



## Child Abuse and Neglect

### Helping Parents Talk to Children

There are two aspects to keep in mind as we begin. The first is helping parents prepare themselves to talk with their children. Many parents are hesitant to talk with their children about child abuse and neglect. Reasons for this vary widely, but include things such as:

- Fear children will see abuse or neglect everywhere
- Desire to maintain “childhood innocence”
- Fear children will accuse parents of abuse
- Fear children will be more anxious

I think it works best to first acknowledge these with parents. Tell them many parents, in the beginning, share these concerns. However, children have been taught about these issues for many years through schools, and community programs and are experience has been that these situations don’t occur. Children will handle this as well as parents do and sometimes maybe even better.

The second aspect is finding the right words. My goal is to keep it as simple and easy as possible. These tips may help:

1. Keep it simple. Children don’t need many details.

You don’t have to explain details of physical or sexual abuse or neglect.

2. If you are relaxed, your child will be relaxed.

This can be easier if you pick a relaxed time to talk with them. Maybe over lunch, or while driving in the car or walking to the park. You can begin casually with introductory lines such as:

- “I read a story in the paper yesterday about a little boy who was hurt at home...”
- “You are good at looking both ways to cross the street. Another safety rule is about keeping your body safe....”
- “Sometimes grown-ups make mistakes, even parents... “ (Kids love this one and I think they connect with the honesty. They see grown-ups make mistakes and break the rules, but grown-ups don’t admit this very often.)
- “Sometimes grown-ups don’t take care of children the way they should or maybe even hurt them...”

3. If you feel nervous, tell them. Your child will sense it anyway. Explain that sometimes it's hard to explain things or some things might feel sad to think about, but are important to talk about.
4. Include this dialogue in the other "safety" talks you do with children, such as, fire safety, traffic safety, and now, personal safety.
5. Have the conversations regularly, not necessarily frequently, but regularly. We continually remind our children about crossing the street and not playing with matches, etc. It is ok to remind them to that if anyone ever hurts them or makes them feel uncomfortable, they should tell someone.
6. Choice of language will assist in making easier for you to say and easier for your child to understand. Some easy phrase could be:
  - "Adults and parents are suppose to take care of children, but sometimes problems get in the way or make it difficult
  - "Grown-ups make mistakes sometimes and they don't always take care of children like they should." If your child and you are ready to talk a little more about this you can use examples like not always having enough food for them, not helping them get to school, or not taking care of them when they are sick, etc.
  - "Sometimes adults or parents might even do things that hurt children." If you want to say more or your child doesn't understand you could give some examples such as: "You know that you must be gentle with babies, but some grown-ups might not remember and are too rough or hurt them" or "a parent might be angry and make a mistake and hit a child to hard and leave a mark".
  - "Everyone has private parts and grown-ups should not touch your private parts unless they are helping you clean or if you are sick. "
  - "If anyone ever touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable or weird or funny inside, you should tell me or another grown-up that you trust."
  - "If anyone ever hurts you or touches you and tells you to keep it a secret, you should tell me right away or tell another adult you trust. That's not a good secret to keep. Good secrets are about birthday presents and surprises, but bad secrets are when someone is doing something that might be wrong."
7. If you are really uncertain about making this about your child, start off by talking about a "what if" regarding a friend.
8. Always give your child options / scenarios of what to do if there is a problem.
  - "You can always come and tell me"
  - "If Mom or Dad are not around, who would you tell then..."
  - "Who is someone you see everyday that you could tell if you had a problem...."
 

If your child has difficulty, remind them to tell their teacher, or a babysitter or a good friend or neighbor. Children name police officers and fire fighters a lot as helpers, but they aren't readily available.
9. Always remind them that you will always try your best to make sure they are safe.
10. Be ready in case your child has something to tell you.
  - First response is: "I'm so glad you told me. You did the right thing."
  - If you become upset, it's ok. Tell your child, simply, how you are feeling. Remember that your child may think your upset with him. You can say things like, "This makes me kind of sad (or mad), but I'm not mad at you. And now I'm glad I know so I can help",

- Always tell your child that they did nothing wrong and it's not their fault.
  - If you are not sure what to do, it's ok to say that. Tell your child "there are grownups that help parents and children with this and we will check with them about what to do."
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- ❖ If your child tells you something about themselves or a friend, please listen to them. As painful as the abuse may be, telling someone and not being heard is more painful.
  - ❖ If you are not sure what to do, call someone and ask. Every county and state has a child protective service agency to respond to abuse and neglect. If you're not aware of it in your area, call the police or check your local yellow pages.
  - ❖ Remember to reassure your child often. They may think it's their fault, and they will be worried about Mom and Dad being sad or angry.
  - ❖ Don't be afraid! Your child can be safe and secure. Remember to have the "Safety Talks" with them.
  - ❖ Don't feel guilty if something does happen to your child. Get the help you will need.
  - ❖ Remember children are incredibly resilient and when they see you handle this situation they will know you can handle any problem!
  - ❖ You will be Super Mom and Dad!