child situations, and to respond appropriately when needed.

Talking openly with children about personal boundaries, their bodies and age appropriate sexual content reinforces positive parent-child communication and provides the child with important skills and knowledge. Though it is awkward for many adults, talking calmly and directly with children from the time they are very young about properly named body parts and rules about touch and exposure, sets the stage for increasingly complex discussions.

Some early messages that are important for children to hear from parents and caregivers include:

- No one should touch their private parts except in certain situations, like a medical exam.
- They have the right to tell any person "NO" to any unwanted or uncomfortable touch.
- It is **not** OK for adults or older youth to use sexual words, show sexual pictures or to act in a sexual way, even if it is not distressing.
- Secrets can be harmful and should be shared with a trusted adult.

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to:

- Talk with their children about their trusted adults so it is understood who they are going to for support. Don't hesitate to intervene if these relationships cause discomfort. Remember, child abusers work hard to present themselves as very trustworthy, and are typically known to the child and family.
- Work diligently to understand their child's online knowledge and experiences, to set appropriate technology rules and to teach technology self-protection skills.

If you have not developed this overall style of communicating with your child from an early age, a conversation when there is a concern or question will likely be more difficult, though no less important. An alleged or known sexual abuse event in the community is a trigger for parents or trusted adults to talk with children and teens. Having an open, mutual conversation in a genuine way will help gauge what a child understands and what additional information might be helpful. It will also provide an opportunity to reinforce important body safety messages.

### ***How can parents and caregivers get started with this conversation?***

Asking a few leading questions may clarify where to take the conversation. You might ask:

- “Have you heard about what is happening at the school?”
- “What do you think about that?”
- “What are your friends saying about the news story?”
- “How do you feel about that?”

Some parents are afraid to ask their child directly if they, or someone they know, have been abused. However, communicating in a calm, non-interrogating and no-nonsense manner will reinforce the notion that these issues are important and safe to talk about. Some children need encouragement to talk because they are embarrassed or feel awkward talking about this topic, so be patient. Children may not talk directly about their experiences, and may talk with an adult other than their parent or caregiver. They may ask questions about bodies, talk about sex more generally, tell parts of an experience or pretend something happened to someone else in an effort to check your reaction. Children will shut down and refuse to tell more if the response is emotional or negative.

### ***What keeps kids from talking?***

Abusers use many tactics to keep the child from talking. Abusers might threaten or try to confuse children about right and wrong (i.e., it is “okay” or “a game.”). Abusers shame, blame or scare children by saying that parents or someone else important will be angry if they learn something has happened. Children don’t want to hurt or disrupt their family, peers or other adults, or they may be embarrassed if they have waited awhile to tell someone and something may have happened again. Often the child cares about the person who has abused either them or someone they know.

### ***If your conversation with the child is leading you to have concern, here’s what you can do:***

- Make open ended statements like, “It’s OK to tell me more.”
- Gather enough basic information so that you can know how to make a report (who, what, where) and keep the child safe. Asking too many detailed questions can overwhelm the child and can complicate possible child protective or law enforcement efforts.
- Believe the child; disclosures about sexual abuse are rarely false.
- Tell the child they have done nothing wrong, praise them for their courage, and provide concrete direction and support.
- Seek the help of a professional who is trained to talk with the child about sexual abuse.
- Call law enforcement or child protective services to make a report.

- Additional information can be found at [www.FamilySafetyandHealing.org](http://www.FamilySafetyandHealing.org), or call our main office number at 614-722-8200 and ask for the intake department.

It is a tragedy each time a child is harmed by someone they trust. When these events become known to you through the news or other public communication, do your due diligence as a child protector to inquire, to educate and to support your own children as well as others who rely on you for their health and wellbeing.