

TALK ABOUT IT

Starting the conversation with your children about sexual abuse is critical, but it isn't always easy. It is normal to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed and not know where to start. It helps to remember these conversations aren't about sex, they're about safety. Try to be open to questions and comments, and respond in a way that keeps the conversation going. Having conversations early in a child's life, openly, and on a regularly basis is the best way to keep your child safe. Here are a few simple ways to get started and weave conversations about body safety into everyday life.

Incorporate Body Safety into Family Safety Rules

Protecting children from sexual abuse is a safety issue just like crossing the street or wearing a helmet. An easier way to talk about safety rules for private body parts is to incorporate them into your family's general safety rules. For example, never cross the street without checking for traffic, never use a sharp tool without an older person's help, never ride in a car without wearing a seatbelt, and never let anyone touch your private parts.

Use Everyday Moments

Talking to your child about touching and private body parts can be simple if you incorporate it into daily occurrences such as bed or bath time, reading time, and mealtime. Pay attention to what your child says and the questions they ask, and use their comments as opportunities to further the conversation about safety. Just remember, try to remain open to questions and comments, and respond in a way that keeps the conversation going.

For example:

- **Talking About Private Parts:** When children are young and still need help dressing and bathing, it's not unusual for them to express curiosity about their private parts. Experts recommend that when kids begin asking questions and learning the names of their body parts, it's important to include the correct names of their private parts, i.e. nipples, breasts, bottom, penis, vagina, and anus.

Create Simple Rules

Having clear and simple rules for children of any age gives a child boundaries and guidance. Teach these rules to your child at an early age and repeat them frequently so you both become comfortable with the conversation.

- **Rule 1, The Touching Rule:** A person should never touch your private body parts except to keep you healthy.
- **Rule 2, Never Keep Secrets Rule:** Never keep secrets about touching.
- **Rule 3, Always Ask First Rule:** Always ask me or the person in charge of you first when someone wants you to do something or go somewhere, or wants to give you something. (This rule helps protect your child from possible danger. It also ensures you know who your child is with and what your child is doing.)
- **Rule 4, The Bathing Suit Rule:** Your private body parts are the parts covered by a bathing suit. They are private because they're not to be seen or touched by others.

Remind children that:

- If someone breaks the Touching Rule, you should tell an adult, and keep telling until someone believes you.
- It is never your fault if someone breaks the Touching Rule.
- It is never too late to tell someone about a broken Touching Rule.

AGE-APPROPRIATE CONVERSATIONS

The type of conversation you have with your child depends on your child's age. Teaching kids rules helps keep them safe, but it's hard to know what is age-appropriate and how to say things that your child will understand and retain. Here are a few guidelines to follow when talking with kids of different ages about how to stay safe from sexual abuse.

Five and Under

- Keep rules simple and easy to remember
- Start with children as young as 2 or 3 when they are learning parts of the body. Ensure that you use anatomically correct terms for private parts
- Review the rules frequently
- Example:
 - "A bigger person should NEVER touch your private body parts except to keep you healthy."

Six and Up

- Be more specific with the rules and discuss them regularly
- Continue to go over rules frequently so you and your child get more comfortable
- Examples:
 - "No one should ever touch your private body parts except to keep you healthy."
 - "You shouldn't touch other people's private body parts either."

Nine and Up

- Be more detailed about the rules
- Since your child can read, rules can be posted in a place where they'll be seen frequently
- Examples:
 - "You should NEVER touch or be made to look at another person's private body parts."
 - "No one should take photos of your private body parts, or show you photos of other people's private parts."

PRACTICE THE RULES

Research shows that kids are more likely to remember rules and skills if they keep practicing them. Try incorporating practice sessions into your routine.

Review

Frequently review your family's private body parts rules and remind your child often that:

- It's never your fault if someone else breaks the Touching Rule.
- Never keep secrets about touching.
- It is never too late to tell someone about a touching problem.

Practice

Practice the Always Ask First Rule and the "What If" game by asking your child to show you what he or she would do in certain situations. Start with general safety situations and then extend the practice to include touching situations.

Examples:

- "What would you do if someone you know offered you a ride home?"
- "What would you do if your friend wanted you to hold a gun?"
- "What would you do if you were in the park and someone you don't know asked you to help look for a lost ball or a puppy or kitten?"
- "What would you do if a bigger kid who lives in our neighborhood wanted to play a touching game with you?"
- "What would you do if someone you knew and liked broke the private body parts rule?"

Remind your child that "Ask First" rules apply even if the person is someone you both know. As your child gets older the rule can be adapted to "always check in," so you know where they are and who they're with.

Teach Assertiveness

Teach your child assertiveness at the same time you practice the "What If" game. It will help better prepare your child for unsafe situations. Assertive behavior includes the following:

- Standing up tall with your head up and shoulders back
- Facing the other person
- Speaking in a calm, firm voice
- Using respectful words

Learning assertiveness takes time and practice like everything else. Whenever your child is practicing saying words/phrases that mean "no," encourage him or her to be assertive. Let your child know which parts she or he is doing well and which parts need more practice.

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

If a child has been sexually abused, it can be very hard for them to tell anyone about it. Kids often don't directly tell anyone if they've experienced sexual abuse—instead they'll take a more indirect route or display sudden behavioral, physical, and emotional changes. Most of the changes aren't specific to sexual abuse but can happen with several kinds of trauma or stress. Be alert to these signs, determine why they're happening, and seek help immediately.

Behavioral Signs

- Acting younger or reverting to doing younger tasks and activities
- Fear of being alone with a certain person
- Sudden, unexplained fears of certain places or kinds of people with a particular feature
- Fear of being touched
- Changes in quality of schoolwork or grades
- Substance abuse, self-harm, or delinquency
- Excessive play with their own private body parts
- Persistent sex play with friends, toys, or pets
- Frequent drawings that have sexual content
- Unusual, persistent, or developmentally inappropriate questioning about human sexuality

Physical Signs

- Eating more or less than usual
- Having trouble sleeping, walking, or sitting
- Soiling or wetting clothes, or bedwetting (or an increase, if it happens already)
- Stomachaches
- Physical pain or itching in the genital area
- Underwear stained with blood or other discharge
- Rectal bleeding

Emotional Signs

- Severe anxiety (such as nightmares or clinging)
- Depression (such as withdrawal, low self-esteem, thinking about or attempting suicide, or frequent crying)
- Extreme anger (for example, tantrums, aggression, or increased irritability)

If you suspect your child has been sexually abused contact a counselor or therapist who is trained in working with children and then immediately report the incident to the police or your local child protection agency. For more information, visit www.earlyopenoften.org/resources.

For more tips, tools, and a series of short videos to guide parents visit www.earlyopenoften.org.