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Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children

PREVENTION TOOLS

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Stop It Now! 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 with Parents about Children's Sexual Behaviors

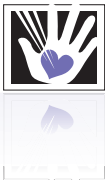
Bringing up concerns about a child's sexual behavior to his or her parents may feel awkward and even scary, but when you become aware of a child engaged in unhealthy sexual activity, it's time for action steps. Parents who can work together and communicate concerns they have about children are setting the stage for a safer and healthier environment for all children involved.

Why should I get involved?

- Children need help when it comes to addressing behaviors that are or could become sexually harmful to other children. If children are never told what is okay and acceptable, and what is not okay, then they simply may not know when their behavior has crossed the line.
- It's possible that the parents of a child with sexual problem behaviors are aware that there may be a problem but feel alone and unsure. Talking with them, and offering support, may help them to take necessary steps to help their child.
- The parents may not be aware of their child's behaviors. By sharing observations and concerns, parents can become better informed about their child and can respond and seek out help.
- There is the possibility that a child with sexually harmful behaviors may be a victim of undisclosed abuse. When you speak up, a child may receive necessary help.
- Children who have acted in a sexually harmful manner are very different than adults who sexually abuse children. With care and support, as well as professional treatment when appropriate, children can learn what behaviors are healthy and safe. Early intervention is crucial, and research shows that when children get help early, they are able to change their behaviors.
- Children who are behaving in sexually harmful ways could continue harming others, and their behaviors may become more serious and could escalate.

Preparation

- Role-play what you'll say with another trusted adult.
- If there are other adults who share your concerns and observations, consider having them partner with you when you talk to the parents.
- Be aware that parents may have different perceptions and expectations of children's behavior due to their own culture, upbringing, and experiences.
- Ask the parent when it would be a good time to have a private conversation about their child. It is hard for anyone to respond to potentially difficult information when they are in between play dates, appointments and rushing home to prepare dinner. Making a set time to have this talk will help everyone be less distracted.
- Choose the setting for your conversation thoughtfully. The conversation should be private, away from the potential of having children overhear it.
- Prepare yourself for a parent's first reaction, which may appear angry, defensive or even dismissive. They may "attack" your own family as a way to avoid thinking



about their own child's needs. Realize that first reactions are not set in stone, and that it can take some time to digest information that can be upsetting or shocking.

- If personal safety is a concern, do not have this conversation.

Having the talk

Some Do's:

- Stick to the facts. Describe behaviors personally witnessed or that a child has reported to you. Share only first-hand knowledge.
- Present a "we're on the same side" approach by focusing on a shared commitment to children's safety, and emphasizing that you want what is safest for all children.
- Share your feelings. Consider adding, "I'm nervous talking to you about this, but I care about our children and I think this is important." Admitting that you're anxious will help make you easier to relate to and help the parent not feel under the spot light as much.
- Include the positive. If genuine, include positive observations about the child, such as "We love having your son over to play, he is so creative and always manages to make us laugh".
- Be prepared to provide the parent with resources for help and information.
- Create a safety plan together. Identify boundaries and behaviors that all the adults agree on, for example: children are only allowed to play in common areas, with open doors when playing in each other's home.

And Some Don'ts:

- Avoid labels or diagnoses. Do not assume that you know why a child is behaving the way he or she is.
- Avoid judgment and criticism. Put yourself in these parents' shoes.
- Don't compare one child to another. Avoid statements such as, "I've never known another child who has behaved like this" or "My child hasn't had this problem with anyone else."

Ending the talk

- Thank the parent for having the conversation with you. You may want to acknowledge that you know it was a difficult conversation and that you really appreciate how much he or she cares for their child.
- Ask for follow up. Let them know that you look forward to hearing how they address the concern, and to hearing from them.

Prevention and safety planning between parents

- If you are a parent, get to know the parents of the children who are in your child's life. When there are difficult issues that need to be discussed, it will be easier to talk about the concern when it doesn't feel like you're talking to a stranger.
- Parents who work together may benefit from making a "pact" with each other that states that anyone who sees something concerning in any of their children, will make a phone call right away and that there is a "don't blame the messenger" agreement.

Be confident that sharing your observations and concerns is the right thing to do. The hardest part is finding the right words and getting started. By speaking up, you can help a child stay safe.