

Seven steps to keeping your child safe from abuse

No child should have to endure the pain of sexual abuse. Yet estimates tell us that about one in four girls and one in eight boys will be sexually violated some time in childhood. This tragedy can be prevented in many instances if we take the following steps, gleaned from research on abuse as well as clinical experience:

- **Make sure your children are well supervised.** Know where your children are and whom they are with. It's often best to have at least two adults and more than one child present when you are not there to supervise. One-on-one adult/child situations should generally be avoided unless the adult involved has shown him/herself to be very trustworthy. Parents should be extremely cautious about leaving young children with teens. Keep in mind that the frontal lobe of the brain (the portion responsible for impulse control) is not fully developed until the early 20s, so teens are more likely to act impulsively. Also, be sure to know who else is in a home your child is visiting. You may feel very comfortable with the babysitter, but are there older children or other family members who will have contact with your child while he is at her house? Steer clear of environments for children (child care centers, etc.) that do not allow parents to drop in anytime. Also, keep any Internet activity in common areas of the home (e.g., the family room) so you can monitor your child's web browsing. It's very easy to accidentally stumble upon inappropriate material online.
- **Keep lines of communication open between yourself and your children.** Find out what is going on in your children's lives and get to know their interests. Your

child is most likely to talk with you about a serious issue, such as concerns about an adult in her life, if you already have frequent, healthy conversations. Spend some “down time” with your children, in activities of their choosing, and use the time you have (e.g., car time) to find out about what is important to them. (One good conversation starter is, “If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?”). Perpetrators often seek out children who seem to have a weak relationship with their parents because they are less likely to tell their parents about abuse, and because they may be attracted to an adult who shows them the attention they are missing at home.

- **Know the warning signs.** Adults who show a strong preference for being with children over adults, especially being alone with kids, should arouse some suspicion. Beware of adults who engage in any actions that could be considered grooming behaviors (actions molesters use to get close to test the waters or prepare children for abuse – for more about this, see the sidebar titled “Grooming Behaviors”). In children, the following behaviors are indicators of psychological distress and can signal that a child is being abused: sudden changes in mood, changes in a child’s willingness to be around a particular adult, frequent crying, difficulty concentrating, a sudden onset of toileting accidents after a history of continence, cruel or aggressive acts towards others that seem out of character for the child, and low self-esteem. One strong indicator of abuse is unusual sexual acting-out behavior. If young children are mimicking or talking about adult sexual acts, they have likely either seen (in media or otherwise) or experienced something harmful.
- **Don’t send your children mixed messages about their bodies.** In an effort to help children protect themselves, we often tell them it is OK to say “no” to

an unwanted touch. Yet we may insist that they give Aunt Jenny a hug or kiss, even when they seem reluctant. This is an instance when actions can speak louder than words, with potentially damaging consequences. Although we may have complete trust in Aunt Jenny, we must be consistent in our message that children have the right to refuse unwanted touches of any kind from anyone. We can teach them to do this politely by saying, "I'd rather shake your hand today," or something similar. If we are not consistent in our message that children have a right to set limits on others' affection towards them, they may become confused and fail to set limits when they really need to. Likewise, parents and other adults should respect a child's modesty when it naturally develops. We must not intrude on the 6- or 7-year-old who is changing clothes or bathing and does not want to be seen by adults.

- **Encourage formal child abuse prevention policies in organizations with which your children are involved.** Many organizations that serve children now have formal policies mandating criminal background checks and setting guidelines for the behavior of employees and volunteers (e.g., limits on physical affection, contacting the child outside of the activity, etc.). Find out if your child's sports league or scouting organization has such policies. Find out about your diocese's policies for child abuse prevention in church settings. Only when we work together and resolve to be proactive can we truly reduce the damage done by sexual abuse. Every child deserves a chance to grow up happy, healthy, and protected.
- **Trust your God-given instincts.** If there is a doubt in your mind about the safety of your child, don't go against your gut feelings. Even if it will hurt someone's feelings, even if you can't put a finger on why you feel unsure about someone, do what you need to in order to keep your children safe. Your God-given

parental instincts, if you trust them, can be a helpful tool in protecting your child. When it comes to your child's well being, it's much, much better to be safe than sorry.

- **Pray daily for your child.** Since no parent can be with their children at every moment, asking for the watchful protection of their Guardian Angels should be a part of every parent's daily prayers.

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