

Committee for Children

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Child Abuse

Establishing a Safe Environment for Your Kids

Some ways of protecting our children seem obvious, like wearing a bike helmet or seat belt, but with sexual abuse, the path to protection isn't always so clear. However, as parents there are several things you can do to help protect your children.

Give Kids Affection and Positive Attention

All children need warmth and positive attention. By giving your children plenty of both and encouraging their interests, you create a solid foundation of trust in your family.

Model Open Communication

Talking openly and honestly sets a tone in your family that helps children feel safe and lets them know that they can talk to you about anything. One way to do this is to practice a process called "reflective listening." This process will not only support and encourage children, but it will teach them to name and express their feelings and concerns. Here's how it goes:

- Give your child your full attention. Make a date to listen later if you are busy: "After we've eaten dinner, we can sit and talk.
- Use phrases like "Tell me more," "Go on," or "What else?" to encourage your child to keep talking.
- Listen and watch for feelings and concerns. Put yourself in your child's place and imagine what he or she is feeling or concerned about.
- Reflect that feeling back to your child; for example, "You sound really confused" or "You seem to be unsure about spending time with Uncle Paul." This shows your child that you understand and teaches your child to put a name to feelings and concerns. It also lets your child know that you will take his or her feelings seriously.

It is also important to model effective communication between adults in the family. Your children should see that everyone in the family can talk to each other, even about serious and important things, without getting angry or fighting. If children think that adults might get mad easily, they might not want to talk about certain things or tell about things that have happened to them. Establishing open communication also sets the stage for talking directly about child sexual abuse and teaching your child safety skills about touching.

Be Aware of Your Kids' Environment

Know where they are at all times. Make sure you know and trust the people your children are with, and get to know the families of your children's friends.

Set the "Always Ask First" Rule

This rule states that a child must always ask a parent or the person in charge first before anyone can take the child anywhere or give the child anything. Explain to children that the person in charge, while most often a parent, might also be a babysitter, a neighbor, a grandparent, a teacher, or a youth leader.

If your children follow the Always Ask First Rule, you will always know where they are and whom they are with. You will also know who is trying to make friends with your child by offering gifts. Most children are abused by people they already know: family, friends, or acquaintances. Therefore, it is critical that your children apply this rule to everybody, not just strangers. If your children understand to always ask first, no matter who makes an offer, you will be able to monitor their safety better.

Know the People Your Kids Are With

Ask yourself, "How well do I know the people my children are with?" Rather than assume that you can trust a person to supervise or care for your child, take the time to make sure. Here are some things you can do to assess your child's safety with another:

- Observe the person with your child or other children.
- Talk with other parents who know that person to get a better sense of him or her.
- Ask your child how he or she feels about the person and what happens when they are together.
- Notice if a person gives your child gifts often, unexpectedly, and/or for no particular reason.
- Make surprise visits when your child is with this person.
- Continue to check in on how things are going over the course of time.
- Pay attention to your child's response to people he or she spends time with.
- Does your child show reluctance or fear about someone?
- Does your child talk about not liking someone or not wanting to see or visit that person?
- Does your child seem secretive about how time is spent with a particular person?

Advocate for a Personal Safety Curriculum

When children learn the same skills at home and at school or daycare, they are better able to understand, remember, and use them.

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