



American Academy of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

Sexual Abuse Prevention What to do if you suspect child sexual abuse

If your child does reveal sexual abuse to you, the most important point is to take what your child says seriously. Many children who report sexual abuse are not believed. When a child's plea for help is ignored, he may not risk telling again. As a result, the child could remain a victim of abuse for months or years.

Listen to your child's explanation for disclosing the abuse. Make sure you report the abuse and help your child to understand that the abuse is not his or her fault. Give lots of love, comfort, and reassurance. If you are angry, make sure you let your child know you're not angry with him. Let your child know how brave he was to tell you and that you understand how frightened and scared he feels. This is most important if the child has been abused by a close relative or family friend. Then, **tell someone yourself and get help**. Talk to your child's pediatrician, a counselor, a police officer, a child protective service worker, or a teacher.

If the abuser is a friend or family member, you may be tempted to try and solve the problem yourself. However, when parents try to stop sexual abuse themselves, they will almost always be unsuccessful. The hard but healthy way to deal with this problem is:

- Face the issue.
- Take charge of the situation.
- Confront the problem to avoid future abuse.
- Discuss the problem with your pediatrician who can provide support and counseling.
- Report abuse to your local child protection service agency and ask about crisis support help.

Talking about sexual abuse can be very hard for the child who has been threatened or told not to tell by the abuser, who is often a trusted adult. It can be just as hard for adults to talk about it if the abuser is someone close to them. Still, in the best interest of the child, the abuse needs to be reported and the child needs to get help.

When abuse is reported, the case is investigated by the police or a social service agency that looks into reports of suspected child abuse. With the help of a doctor, the police or social services will decide whether sexual abuse took place. Sometimes the police will let social services handle the case. This may occur if the child shows no physical injury and the abuser is a family member. When a child is abused by a nonfamily member, the matter is usually handled by the police.

After sexual abuse is reported, what happens depends on the circumstances of the case. The degree of risk of more abuse to the boy or girl is of first concern to the authorities. The offender and/or the entire family may be required to attend a treatment program. The offender may even face criminal charges. If the child's safety is in question, authorities will take the offender out of the home. Usually a child can stay in the home as long as her family will take the necessary steps to protect her from further abuse, such as by asking the offender to leave the home while the problem is investigated. In any event, the child and family will need a lot of support from relatives and friends.

Stay alert to this problem and teach your children what sexual abuse is. Tell them they can and should say "no" or "stop" to adults who may threaten them sexually. Make sure they know that it's okay to tell you about any attempt to molest them--no matter who the offender may be. Let them know they can trust you and that you will not be angry with them if they tell you.

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages you to take the following steps:

- **Teach** your child about the privacy of body parts.
- **Listen** when your child tries to tell you something, especially when it seems hard for her to talk about it.
- **Give** your child enough of your time and attention.
- **Know** who your child is spending time with. Be careful about allowing your child to spend time in out-of-the-way places with other adults or older children. Make visits to your child's caregiver without notice. Ask your child about his visits to the caregiver or with child sitters.
- **Check** to see if your child's school has an abuse prevention program for the teachers and children. If it doesn't, get one started.
- **Talk** to your child about sexual abuse. A good time to do this is when your child's school is sponsoring a sexual abuse program.
- **Tell** someone in authority if you suspect that your child or someone else's child is being abused.

Prevention measures to safeguard your children from sexual abuse should begin early since a number of child abuse cases involve preschoolers. The guidelines below offer age-appropriate topics to discuss with your children.

Your child's teacher, school counselor, or pediatrician can help you teach your child to avoid sexual abuse. They know how this can be done without upsetting or scaring your child. For more information on child sexual abuse or other forms of abuse, write to the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, PO Box 2866, Chicago, IL 60690.

Your pediatrician understands the importance of communication between parents and their children. Your pediatrician also is trained to detect the signs of child sexual abuse. Ask your pediatrician for advice on how to protect your children.

AGE	PREVENTION PLAN
18 months	Teach your child the proper names for body parts.
3-5 years	Teach your child about "private parts" of the body and how to say "no" to sexual advances. Give straight-forward answers about sex.
5-8 years	Discuss safety away from home and the difference between being touched in private parts of the body (parts covered by a bathing suit) and other touching. Encourage your child to talk about scary experiences.
8-12 years	Stress personal safety and give examples of possible problem areas, such as video arcades, malls, locker rooms, and out-of-the-way places outdoors. Start to discuss rules of sexual conduct that are accepted by the family.
13-18 years	Re-stress personal safety and potential problem areas. Discuss rape, "date rape," sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy.

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