

How to Advocate Directly With Youth for their Safety and Wellbeing

By The VIRTUS Programs

Preview:

As a safe adult, you have tremendous power to make a profound difference for children—not only by recognizing and responding to unsafe situations, but also by teaching children about their rights to safety and creating environments where they can speak up and get help.

Article:

No matter what ministry or program in which you may serve—you are uniquely positioned to be a sanctuary of safety. **Safe adults are advocates, which means that we advocate for youth, and with youth for their safety and wellbeing.**

As a safe adult, you have tremendous power to make a profound difference for children—not only by recognizing and responding to unsafe situations, but also by teaching children about their rights to safety and creating environments where they can speak up and get help. To be clear, it is our responsibility as adults to create safe environments for the children in our care, and there are also things we can teach to children to help them to be safer.

There *are* skills we can teach to children to help them to better protect themselves when faced with tough situations like child sexual abuse or grooming experiences where their boundaries are violated. Teaching them these factors can also increase kids' resilience when they *are* harmed. In regular, frequent conversations, kids need to know:

- Adults are the main protectors of children and youth. Tell the youth it's not *their* job to be responsible for the safety of themselves or others. We specify this because if we don't, feeling responsible for their own safety and the welfare of their friends can increase their guilt and shame when abuse does happen, making it harder for them to talk about it. Instead, tell them that they can *help* keep their friends safe by communicating with a safe adult when something is amiss—even if they promised not to tell.
- It's never okay to keep unsafe secrets from safe adults like parents. Promising "not to tell" about unsafe secrets puts them, and their friends, more at risk. Let them know it's always best to tell a safe adult when abuse is happening, or has happened. This is the best way to help themselves and their friends.
- That they have a *right* to be safe—this isn't a privilege, it's a fundamental human right for every child to have their inherent human dignity be upheld, which includes being protected from harm. There are worldwide, societal, legal and ethical laws, policies and structures to uphold this right.
- Younger children should be aware of and use the anatomical names for their private parts. Nicknames for private parts indicate to children and others that private parts are a taboo subject. Using them puts children at greater risk, makes

it less likely that they will disclose abuse, *and* less likely that others will be able to recognize their test balloon statements or disclosures.

Children and youth also need to know:

- That they're not going to get into trouble for talking to you about safety. Tell youth, frequently, "When it comes to your safety, or the safety of one of your friends, I will believe you, and you will not get into trouble with me."
- Examples of specific safe adults with whom they can talk to when they're uncomfortable or feeling unsafe, such as a teacher, a family member, school counselor, the police and the names of other safe people in their lives.
- The characteristics of healthy relationships, particularly with regard to the concept of self-respect. For example, it's healthy and good to set boundaries, and it's necessary to get help when something is wrong. Respectful relationships include honest communication, kindness and listening to each other. Conversely, characteristics of unhealthy relationships include when someone manipulates you, doesn't honor your boundaries and pressures you to do something you don't want.
- Avoid teaching "stranger danger;" do not train children to fear others. Instead, tell them that most adults are safe, and are willing to help them.
- What unsafe physical interactions are, such as when someone tries to touch the child's private parts, force them to touch another's, or shows them sexual materials, that they should tell a safe adult right away.
- That being abused or victimized is never the child's fault, ever(!).

Children frequently feel paralyzed when experiencing abuse or boundary violations. This is typically due to the youth's nervous system reacting strongly, by placing the youth in "fight," "flight," or "freeze" mode. This can occur when a child or youth is involved in a stressful or uncomfortable situation. To help them be more prepared and overcome this in the moment, teach and role play with youth regarding their **personal boundary safety rules**. These include:

- That they are allowed to speak up and say "no" when they feel unsafe or uncomfortable (even regarding their personal physical boundaries with adults),
- That they should try to get away when they feel unsafe or uncomfortable, and to tell a safe adult right away or as soon as possible.
- All adults interacting with children should be aware of these personal boundary safety rules, and should be reminded of appropriate reactions when children attempt to assert their personal boundaries.
- A child's need to establish a boundary should always be prioritized and honored over the adult's desire for affection or respect. For example: when a child says they don't want to show affection, that's okay! *Safe adults* accept the boundary and consider providing an alternative, such as a "high five," "fist bump," or a "simple wave."
- *Safe adults* might take it a step further and let the child know that they don't have to undermine their own boundaries to please an adult. You could say, "oh, it's OK, you don't need to do anything for me, I know that you just need some space right now and I accept that!" Or simply, "Ok, I understand."

- Another safe adult may also need to intervene. This could help uphold and communicate the child's boundary, and help other adults to understand the importance of boundaries. An example could be, "He isn't feeling comfortable with doing that right now, and *he* gets to have ownership over *his* body just like you and me.

Partnering with children and youth for their safety in these ways will help ensure the safest environments possible, where children and youth can flourish. Thank you for everything you do as a safe adult to help protect children, youth and the vulnerable.