

How to talk with CHILDREN about preventing sexual abuse

Sexual abuse, especially of small children, is a difficult subject to consider. Parents — and other caring adults — have a hard time even thinking about abuse happening to their little ones. But sadly, one out of four girls and one out of eight boys experience sexual abuse before age 18. This booklet offers suggestions on how parents or guardians can talk to their children about this issue. In our sacred vocation as parents, God calls us to provide our children with love, guidance and nurture. Our children look to us to help them grow into the wonderful people God created them to be.

How to teach your child about sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is when someone older or more powerful involves a child or adolescent in sexual activity. Teaching children what they need to know about sexual abuse really can't happen all at once. It takes time and it works best if you use a "building block" approach to teaching your child. If your child is already passed the stages in this book, don't try to teach everything at once. Just take it a step at a time. Take time to plan when and where you want to talk with your child. Take time to read through this information. It is intended to show you when your child is ready to learn different parts of self-protection. Determine your child's readiness based on when your child is ready to learn similar lessons. Build information about personal safety into all the other parts of learning for your child. Don't be afraid. If you are calm and reasonable, your child will be too. If you approach this the way you would any other danger, like crossing the street, your child is unlikely to be scared. You'll want to bring up the topic many times, just as you do any other safety lesson, to reinforce the concepts. People who sexually abuse children count on children not knowing about their bodies or about what is allowed. They test the child's sense of personal boundaries and ability to react if a boundary is crossed. Remember: even though you may have talked with your child, most children are not able to protect themselves completely. Protection is still up to parents and adults.

What to teach your child

1. Your child will need to know the names of body parts. Most experts agree that children should learn the anatomically correct names for their body parts.
2. Your child needs to know the rules about various body parts, including the genitals, breasts and buttocks.
3. Your child needs to know what to do if someone breaks the rules about their body and their boundaries.

Step 1. Teach the names of body parts

When your children are ready to learn the names of all body parts, such as elbows and knees, don't leave out the chest, breasts, vagina, penis and buttocks. Use natural opportunities to talk. For example, bath time is a great opportunity to talk with your child about his body and to learn the names of body parts. Just knowing that it is OK to talk about the more personal areas of the body is a big step for children.

Step 2. Teach rules about body parts

When your children are ready to start learning all safety rules, such as not touching a hot pot on the stove, it is time to teach rules about body parts. Teach your child that the body is a gift from God and we should all respect the gift of our body. Respecting and loving our bodies means that

there are rules about how we treat our bodies. Rules are normal for children. It is something they understand and know how to apply.

Teaching about rules makes things less scary and helps you avoid talking about aspects of sexual abuse that young children are not able to understand or use to self-protect. Teach your child that each part of our body has different rules for how we can show God how much we appreciate our bodies. For example:

- Rules about our eyes are that we cannot poke them with things or poke other people's eyes with things.
- A rule about our skin is that we keep it clean by taking baths.
- Rules about our feet are that we protect our feet with shoes when we're outside and we do not stomp on other people's feet.
- Just like the other parts of the body, there are rules about our more personal areas.
- We respect our genitals by not touching them in front of other people.
- Nor is anyone else allowed to touch them, unless our parents know about it, for instance, someone helping a small child bathe.
- If someone asks your child to keep secrets from you, tries to get her to do something she isn't supposed to do or scares her, she should tell her parents.

To reinforce your rules, follow them yourself. You can model a response for your child. For example, if your child grabs or touches you inappropriately, gently remind your child, "Remember that is my breast and it is private, so please do not touch it." Some parents tell children it is wrong or sinful for someone to touch their genitals. Remember that despite our best efforts, it is still possible for a child to be abused. If your child is abused, how he or she understands what happened will depend on your explanation. Most of the time children feel responsible; that is one reason why they don't tell. Knowing that a rule has been broken is normally easier to face and to discuss than dealing with something that the child believes is terribly wrong and sinful.

Step 3. Teach what to do if someone breaks the rules

When your children are ready to start learning about how to stay out of danger, like not crossing the street alone, or what to do about bullies at school, you can teach them what to do if someone breaks the rules about their bodies. It would be wonderful if we could count on kids to tell us when someone touches them, but research shows they often do not tell. Because we know this, it is essential to provide children with some alternative skills. To reinforce these skills, occasionally ask your child, "Has anyone touched your genitals?" Or, "Has anyone tried to get you to do something you didn't like, or knew you weren't supposed to do?" That accomplishes two things: First, it lets your children know that whether someone has touched them is information you would like to have, increasing the likelihood that they will share the information with you. Second, if there is ever a time that you are concerned, it will be a question your child has come to expect and will be comfortable answering.

What to do if your child reports boundary violations

Talk with your child more about the situation. Then you have some options:

1. Observe the situation yourself.
2. Talk to the person.
3. Remove your child from the situation.
4. If it's an organized program, talk to the people in charge.

If Your Child Experiences Sexual Abuse

What to do if your child reports abuse

If your child discloses abuse, stay calm. Your child will decide how to feel based on your reaction. Listen to him or her and ask questions: “Show me what happened.” “Who else was there?” “What happened then?” Be sure your child knows it was not his or her fault and that you love your child very much. Don’t ask “Why didn’t you stop her?” or “Why didn’t you tell me right away?” Those questions can make your child feel responsible. If your child seems OK, don’t try to convince your child that he or she should be upset. Try not to criticize or threaten the person who did the abuse. Although this is a natural response, it is likely that your child knows the person well and may even care very much for the person.

Further steps to take

This is not an easy topic to discuss. While it is important for us to talk with our children, they are not always capable of stopping someone who is more powerful. It is up to adults to be the primary protectors. You have the skills you need to help your child. Your love for your child will make it easier. Pray for your child. Stay calm. Stay interested in your child’s life as a whole. Keep the lines of communication open when they are young and it will help you communicate with them when they are older.

Counseling

Children and teens may need counseling to help them heal from sexual abuse. If you need help, please contact the Catholic Charities of Central Texas **Family Counseling Office at (512) 651-6150** for information, assistance and referrals.

Mandatory Reporting of Abuse

Texas State law **requires** any adult citizen to report suspicions of abuse and/or neglect to the police or to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. If church personnel are involved, also notify the church and/or use the Notice of Concern so the appropriate steps can be taken to protect and to heal.

Child Protective Services (CPS) txabusehotline.org or 1-800-252-5400

Diocese of Austin austindiocese.org/report-abuse or (512) 949-2447