

Help your child be *safe, strong, and independent*

DO YOU HAVE FEARS FOR YOUR CHILDREN?

Most parents do. If you want to help your children prevent physical or sexual abuse, talk to them. Begin talking with your children when they are very young and continue the discussions through adolescence.

Are you frightened by the idea of talking to a child about abuse, particularly sexual abuse? Most parents are. Frightening your children, corrupting their innocence and trust, and actually harming them may be some of your concerns.

That fear is understandable, but not necessary. There are several ways you can talk to your child, even if he or she is very young. You want to help him feel safe and more confident rather than fearful and distrusting.

WHEN AND WHERE

Find the right time and place to talk! Don't rush into abuse prevention discussions after hearing a frightening abuse report on the news. Your own fear will frighten your child if you talk about the incident right away.

Incorporate talking about abuse prevention into everyday life situations using "teachable moments."

Use cartoons or children's books, for example. When a character is hit in a cartoon or a child is hurt in a book, discuss what happened with your child. Point out that hitting isn't right, that children have a right to be safe and not to be hurt by adults or others.

FINDING THE WORDS

Don't use big and frightening words to discuss safety skills. Talk about "how to stay safe" rather than "how dangerous strangers may be." Use words like "safe and unsafe touching" instead of rape or sexual abuse.

Discuss prevention skills with your partner before beginning a discussion with your child. Reach an agreement about what language will be used.

Make yourself comfortable with anatomically correct language. Your child will sense it if you are not comfortable. Teach terms such as penis, vulva, buttocks, and anus to your children when they are four or five years old. If you don't teach them the proper terms at a young age, they will soon learn incorrect words from schoolmates or friends.

THE FOCUS

In teaching your child to cross the street safely, you focus on teaching your child the safe behavior, not what the car will do. Focus the conversation on what a child can do if faced

with a dangerous or uncomfortable situation to help him or her increase their confidence and reduce fear.

SELF-CONFIDENCE

Help your child believe in his or her own abilities to be safe. After a conversation about safety, tell your child that you know that he or she will remember safety skills at home, in the neighborhood, and at school. Give your child a hug, and show them you believe in them.

PRACTICE

Review safety skills regularly and especially before your child goes on new, independent activities.

DISCIPLINE

Good Touching

We hear a lot about bad touching. The newspapers are filled with stories of sexual abuse. Many parents, especially dads, worry about touching their children for fear it will be misinterpreted. Stop worrying. All of us need to be touched. Physical affection helps us feel loved. Hugging and kissing children, in nonsexual ways, is important to their development. Hug your children often—they like to feel close. Remind your children that safe touches like these never have to be kept secret.

Spanking

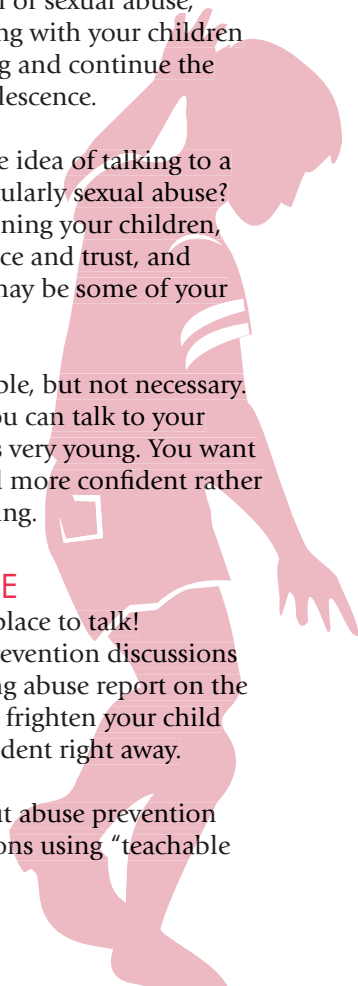
Spanking isn't a good parenting technique. When you spank your child he or she is more likely to fear and resent violence than to consider the reason for the penalty. Certainly not all spanking is child abuse, but if it leaves a mark on a child's body or if the child is harmed in any way, and if anything other than an open hand is used to spank the child, then it is abuse.

We expect children to use their words rather than their fists when they are mad or upset, so we should set the example. Spanking sends the wrong message to children that it is O.K. to hit when he or she is stronger than the other person or is very angry.

STRANGER DANGER

Research clearly shows that 85 percent of abused children are abused by adults they know and trust. Often these adults are family members; youth group leaders, or other adults who can develop relationships with children over time.

Tell your child that abuse from anyone is an unsafe secret. Children need to know that, sometimes, an adult the family knows and trusts might try to touch a child's body inappropriately. Children's bodies are their own



and they must have the right to determine how their bodies can be treated. Children need to know it is never right for an adult to touch their bodies in a secret way.

PREVENTION SKILLS

Provide options to your children to use if faced with a threatening situation. When opportunities arise, discuss these with each child.

1. Run away from danger. Run to school, to a neighbor's, to a store, or home. Run to the nearest safe place. Help your child determine all safe locations along regular routes he or she travels.

2. Yell loudly and don't stop yelling until you are safe. Practice this with your child since we teach him or her that yelling is not O.K. most of the time. For instance, practice yelling with your child in the basement with doors closed, or in the yard.

3. Define safe and unsafe secrets. Surprise parties and gifts are safe secrets; they don't make a child feel afraid. Safe secrets eventually are told to someone. Unsafe secrets often make children feel scared or uncomfortable. Unsafe secrets always should be shared with an adult who will help.

4. Brainstorm the names of safe adults with your child. Children need more than Mom and Dad. Teachers, Grandma or Grandpa, a friend's mom, or a neighbor all might be safe adults to your child.

5. Many children believe that saying "no" to an adult is wrong and that they will be punished. Give your child permission to say "no" to anyone who frightens him or her with requests.

6. Teach them that "Your body is your own; you have my permission and you have my help to take care of it" or "Nobody should touch your body without your permission."

7. Let them know "Whenever you have a problem, no matter how scary or embarrassing, I will listen, believe you, and help. If you share problems with me I can help and protect you from harm."

AGE-APPROPRIATE INFORMATION ABOUT SAFETY

Preschoolers don't need much education since they should always be supervised. Elementary school-age children need safety information related to their independent activities. Teens need additional information about dating safety.

SAFE, STRONG, AND INDEPENDENT

All parents want their children to grow up feeling safe, strong, and free. Parenting is a difficult task. It takes practice. Communication is the most important ally parents have to ensure their children's health. Listening to children and talking honestly with them is a good foundation for practicing prevention skills.

All of us have the right
to grow up
free from abuse.

If you want more information about abuse prevention and your children, please contact your local librarian. There are many books on the subject geared specifically to parents. Or:

CALL PREVENT CHILD ABUSE IOWA
1-800-CHILDREN

PARENTS ANONYMOUS®
515-255-9490

CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL OF IOWA
CHILD PROTECTION PROGRAM
319-353-6128
(Voicemail)



Child Protection Program
Center for Disabilities and Development
100 Hawkins Drive
Iowa City Iowa, 52242
319-353-6128 (Voice mail)
or 319-356-7880 Tel
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www.uihealthcare.com/children

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