



Have questions?

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Online Help Center  
<http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>

Stop It Now!<sup>®</sup> 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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## Talking To Children and Teens

Experience has taught us that actions by adults can be more effective than expecting kids to protect themselves from sexual abuse. Still, we know that children \* also need accurate, age-appropriate information about child sexual abuse and confidence that adults they know will support them.

Clear communication is a cornerstone of effective prevention. Make sure other adults understand the expectations kids will have of them and how their cooperation will help keep kids safe.

### When teaching kids about others' behavior towards them

#### *Use concrete examples*

Remember that in as many as 90% of situations where a child is sexually harmed, the child (and often their family) knows the adult, youth or child who is acting in a sexually inappropriate way. When talking with kids about child sexual abuse, use examples and situations that make that reality clear. (For example, "What if you are at a friend's house and her older brother asks you to play a game that makes you feel weird or uncomfortable or involves something like touching or taking off your clothes?"

"Sometimes relatives, like grandparents or uncles or cousins, don't understand the rules and touch kids in ways they're not supposed to. If that ever happens, be sure to tell Mom or Dad or another adult you trust so that we can help that person learn the rules.")

#### *Model healthy boundaries*

Sometimes we unintentionally confuse kids by insisting they hug Grandma even when they don't want to, or by saying, "Do whatever the babysitter tells you to do." Help your children practice setting healthy boundaries. When children tell us they don't want to hug and kiss everyone at a family gathering, support them by helping them find another way to show respect to family members (such as shaking hands, high fives, saying goodbye). Model saying "no" and assure your children that their "no" will be respected. If others disrespect or ignore your child's limits, it's your job to explain your family rules and insist on your child's rights to set boundaries.

#### *Talk about touch*

When talking with children about touch, remember that sexual touch can be very confusing. In a strictly physical sense, sexual touch can feel good and for a victim of sexual abuse, this can create more shame and confusion about the situation. "If my body responded this way, this must mean that I liked it and wanted it to happen."

Many families prefer to talk about "secret" touch or touch that makes a child uncomfortable. "It is not OK for anyone to touch you in any way that makes you feel uncomfortable—not Mom, Dad, aunts, uncles, teachers or even your friends. Your body is yours and yours alone and you always have a right to say no to someone."

*\*A note on terms:* Stop It Now! uses the terms "child," "children" or "kids" interchangeably to mean those persons under the age of 18. The terms "children and adolescents (or teens)" may be used in instances where it is important to emphasize the differences between children age 12 and under ("children") and age 13 or older ("adolescent," "teens" or "teenagers.")

### ***Explain about tricks***

Some people who sexually abuse children use tricks or bribes to keep kids from telling. The abusive person might promise a gift or allow a forbidden privilege; or they might tell the child that it is their fault or that no one will believe them, or that if the child tells anyone they will hurt their family or pet, etc. Explain these tricks to your children and reassure them that you can handle the situation, even if they didn't object to the sexual interaction at the time. "As your parent, aunt, guardian, I will always be here to keep you safe and will always believe you and love you." "If someone touches you in an uncomfortable way it is never your fault." "They just tell you that to trick you."

### ***Involve other adults***

Children need to know that there are other adults in whom they can confide. Sometimes children are afraid that they will "get in trouble" if they tell their parents about something that happened. This fear can be reinforced by the person who is harming them. Help your children to realize that there are other adults who can help them if they don't want to talk to Mom or Dad or if Mom or Dad is doing something that concerns them. Ask "If you don't feel comfortable talking to me about something, who else can you talk to?" or "What if something happens at school, church, the park, who could you talk to?"

### ***Be approachable***

By initiating conversations about healthy sexual boundaries, by answering questions accurately and respectfully, by handling disclosures calmly and reassuringly, you send the message that you are someone your child (or other children you care about) can talk to even when something has already happened.

## **When teaching kids about their behavior towards others**

### ***Don't miss a real prevention opportunity***

In more than 30 percent of child sexual abuse cases, a child is sexually harmed by someone under 18 years old, frequently by another child or adolescent who may not fully understand the impact of their actions. Most parents talk with their children about how to keep themselves safe from others who may sexually harm them. We also need to talk to our children about why it is so important for them not to harm others. "Just like it is not OK for you to hit and hurt other people, it is not OK for you to use tricks or force to touch other people in a way that makes them uncomfortable."

### ***Learn about child development***

Children are born as healthy sexual beings. Just as they are curious about bugs, airplanes and animals, they will be curious about their bodies and other people's bodies. As parents, it is very helpful to be knowledgeable about healthy sexual development so we are able to tell the difference between expected behaviors and behaviors that may be cause for concern.

### ***Clarify the rules***

When you find your child exploring his or her own body or playing "doctor" with another child, calmly acknowledge what you've seen and set clear expectations. "It looks like you and Janie are comparing your bodies. Now get dressed. And remember, even though it feels good to take our clothes off, we keep our clothes on when we're playing." If a child continues behaviors after you've set clear limits, you may want to talk with a professional. To find information, guidance and resources, visit our Online Help Center, <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org> or for help in finding a professional, see our Resources for Specialized Therapy, [http://www.stopitnow.org/resources\\_treatment](http://www.stopitnow.org/resources_treatment).



### Age of consent: special concerns for teens

Teens need information not only about child sexual abuse but also about the laws of consent in their state. As our judicial system holds more teens responsible as adults, there are significant and long-lasting results for teens who engage in illegal sexual behaviors, even with other teens who are close in age. "I know you and your girlfriend love each other but you are 19 years old and she is 15 and that makes being sexual with each other illegal. If she gets pregnant or her parents press charges, you could have to register as a sex offender for the rest of your life. It is important for both of you to wait until you are older

### Resources for talking with children about child sexual abuse prevention

- Friedman, Norman. (2006) *Inoculating your children against sexual abuse: What every parent should know*. Booksurge.com
- Hindman, Jan. (1998) *A very touching book*. Baker City, OR: AlexAndria Associates.
- Wurtele, Sandy and Feather Berkower. (2010) *Off limits: A parent's guide to keeping kids safe from sexual abuse*. Brandon, VT: Safer Society Press