

Talking To Your Child About Body Safety

Talking to children about body safety can be difficult for parents. Many parents think that if they talk to their children about body safety, they have to talk to them about “sex.” This is not the case. Parents teach their children to look both ways when crossing the street, to wear their seat belt in a vehicle, and not to talk to strangers. In the same way, parents need to teach their children that they have private parts of their bodies and that it is not okay for others to touch these parts.

Please [print](#) and share with other parents and caregivers

Parents should begin to teach their children about body safety **between the ages of 3-5**.

Teach children proper names for all body parts, including names such as penis, vagina, and private parts.

Teach children to bathe, toilet, and dress themselves starting at an early age.

Teach children that privacy, modesty, personal behaviors, and boundaries are important. Parents should model these concepts, as well as talk about them.

Tips for Encouraging (and Modeling) Healthy Behaviors:

- Make sure the door is closed when people are using the bathroom or dressing, and be certain others do not enter.
- Adults and children should not walk around without their clothes on.
- Children should dress age appropriately, and parents should strongly discourage too sophisticated or sexual clothing.
- Avoid jokes about sex or the use of sexual remarks/innuendoes in front of children.
- Monitor television, movies, radio, internet, and video games for sexual content.

Teach children that it is not okay for anyone to invade their privacy or boundaries. Explain that it is not okay for others to look at or touch their private parts. Explain that these parts are private and need to be kept private.

Give your child permission to say “NO” to people who want to touch his or her private parts. Let your child know that saying “NO” is okay and is the right thing to do.

Do not force your child to give hugs or kisses to people. Respect their right to tell “grandma” or “grandpa” that they do not want to give them a kiss or a hug. Explain that a child may tell any person to stop touching them if any type of touch makes them feel uncomfortable or they do not like it (i.e., tickling, wrestling, etc.).

Let your child know that he or she should tell you right away if anyone attempts to look at or touch his or her private parts. Children need to know it is okay to tell you if anyone makes them

feel uncomfortable or touches them in a way they do not like. Reassure them that you will listen to them, believe them, and keep them protected.

Reassure your child that most touches are OK touches but they can say “NO” and need to tell you about any touches that are confusing or that scare them.

Remember to review and practice this information on a regular basis. Parents should talk to their children about personal safety during:

- Bath time: as you are teaching children to wash themselves
- Bed time: when they are focused on what you are saying
- New situations: before going to camp, starting school, going to daycare, going to a new house to play

Play “what if” games with your children and let them practice saying “NO.” By role playing with your children you help them develop the skills they need in certain situations.

Sparking the Body Safety Conversation

As parents ourselves, we understand the complexity of talking to our children about body safety. Our first thoughts are “This couldn’t happen in my family.” “My friend, my brother, my neighbor... they would never do that to my child.” These thoughts and fears are common and relatable. Yet, as professionals in this field, we see and hear each day of the family friend, the neighbor, the family member who has touched a child inappropriately. Discussing body safety with your child is imperative. Yet, it doesn’t need to be intimidating or scary. These conversations can start small and grow more complex over time.

Begin with basics. Yes, it may seem uncomfortable at first, but with time it will become second nature to review this information with your child. They need to hear more than, “You can always come to me if there is something bothering you.” That is not specific enough.

What do we hear most often from students?

“Am I in trouble?”

They fear disappointing the grown-ups they love, they fear they have done something wrong by “allowing” this to happen or not coming forward sooner. It is not easy for them to find the words or even to know what happened to them is not okay. Let’s look as how you can begin this conversation with your child.

Where to start?

Beginning around age 3, teach your children about the parts of their body that are “private.” Teach the correct names for their body parts – penis, vagina and what the term private parts means. Brief conversations teaching the correct names of body parts, the importance of keeping them safe and how no one should touch their private parts are great places to start getting comfortable talking about body safety with your child. Keep it casual and nonchalant.

Let them know that it is important for them to tell you or another safe adult if someone ever touches them in a way that makes them uncomfortable or touches the private parts of their body. Encourage them to trust their feelings – if something feels wrong, it’s always okay for them to tell a safe adult. Even if the person making them uncomfortable is someone they know. Let them know they will not get in trouble for telling no matter what. This is such a tough one for kids, many times we are teaching them the opposite – not to be a tattler!

Teaching your child about Safe Secrets and Unsafe Secrets.

- *Safe Secrets will make them feel good inside and will come to an end.*
- *An example would be, not telling someone about the present you bought them. It’s a fun secret that is over when you give them the present.*
- *Unsafe Secrets can make them feel upset, scared, or confused.*
- *They may be never ending, like “you can never tell.” If a child is ever asked to keep an Unsafe Secret they should tell a Safe Adult.*

Now that you're talking...

Ask your children "what if" or "what would you do" questions appropriate to their age. These conversations can help you understand their perspective and also provide a time for you to talk with them about what to do in a variety of situations.

Below are ideas by age on how to further your body safety conversations with your child.

Kindergarten (Age 5-6)

- What if your babysitter asks you to play your favorite card game?
- What if a really good friend or your favorite cousin wants to play a game where they touch your private parts?

Focus

They would never be in trouble. They should always tell a safe adult about someone touching private parts. It is not a safe game if someone (even someone they know and like) asks them to play a game about touching private parts.

1st Grade (Age 6-7)

- What if your mom or dad asks you to keep a secret about a gift they bought for your brother?
- What if someone you like a lot touched your private parts and said you HAVE to keep it a secret?

Focus:

There are safe secrets that are fun to keep and they make everyone smile. A gift someone buys and asks you to keep a secret is an example of a safe secret. There are also unsafe secrets. These are secrets that could make you feel bad inside, weird or unsafe. An example of an unsafe secret would be a game about touching private parts that someone asks you to keep a secret.

2nd Grade (Age 7-8)

- What if you get a good grade on your spelling test and your grown-up takes you out for ice cream to celebrate?
- What if someone you know and like touched the private parts of your body and said as long as you don't tell anyone about it they will take you to someplace really fun?

Focus:

There are nice things people do for us and say to us that make us feel really good inside, like going out for ice cream or doing another special activity together. It is important for a child to understand how this is not the same as someone using a place they like to go to get them to keep an Unsafe Secret. The child should know this would never be their fault, even if they said yes, and they can always tell a Safe Adult without fear they would be in trouble.

3rd Grade (Age 8-9)

- What if a grown-up you spend a lot of time with and your grown-up at home likes a lot touched your private parts, but said it was an accident? What if it happened a few times, but they said each time it was an accident?
- What if you were playing tag and a friend touched your private part while they were tagging you but said they are sorry, it was an accident?

Focus:

In either situation they would want to talk to a Safe Adult. Even if it was someone your grown-up at home liked a lot or loved. The student would never be in trouble and it would never be their fault. If when playing a game a friend/classmate touched your private part and said they are sorry, it was an accident, this would still be a time to let a Safe Adult know what happened. Maybe the same student is touching many other classmates' private parts but saying it is an accident each time. We would want this to stop and for that student to have a better understanding of boundaries and why this is not appropriate. (They might think it is silly or a joke.)

4th Grade (Age 9-10)

- What if your child says to you, "My coach is so mean." What could you say? What is your child trying to tell you? It could be that your child is upset the coach didn't let them play the position they wanted on the team. It could also be something unsafe happened and this is how they are trying to share this with you. It is very important to listen when your child is sharing with you about the people in their life (grown-ups, teenagers and friends/other kids.)
- What if your older friend/older cousin touched your private parts when you would hang out together? You really like this friend/cousin and don't want to stop hanging out with them, but you don't like when the Selfish Touches would happen.

Focus:

At this age, students have more independence. They will be exposed to new situations on their own. Practice with your child what they should do if they encounter a situation where there is Selfish Touching. This will give them confidence and help them know they can come to you.

How to Respond To a Disclosure/Situation

There is no doubt that hearing your child tell you that abuse has taken place is one of the most difficult things a parent/caregiver can hear. It will undoubtedly send your mind spinning. It is important to remember, though, that your response to what your child is sharing with you will have an impact on their healing process. Your verbal responses, as well as your non-verbal responses, are extremely important.

If you are not sure where to begin or what to say, a great starting point is to tell your child that you believe them, you are very proud of them for telling you, and you are going to help them. Let them know that they did the right thing by coming to you, and that they can always come to you no matter what.

As your child begins to disclose information, ask open ended questions such as, "Then what happened?" instead of questions such as, "Why didn't you tell me sooner?". The last thing we want is to place guilt on the child. Do not assume that you know what your child is going to say next by filling in words for them. Allow them to share what they are comfortable with and share it at their own pace.

Let your child know that in order to help them in the very best way, you are going to need to talk to some other grown-ups and work as a team to figure this out. These grown-ups have helped other children who have been in the same situation to get the help that they need.

Although you may be experiencing many different feelings, make sure you are really listening to what your child is telling you. In most cases (over 90% of the time) the abuser is someone the child knows, loves, and trusts, and more than likely, you do, too. It is important to remember to remove your personal feelings for this person and focus on the incident(s) your child is sharing with you.

Your child is very brave for telling you, and now it is your turn to be brave and make sure the abuse stops. Your first step is to contact Children's Protective Services at 855.444.3911. They can assist you in finding all the appropriate resources in the community.

Surrounding your child with as much support as possible will only help them heal more quickly.