

How to Talk with Kids About Personal Safety and Sexual Abuse

A Conversation Guide for Parents and Caregivers



About This Guide

This guide contains decades of research packed into practical, digestible advice and age-appropriate conversation starters to help you feel comfortable talking with your child about personal safety—one of the most powerful ways to protect them from sexual abuse. Keep this guide handy and use it in everyday moments to give you the confidence needed to navigate and normalize these vital safety conversations.

Key Takeaways

- ➔ A critical component of child sexual abuse prevention is to **talk openly and often with your child**, from an early age, about personal safety.¹
- ➔ Child sexual abuse is scary, but talking about ways to prevent it doesn't have to be.
- ➔ Establish simple, personal **safety rules** with your children that are easy to understand and remember.
- ➔ **Know the facts and signs** of abuse—and what to do and say if it happens.
- ➔ Ask open-ended questions; practice active listening; and **believe your child**.
- ➔ Our Hot Chocolate Talk resources can help you **normalize conversations** about personal safety and sexual abuse prevention.

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Get Comfy

Bring a sense of warmth, comfort, and normalcy to personal safety conversations so your child feels comfortable coming to you with questions and concerns.



Anytime is the right time to talk with your child, but it helps to feel calm and relaxed.



Look for opportunities in your daily routine that allow some privacy, like bedtime or in the car, because your child may not want to open up about a sensitive topic in a public place.



Be ready to respond appropriately if your child tells you about any inappropriate behavior.

Best Practice

Listen actively and watch for signs of abuse, such as physical discomfort or behavior. If your child discloses abuse, stay calm. Then with care, not denial or anger, assure them that you believe them and that you'll keep them safe. Don't rush them or insist on details. What you can say:

**“It took a lot of courage
to tell me about this.
I believe you.”**

**“Everything will be okay.
I can help keep you safe
because you told me.”**

**“Tell me more.
What happened next?”**

Tip

A **mug of hot chocolate** or another treat might help create a **cozy atmosphere**. Remember, kids will follow your lead. Approach the subject of personal safety matter-of-factly, just as you would any other safety topic.



What the Research Says

- ➔ Children who are informed about their bodies and who feel comfortable talking openly with a caring adult are **less likely to be abused** and more likely to disclose abuse if it happens.²
- ➔ Many parents are reluctant to educate their children about sexual abuse because they view it as an **uncomfortable topic to discuss**.¹
- ➔ In about **90 percent of sexual abuse cases**, children know their offender. Often, it's someone the family knows and likes, which is why many children are afraid to tell.³
- ➔ If your child discloses abuse, stay calm and believe them; **children rarely lie about abuse**.⁴

Start Talking

If you're not sure what to say or when to talk with your child about personal safety, try using the following tips and conversation starters. If your child isn't receptive right away, that's okay. Try again another time. The most important aspect of these talks is to create an open line of communication.

Bath Time When bathing your young child, you can teach them the correct names for all body parts, so if they are harmed, they can accurately describe what happened. Also, research indicates that well-informed children are less likely to be targeted by offenders.

“Can you name all the parts of your body? Eyes, ears, elbows, penis, knees...”

“Can you point to the parts of your body covered by a swimsuit? They're covered because they're private.”

Leaving the House When your child is getting ready to go somewhere, whether to school, an activity, or a friend's house, this can be your cue to remind them about personal safety rules.

“Let's have a quick chat before you leave. I want to go over a few safety rules.”

“Just in case you need me for anything, I want to make sure you know the safety plan and have all of our emergency contact information.”

Bedtime When tucking your child in at night or snuggling on the couch, you can read together and ask open-ended questions about the book themes or situations that might relate to personal safety.

“What touches did you notice that might have been unsafe? What would you do in that situation?”

“Some touch is never okay, like hitting. Other touches depend on the person and situation. No adult should ever touch you and then ask you to keep it a secret.”

Playtime Playing games together can be a good opportunity to start teaching basic concepts of consent. Start by explaining rules for safe and unsafe touches. Teach them that it's always okay to refuse touches, even if it seems fun (like tickling).

“Always ask before touching someone else.”

“Listen when someone says ‘No’ or ‘Stop.’”

Side by Side Older kids often find it easier to talk when they're not looking directly at someone. The best time to connect may be while engaged in an activity such as riding in a car or cooking a meal together. Ask open-ended questions and listen carefully for any comments that might hint at discomfort. Try watching the news or a movie together, using the content to bring up specific topics, such as new romantic feelings.

“Being in a relationship can sometimes feel complicated. Let me know if you ever want to chat about how things are going.”

“It's always okay to say ‘No,’ even if you've already said ‘Yes.’”

Talking Tips by Age

Having regular talks about personal safety is important for raising a confident, resourceful child who can make safe choices.

0-5

Keep conversations short and simple with toddlers and young children. Focus on teaching basic personal safety rules, the correct names for all the body parts, and how to refuse unwanted touches.

“A bigger person should NEVER touch your private parts.”

“You can always say ‘No’ or ‘Stop’ if you don’t like something.”

“Never keep secrets about touching. The only safe secrets are those that eventually can be shared, like birthday surprises.”

6-8

Be more specific with the rules and continue to regularly remind your child of the personal safety rules. It should feel just as normal to say, “Look both ways before crossing the street” as it would to say, “Remember: No one should ever touch your private body parts except to keep you healthy.”

“Safe touches make you feel well-cared for and loved, like a hug from a parent. They’re good for you. Unsafe touches make you feel uncomfortable and might even hurt.”

“Pay attention to different feelings in your body, like butterflies in your tummy, sweaty palms, or a fast heartbeat. That might mean a situation is not okay.”

9-10

Review family safety rules and go into more detail about privacy, different types of touches, and how to recognize behavior that makes them uncomfortable. At this age, your child may spend more time away from you at friends’ homes or activities, and they may also spend more time online without your supervision. Know who your child spends time with, including coaches, music instructors, and friends’ older siblings.

“Not all abuse involves touching. It’s not okay for someone to show you their private body parts or ask to see yours, in person or online.”

“No one should take photos of your private body parts or show you photos of other people’s private parts.”

Talking Tips by Age (continued)

11+

Many of the same safety rules apply to older kids but might need to be framed in a way that's more open-ended. Rather than giving a one-sided talk about safe choices that your child may tune out, focus on open, honest, and ongoing dialogue. Build trust and comfort over time and adapt your conversations to be more informative and nuanced as they age.

“I noticed you hanging out with some new kids at the basketball games. I’d love to hear more about them.”

“Being in a relationship can sometimes get complicated. Let me know if you ever want to chat about how things are going.”

“I know you have strong feelings for your girlfriend, so even though it may seem awkward, we need to talk about safety and consent.”

“It’s always okay to change your mind and stop sexual activity at any time, even if you’ve already said ‘Yes.’ Your feelings and safety come first.”

“It’s never okay for someone to use sex or your feelings to try to control you. If that happens, tell them it’s not okay, and then tell me so we can talk about it.”

“It’s important to watch out for your friends. If you see something inappropriate, say something.”

Words to Know

It’s estimated that nearly 36 percent of offenders are older children or teens, so, it’s critical to thoroughly explain personal boundaries and consent.

Assault: According to the United States Department of Justice, sexual assault is “any nonconsensual sexual act proscribed by federal, tribal, or state law, including when the victim lacks capacity to consent.”⁵ Even unwelcome sexual gestures can sometimes be interpreted as assault, as well as having sex with people who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Child Sexual Abuse: Definitions vary from state to state, but in general terms, child sexual abuse includes any activity with a minor to meet the offender’s sexual needs. It does not have to be physical; it can be looking, showing, or touching.

Consent: Legal definitions also vary from state to state, but generally, consent means freely giving permission or agreeing to do something. One consistent part of consent is that the absence of ‘No’ does not mean someone has given consent. They must clearly say ‘Yes.’

Sexting: Sharing nude or suggestive content online or via mobile phones is known as sexting, which is illegal for minors and in some states, for consenting adults as well.

Trafficking: In child sex trafficking, a child under the age of 18 is bought or sold for sexual purposes or engages in sex in return for basic needs like shelter or food. The average age that a child is first exploited is 14 years old, and the average age that an exploited child first seeks services is 16 years old.⁶ Learn more at stolenyouth.org and missingkids.org.

Simple Safety Rules

How you communicate the following safety rules and how much detail you include may vary depending on your family values and child's developmental stage. Make sure to keep safety rules simple so they're easy to understand and remember, and repeat them frequently, particularly for younger children.

“Never keep secrets about touching.”

“Always ask the adult in charge if it's okay for another adult to give you something or take you somewhere.”

“You can always say ‘No’ to unwanted touches.”

“It's never your fault if someone sexually abuses you.”

“Tell a safe adult if someone ever makes you feel uncomfortable—and keep telling until someone believes you.”

“It's never too late to tell.”

Thank you for reading our Conversation Guide. Keep your kids safe from child sexual abuse and have a Hot Chocolate Talk today!



Tip

Create a family safety plan with your child to help them identify safe adults and how to contact them in an emergency.



The 3 R's of SAFETY

RECOGNIZE the difference between safe and unsafe touches.

REFUSE unwanted touches.

REPORT abuse.

IF YOU SUSPECT ABUSE OR NEED HELP

Childhelp 800-4-A-Child

National Sexual Violence Resource Center 877-739-3895

National Human Trafficking Hotline 888-373-7888 or text **HELP** to **233733**.

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network 800-656-HOPE

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3. Snyder, H. N. (2000). Sexual assault of young children as reported to law enforcement: Victim, incident and offender characteristics (NCJ 182990). Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/saycrle.pdf>.
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6. StolenYouth.org (n.d.). <https://stolenyouth.org/>