



by Karen Stephens

# Sexual Abuse of Children: Prevention and Response Steps to Take

For most adults, an attraction to sexually touch or dominate a child is abhorrent. And yet, it happens.

An incident is generally considered sexual abuse when a person six years older than an under-aged child engages in a sexual experience with the child. At the most conservative, research estimates that by age 18 years, at least 20% of children are abused sexually; girls a bit more often than boys. Adult substance abuse, especially alcohol, is often involved in abusive situations.

## **Preventing Child Sexual Abuse**

Children should never bear the major burden of preventing their own abuse or of fending off an abuser. Parents ultimately have that responsibility; the role includes crucial responsibilities.

The first brave step parents can take is to learn about child sexual abuse and myths surrounding it. For instance, most abuse is not sexual intercourse, but rather sexual touching of children's genitals, children forced to touch an adult's genitals, or children introduced to pornographic materials or language.

Most sexual abuse doesn't stem from force, although cooperation is sometimes gained with threats of injury to children or their loved ones. More often abusers use psychological methods to coerce children. For instance, they bribe and entice with individual "special" attention and "secret" friendship games or by offering tantalizing privileges, treats, or gifts.

Abusers may manipulate children into being a "good" boy or girl; unethically playing upon kids' guilt and natural desires (due to frequent instructions) to please and obey adults or "do as you're told." Abusers may also may trick children with comments like, "Everyone plays this game; I'll teach you the rules."

An effective step toward sexual abuse prevention is helping children develop a strong sense of personal body space and self esteem. Children who feel good about themselves *and* are taught they have a say in how their body is touched, are more confident to resist inappropriate touching

## **Reducing Opportunity for Abuse**

Parents protect children by limiting conditions that provide opportunity for abuse. When you leave your child in someone else's care, be sure you can really trust them — whether they are a family member or child care professional. Many states require background checks to screen convicted abusers from child care and teaching jobs. Make sure your program complies.

To limit chances of abuse, be alert to "red flag" behaviors or situations. Don't ignore blatant favoritism shown to one child by an extended family member, older sibling, teacher, coach, or neighbor. Most abuse doesn't just happen; it occurs gradually as an abuser works to gain the child's trust. Nip questionable interactions in the bud early.

Make sure your child care arrangement never allows a child to be privately alone with one adult, such as during nap or restroom times. Require that lessons or

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activities — from dance classes to Scout meetings — be properly supervised by adults so children aren't at risk. And of course, don't leave your child unsupervised in public places where "friendships" with unfamiliar adults can secretly develop, such as parks, libraries, toy stores, children's museums, or malls.

### Teach Children Self-Protection Strategies

For prevention, it's also wise to teach children basic self-protection skills. Listed below are some recommendations:

- Find ways daily to support your child with your love and attention so they won't crave it from others.
- From infancy, use correct terms for body parts. And yes, I do mean be as specific as vagina, vulva, penis, and anus. It helps children develop body image and awareness of "private zones." (And if an abuse incident needs reporting, authorities trust information children share that is commonly used and not "family-coined" or confusingly vague.)
- Don't assume warnings about "stranger danger" will prevent sexual abuse. Statistics prove otherwise. Explain when it's reasonable for children to be wary of *any* adult's questionable conduct.

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- To help children grasp that they have the right to decide how people touch them, don't force children to immediately hug or kiss others "on command." Teach children how to show affectionate greeting, but also allow children time to "warm up" to new people, including relatives they haven't seen for a long time. Wait until the child chooses to invite physical affection. Sometimes asking a child if you can hug or kiss them is also respectful and sends the message of the right to personal body space.
- Reinforce that children sometimes *should* say "NO!" to adults. Help children to understand when it is important to say "NO" to an adult — such as in the face of discomfort or violence.
- Specifically tell kids they are allowed to move away from an adult talking or behaving in a "weird" or odd way. Children are concrete, literal thinkers, so be specific: "You don't have to let anyone touch your penis. If a doctor needs to do so, mom or dad will always be with you."
- Remind children that it's *always* best to tell someone, especially mom or dad, if they are scared, nervous, hurt, or have experienced an uncomfortable touch.
- Warn children frankly that some people encourage children to keep secrets, but some things, like how we're touched, are too important of a secret to keep. (By the way, be prepared to then discuss the difference between a "good" birthday gift secret and other secrets. Like I said, kids are literal and often demand full disclosure in rule-making.)
- Play "what if" questions with your child to help them rehearse resisting dangerous situations and seeking help. Supply scenarios that reinforce the importance of turning to a trusted parent, caregiver, or teacher. For instance, "What if a grown up (or older child) asked you to touch them between their legs?" Or "What could you do if someone offered you a toy if you'd keep a special secret from mom and dad?"

### Signs of Possible Abuse

Of course, if all abuse were preventable, you wouldn't be reading this. But some children become victims despite parents' best efforts. Below are possible signs of abuse:

- Child includes advanced types of sexual actions or language in their play.
- Child asks adult-like questions using slang or vulgar sexual terms.
- Child is atypically nervous in a formerly enjoyed location or situation.
- Child is newly nervous to be around a specific adult.

- Symptoms of emotional upset become evident, such as sleep disturbances or nightmares, significant change in appetite, fear of being left alone, withdrawal into depression, or acting out through uncontrollable tantrums.
- And this will be very hard to read . . . but your child diagnosed with a venereal disease is also a sign of abuse.

### **Responding and Getting Help**

If the despair of sexual abuse affects your family, try to remain calm in front of your children. An uncontrolled reaction undermines their sense of security. Most children fear “upsetting” parents; so if you need it, have an outburst privately with others.

As shocked as you may be, *believe* your child. Kids usually fear bringing abuse out in the open; so if they are treated like a liar, they feel twice betrayed.

Honestly admit to your child that is very hard to hear they experienced a problem, but you are *very* glad they turned to you. Compassionately reassure them you will help.

Don’t immediately assume your child will suffer permanent emotional or psychological damage. No abuse is acceptable, but a one time case isn’t as damaging as a long-standing abusive relationship. When bolstered with warm supportive relationships, children can be amazingly resilient. We just don’t like them to have to be.

And finally, there is help for sexual abuse victims and their families. Your pediatrician, child welfare agency, early childhood professional, and mental health clinic can connect you to resources and services — including medical and therapeutic.

If you ever need help for sexual abuse, I wish you strength, wisdom, and a trusted shoulder to cry upon. But I hope the above tips reduce your family’s vulnerability.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.