

7 Tips for Talking to Kids about Sexual Abuse

Don't be afraid or embarrassed to talk to your kids about this important issue.

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The topic hits the news and you shudder. Nausea sinks into your stomach. Another sexual abuse scandal has been revealed. "Please never let this happen to my children," you think. But here's the thing, educating them early is the first step to prevention.

Talking with your children about sexual abuse may feel uncomfortable, but it's important to have the discussion, experts say, because you're protecting them by providing information that can help keep them safe. Here are seven tips to help:

1. **Start the Discussion Early**

Parents can begin the discussion when their kids start to spend more time away from home -- usually around age 4 or 5 -- when they're attending school, [after-school activities](#) or camp.

A high-profile case, like the 2011 Jerry Sandusky Penn State scandal, can also be a good springboard for discussions on sex abuse -- either to start the conversation, reinforce safety rules and find out if they have any questions or concerns.

"Those events in the news provide a wonderful opportunity for parents to talk with their kids about what's okay, what's not okay and to think about it," says Dr. Bob Sege, a pediatrics professor at Boston University School of Medicine and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Child Abuse and

Neglect. "It's wise for parents to use those things that everybody's talking about as an easy way to talk about it."

2. **Know What to Talk About**

Sege urges parents to explain to their kids what grownups should never be doing with children. Bring up rules like:

- Adults shouldn't be interested in your private parts -- body parts that are covered by a bathing suit
- Adults never need your help with their bodies
- Adults never should tell kids to keep something secret from their parents
- What types of "touching" are allowed and the difference between hugs and touches that make you feel weird

Tell your children: "If an adult does any of these things, you should tell your parents," he says.

3. **Focus on the Actions -- Not the People**

It's crucial, Sege says, for parents to teach their children to focus on inappropriate behaviors, not on individual people. That's because the vast majority of sex attacks on kids are committed by people they know. Instead of the "stranger danger" philosophy you may have learned -- kids need to be prepared for dangers closer to home too.

"It's not who the person is. It's what they do," Sege says. "Most sexual abuse is by people who gain the trust of the children and who the children wouldn't consider strangers. Not a single one of those boys [in the Sandusky case] would have considered the coach a stranger."

Psychotherapist Dr. Robi Ludwig also stresses the importance of telling your child that when it comes to inappropriate touching, it doesn't matter if the person is a relative, friend, coach, teacher, clergyman or camp counselor.

"The important piece here is just because it's an adult and just because it seems to be somebody thought of well, that doesn't change things," she says. "If somebody is well-respected and has power, it's easy to then think, 'Oh I should listen to what this person has to say.'"

4. **Encourage Questions**

Your kids should know that it's okay to ask questions. If they don't understand what

you're talking about or a scandal that they hear about on the news, they should know they can come to you.

Experts say you should follow your child's lead with any questions. If children wonder why somebody would want to touch them, Ludwig says you can tell them it's because "they're not well."

5. **Tell Kids to Come to You Immediately**

As with any difficult topic, parents should let their kids know they can come to them with any concerns.

"The more topics you can allow to be discussed in the household...the safer your child will be," Ludwig says. "You become a point person for who they go to."

6. **Don't Scare Your Kids**

Though it can be terrifying for parents to imagine their children being assaulted, parents should try not to instill fear in their children when talking about sexual abuse.

"You simply say, 'Most people are great, but it's important to protect yourself in the event you meet up with someone who's not,'" Ludwig says. "If you present the world like it's a dangerous place, then they'll be afraid."

Sege, too, says it's important not to frighten children and says graphic details are not necessary, especially for young children.

7. **Incorporate Tools**

Sometimes you need a little help starting a discussion like this. Check out books like [My Body Belongs to Me](#) and resources from organizations like [Prevent Child Abuse America](#).

Educating children on sexual abuse won't reduce the number of child assaults but hopefully will make your child less likely to become a victim, Sege says, because predators are looking for kids who will keep their secret.

"Give [your children] the tools and skills to protect themselves," Sege recommends. "I view it as giving them street smarts."