

PREVENTING THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN (Part 1)

Preventing the sexual abuse of our children starts from birth, this sounds both simple and yet complicated. A child needs a positive self-image, sense of control of their own body and good communication between parent and child to reduce a child's vulnerability to sexual touching. Children begin to learn about themselves and their sexuality even as infants, as we teach independence and general safety skills, such as dressing, bathing, toileting, how to cross the street, not to play with fire, water safety and precautions about bad secrets and inappropriate touch.

Raising sexually healthy children follows a long and thoughtful process of communicating through words and behaviours, attitudes, feelings, and information about sexuality and, even more importantly, about the child himself or herself. How parents touch their baby, change their diaper, or respond to finding a toddler masturbating influences how children view themselves and their bodies. Start at birth by teaching proper names for all body parts – ears, nose, penis, elbow, vulva, and toes. Teach toddlers and preschooler's about the "private parts" of the body and how to say "no" to anyone who might try to touch them. Encourage their growing sense of autonomy and ownership of their body, "I can do it myself!" Give straightforward, developmentally appropriate answers about sex, as children are naturally curious about how their bodies look and work; how male and female bodies differ; and where babies come from. As early as age 2, parents should begin to talk about good touch, bad touch and secret touching while encouraging their children to talk about any scary experiences or "yucky" feelings. Problem-solving games, story telling, and role-playing are ways we communicate with children, and begin to teach that sexuality should never be coercive or exploitative.

It is equally important for the parents to listen as well as to share with their children. Especially during the tween years, don't wait for your child to start the conversations, these children are generally wanting and waiting for their parents to talk to them. Parents can use the media and current life events as food for conversations about sexuality. This is a time when children are learning to what extent their parents will listen and hear what they have to say. This is critical in influencing the child's decision about whether or not they will inform their parent if they are victimized at any time. The more those parents have created a climate of open and receptive conversation, the more it is likely that their children will utilize them as consultants and supports even during the teen years.

It's okay if you don't have an answer, use resources together to find the answers. It's okay to feel uncomfortable. Talk about it anyway, you can be a model for talking about important issues even when you're uncomfortable or afraid to do so. Listen, listen, and listen some more to your children. Pay attention to what they are feeling and wondering. Communication opportunities are every day activities.

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May is Sexual Abuse Prevention Month. This article is one of a series that addresses the issue of tween sexuality