

## Practical Advice for Parents On Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

We recognize that parents need practical advice. Parents bear the primary responsibility for the safety and well-being of their children. Here are some practical actions that parents can take to help protect their children from sexual abuse:

1. By virtue of their physical size, adults have power over children—and that increases a child’s vulnerability. For example, parents and other authority figures teach children to “obey adults.” When children hear this message, they may interpret it to mean that *all* adults have the authority to tell *all* children what to do, *all* the time. If this is a child’s interpretation, then the message has created additional vulnerability for the child. Yet, some simple, common sense steps can help

minimize a child’s vulnerability. For example:

§ Do NOT insist that children hug or kiss relatives or friends. Let children express affection on their own terms.

Let children know that their feelings are important to you. Intervene if you notice that your child is uncomfortable doing something that another adult asks him or her to do. Let the child know that you will protect him or her from this discomfort. That doesn’t necessarily mean that you should let children off the hook when it comes to doing their chores or cleaning up a mess they’ve made.

2. Learn to recognize and take advantage of teachable moments with children. Be willing to openly discuss sensitive issues. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following age-appropriate conversations with children:
  - From ages 18 months to 3 years—begin teaching children the proper names for all body parts.
  - Ages 3 to 5 years—teach children about private body parts and how to say “no” to anyone who touches them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. Give them direct answers to questions about sex.
  - Ages 5 to 8 years—talk about good touches and bad touches, and safety away from home.
  - Ages 8 to 12 years—focus on personal safety issues.
  - Ages 13 to 18 years—discuss issues such as rape, date rape, HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy. There are also professionals in the community who can provide assistance with forming age-appropriate responses to children’s questions and concerns. Remember, regardless of the child’s age: **Take advantage of teachable moments.**

3. Games are a great way to reinforce the lessons you teach your children about safety issues. For example, children are always asking parents, “What if?” Using this same game, parents can raise their own concerns and encourage their children to *think* and *make decisions* relying on the lessons they have learned.

4. Teach children to say, “Stop it,” to instructions that might encourage them to do things that they *really* do not want to do. Reinforce the rule that children should say, “Stop it,” to requests or demands that make them uncomfortable, even if they *think* they should obey. A discussion of these rules can teach a child that there are some times when it is okay to say, “Stop it,” and other times when it is okay to go along with the instructions. Everything hinges on context. Parents must teach their children how to discern between an *appropriate* request and an *inappropriate* request.

For example, it is appropriate to follow the instruction to “Be nice,” as long as the instruction is within an appropriate context, such as, “Be nice and don’t throw things at the other children.” But, tell children it’s okay to disobey this request if, for example, someone says, “Be nice and take off your clothes.”

5. Know where children spend their time. Get to know the adults who show up at the various locations in the community where children gather and where they play together. Be wary of any adult who seems more interested in creating a relationship with a child than with other adults. Pay attention when an adult seems to single out a particular child for a relationship or for special attention. Warning signs include treats, gifts, vacations, or other special favors offered only to one specific child.

6. Make unannounced visits to the child’s nursery, babysitter, daycare center, or school. When choosing a nursery, daycare center, or school, make sure that there are no areas where children play or work that are “off limits” to parents. Taking these actions raises awareness among caregivers, and reinforces the responsibility they have for the safety of the children in their charge.

7. Find out if the child’s school or church religious education programs include a sex abuse prevention curriculum. If not, volunteer to be on a committee to establish such a program. Work with teachers to review available programs and make recommendations to school administrators. Talk with other parents about supporting the addition of child sexual abuse prevention material to existing child safety programs.

**Do NOT** allow a child to go alone on “vacation” with *any* adult other than the child’s parent.

**Do NOT** allow a child to spend the night alone with *any* adult other than the child’s parent or another **safe** adult.

**Except in the case of a serious emergency, Do NOT** allow a child to travel alone—even for a very short distance—with *any* adult other than the child’s parent or another **safe** adult. You should also prohibit children from accepting expensive gifts from an adult, particularly if one child is singled out for special attention.

Parents can make an important difference. However, without a supporting organization to help bring together a community’s resources, experts, and commitment, parents are limited in their ability to impact community-wide child abuse prevention. That’s where we can help.

**Resources:**

*Child Sexual Abuse: What It Is and How to Prevent It*, American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999.  
Adams, C., and Fay, J., *No More Secrets: Protecting Your Child From Sexual Abuse*, Impact Publishers, Ninth Printing, 1991.

Adapted from the website [www.virtus.org](http://www.virtus.org) Parent's Handbook on Preventing Sexual Abuse May 2010

## **Child Abuse: Basic Information**

There are several forms of abuse: neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse.

### **Neglect**

A child is neglected if the person(s) the child depends on does not provide food, shelter, clothing, medical care, education, or supervision. When these basic needs are deliberately withheld, it is considered neglect. Often, parents or caregivers of neglected children are so overwhelmed by their own needs that they cannot recognize the needs of children in their care.

### **Physical Abuse**

Physical abuse is any act that results in non-accidental injury to the child and usually involves physical violence in which the parent or other person responsible for the care of the child is out of control. Such abuse may be due to severe and unreasonable corporal punishment. It could also occur as a result of physical hazing and initiations.

Some possible signs of physical abuse are:

Bruises, cuts, or lacerations on areas of the body that are not usually injured as a part of normal childhood activities, such as the back of arms and legs. Sometimes they have distinct shapes indicating the weapon used. Bruises may be of different colors indicating injuries that occurred at different times.

Cigar or cigarette burns, especially on the soles of the feet, palms of the hands, or back. There could also be rope burns on the wrists or ankles. Some burns may leave marks indicating the instrument used to inflict the burn, such as a steam iron.

Injuries that are inconsistent with the story of how they occurred. n **Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse is harder to recognize but is just as harmful to a child as other forms of abuse. Emotional abuse damages a child's self-esteem and in extreme cases can lead to developmental problems and speech disorders. A child suffers from emotional abuse when constantly ridiculed, rejected, blamed, or compared unfavorably with siblings or other children. Note: Emotional abuse may be committed by adults or other athletes. Derogatory nicknames, belittling, threatening, and bullying may constitute emotional abuse, are violations of our Code of Conduct and are not to be tolerated.

### **Sexual Abuse or Sexual Molestation**

Child sexual abuse involves any sexual act between a child and an adult or between a child and another child, one of whom is perceived to have more power based upon

physical maturity, size, strength, or social status. The age of the aggressor is not a determining factor in considering whether the sexual acts are abusive.

Signs of possible sexual abuse include:

- Age-inappropriate understanding of sex
- Reluctance to be left alone with a particular person
- Inappropriate sex play
- Suggestive drawings
- Fear of being touched

Here are facts you should know about child sexual abuse:

- Child abuse occurs to as many as 25 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys before the age of 18.
- Boys or girls can be sexually abused at any age.
- Children are most likely to be abused by someone they know and trust.
- Eighty to 90 percent of sexually abused boys ages 7 to 13 are molested by acquaintances who are non-family members.
- Few sexually abused children tell anyone that they have been abused. Children are usually told to keep the abuse secret by a series of threats, bribes, or physical force.
- Children might feel responsible for abuse and fear an angry reaction from their parents.

Preteen and teenage boys are especially at risk for sexual abuse. The physical and hormonal changes caused by puberty and their natural curiosity about their new emotions and feelings make these youth likely targets for child molesters. The normal desire of boys this age to show their independence from their parents' control adds to the risk. This combination might keep boys this age from asking their parents or trusted adults for help when faced with sexual abuse.

## **Sexual Molestation by Peers**

Approximately one-third of sexual molestation occurs at the hands of other children. If a child tells you about club initiations in which sexual activity is included, or if a child tells you about inappropriate (deception, pressure, or force) sexual activity by other children, this is a form of sexual abuse and you need to take steps to stop the activity. This form of sexual misconduct is serious and cannot be ignored. Children who molest other children need professional help. They are much more likely to respond to treatment when young than as adults (who were molesters as children and received no intervention).

## **Signs of Sexual Abuse**

The clearest indication that a child has been sexually abused is disclosure of the incident. Children often do not report their abuse, so camp leaders must be alert for the other signs, such as:

Hints, indirect messages  
Seductive or provocative behavior  
Physical symptoms

The following are common signs that children are upset; and if present for more than a few days, these signs could indicate that something is wrong and the child needs help. They might also be signs that the child is being sexually abused:

Self-destructive behavior  
Unhappiness  
Regression  
Difficulty at school

## **Three R's of Youth Protection**

Recognize that anyone could be a child molester and be aware of situations that could lead to abuse.

Resist advances made by child molesters to avoid being molested.

Report molestation or attempted molestation to authorities.

## **Reporting Requirements**

Each state has specific reporting requirements. Camp leaders will be instructed in the proper procedures for their local council. In all cases, allegations of abuse in the program must be reported to the Scout executive. At some point, a youth in your care may disclose that he or she has been abused.

DON'T panic or overreact to the information disclosed by the child.

DON'T criticize the child.

DO respect the child's privacy.

DO make sure the child feels that he or she is not to blame

Information adapted from the Boy Scouts of America website:

<http://www.scouting.org/Training/YouthProtection.aspx> and the Camp Leadership – Youth Protection Begins with You: A Guide for Camp Staff and Unit Leaders.