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# Sexual abuse: Don't Avoid the Subject



By **Andrea Ciccocioppo**

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You can't turn on the news lately without hearing a story about accusations of sexual abuse against children. No parent wants to think it could happen to his or her child, but yet many parents now find themselves wondering if they need to be concerned.

Statistics show there isn't a child molester lurking on every corner. Research suggests abuse rates from 8 to 20 percent. That rate is vague because the majority of child victims—73 percent—don't tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year; 45 percent of victims don't talk about it for at least 5 years; and some never disclose their abuse, according to Darkness to Light, a global nonprofit that works to prevent child sex abuse by educating adults.

It's up to parents to educate themselves—and their children—about sexual abuse.

"We can't rely on 'the system' to prevent children from being sexually abused. We don't have a system for prevention," said Deborah Donovan Rice, executive director of Stop It Now!, an organization designed to prevent the sexual abuse of children. "We have systems for investigating reports, but we don't have systems that mobilize when we're worried and get an icky feeling in our gut when seeing someone interact with a child. We have to be the system that protects kids."

## Start with toddler talk

Protecting your child from abuse begins with educating them. When children are old enough to understand and use language is the time to educate and empower them. "You always raise the issue from when they're young enough to understand. If you wait until they start asking questions, you've waited too long," said Andrea Taroli, assistant professor of pediatrics and director of the Child Safety Team at Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital.

Educating your child about sexual abuse doesn't have to be frightening—for the parent or the child. "Explain in a very calm way," Taroli said. "If the mother appears to be scared, the child is going to be scared."

And, Taroli urged, lay a solid foundation of education for your child before you delve into details. "When they are toddlers, teach them that there are some parts of their body that are private and no one is to look or touch. Tell mommy if that happens," she suggested. "Be specific with identifying and labeling terms. "We encourage people to teach proper names, but just as long as they know the difference between 'front' and 'back' and 'private.'"

As children get older, they should be given reminders. "This needs to be a topic of discussion every once in a while as they grow through stages," Taroli said.

The conversations need to be updated as the child gets older. "School age children need to

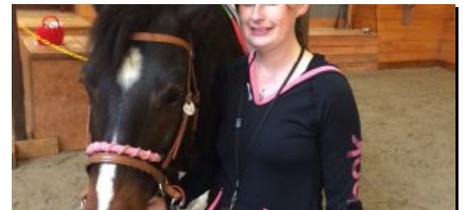


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understand that no matter who it is that wants to touch them, it's not OK," she said.

Even teenagers need a reminder. "They may think you're being ridiculous," Taroli said. "But it's important to make sure they understand what the risks are."

### **Educate yourself**

It's not typically "stranger danger" that threatens our children. "The vast majority [of sexual abuse perpetrators] are family members or someone who the family knows and trusts," Taroli said.

"Just because someone seems really nice, has a good job and is not on a sex offender registry doesn't mean they are safe with your children," Donovan Rice said. "We need to open our eyes to the reality of who sexually abuses children."

"The responsibility needs to fall to parents," Taroli added. "If kids don't like Uncle Johnny, you'd better listen to that, don't just dismiss it."

And the majority of young children are victimized in their own homes, Taroli said.

Make sure your child isn't placed in a risky situation. "The vast majority [of child sexual abuse cases] occurs when a child is in a one-on-one situation with an adult," she said. "You need to know where your kids are and who they are with. If they're going to a sleepover, you need to know the people who live where your kid is sleeping."

Taroli said parents need to go over safety issues with their children. "When they are young, it's helpful to start teaching them a code word they can use if they feel frightened," she said. "Tell them they can always call if they don't feel comfortable and say that code word and you'll come get them."

### **Know the signs**

For parents who may be worried about whether or not their children have been abused, there is no one obvious sign. Most children's reactions to molestation are very general (but can come on suddenly) and include anxiety, depression, withdraw, poor academic performance and acting out.

Very young children may demonstrate inappropriate sexual behaviors. "Young children who don't understand what's happened to them will try to understand by recreating the activity with dolls or other children," Taroli said. "Those behaviors are out of the norm and should be a red flag."

Other behaviors that could indicate abuse, according to Stop It Now! include: nightmares/sleep problems without an explanation; a sudden change in eating habits; leaves "clues" that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues; develops new or unusual fear of certain people or places; refuses to talk about a secret shared with an adult or older child; suddenly has money, toys or other gifts without reason; self-injury; sexual promiscuity; and fear of intimacy or closeness

Donovan Rice said it's crucial for parents to do all they can to protect their children from abuse and to identify it and get help if necessary. "Be the adult who is there for children and young people. Be the adult who recognizes warning signs," she said. "Be the adult who's a broken record when it comes to speaking out about concerning behaviors."

### **If you have concerns**

Parents whose children have exhibited unusual behavior or who are concerned that there may be abuse need to seek help, said Andrea Taroli, associate professor of pediatrics and director of the Child Safety Team at Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital.

"The first thing is to ask the child, 'Where did you learn that behavior?'" Taroli said.

"Don't lead and suggest things. Ask very general questions. Even though a parent may be upset or horrified, don't yell or be judgmental. Stay calm. One of the biggest mistakes people make is to yell or punish. The kid will never talk about it."

If your child is not forthcoming or you have concerns, go to a pediatrician for help. If the pediatrician is concerned he/she will contact Children & Youth Services. Taroli said parents shouldn't be intimidated by the agency's involvement. "What you're asking for is help from an



agency trained to interview children.” They will determine if there is reason for concern and suggest ways to help the child.

**For more information:**

To find out more about child sexual abuse, visit one of these sites:

**Children’s Resource Center**, a service of PinnacleHealth,  
[http://www.pinnaclehealth.org/Conditions---Treatments/Services/Children-s-Health/Services/Children-s-Resource-Center-\(Child-Abuse-Services\).aspx](http://www.pinnaclehealth.org/Conditions---Treatments/Services/Children-s-Health/Services/Children-s-Resource-Center-(Child-Abuse-Services).aspx)

**Darkness to Light**, a global nonprofit that works to prevent child sex abuse by educating adults.  
[www.d2l.org](http://www.d2l.org)

**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. [www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)

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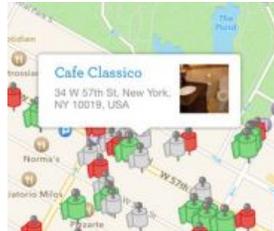
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