

Articles for Parents

Safety Steps to Prevent Sexual Abuse

This article introduces three simple safety steps for children to follow when someone tries to break a touching rule. Young children remember how to protect themselves from sexual abuse better when they learn and practice a few simple steps. If children have to wonder what to do, or if they have to stop and think about how they feel first, they can get confused.

Once your children fully understand your family safety rule about touching, teach them that it is never their fault if someone else breaks that rule. When children are not afraid of getting into trouble, they are more likely to tell when someone breaks the rule.

Three Simple Touching Safety Steps

Children can be taught to follow these three steps when someone breaks or tries to break the touching rule.

1. Say words that mean “No.”
2. Get away.
3. Tell a grown-up.

Step 1

The first step instructs children to come up with different ways of saying “No.” This is because a simple “No” is not always the best response. However, any response a child makes should be with the intent to resist the person. Help your child think of different ways to say “No.” Examples are: “Stop that”; “I’m not allowed to play touching games”; “I don’t like that”; and “I don’t want to do that.”

Help children understand that they can:

- Say “No” to people who are older or who have authority over them if safety rules are being broken.
- Say “No” to people in their family or to adults who take care of them (for example, teachers and youth leaders).
- Say “No” loudly and in a strong voice so that bystanders will hear and can help them.

Step 2

The second step instructs children to remove themselves from the situation immediately. Help your child understand that getting away can be as simple as moving away, getting off the person’s lap, or going to another room. It might also mean immediately running home or to a neighbor’s house.

Step 3

The third step instructs children to tell a grown-up they trust as soon as they can. Help your children identify people they could tell, and have them practice telling. Children should identify family and non-family members, since you might not always be available. Sometimes a child might not be able to get a person to stop the abuse. In these cases, telling becomes even more important. Reassure children that it is not their fault if they are unable to stop the abuse, but teach them that they do need to tell.

Secrets About Touching

Tell children never to keep secrets about touching. Explain to your children that there are two kinds of secrets: safe secrets and unsafe secrets. Examples of safe secrets are birthday presents or special events. Safe secrets make people happy and are fun.

Secrets about touching are not safe and should never be kept. Offenders will put pressure on children to keep the abuse secret. Without secrecy the abuse cannot continue. You want your children to resist that pressure so that they tell. Reassure your children that it is okay to break a promise not to tell a secret about touching. Frequently remind children not to keep unsafe secrets.

Instruct children always to tell about a touching problem, even it has gone on for a long time. Reassure your children that it is never too late to tell about a touching problem. This encourages children to feel safe in disclosing abuse even if it has been going on for a while.

Tell children to keep telling until someone believes them. Help your children understand that if the first person they tell does not believe them, they should tell someone else and keep telling until someone helps them.

Bridgid Normand, M.Ed.
Program Developer
Committee for Children