



# Preventing Sexual Abuse in Children

**What is considered child sexual abuse?** Child sexual abuse is a type of abuse that involves any sexual behavior or act with a child. Abuse happens in a variety of ways. Someone might touch a child inappropriately, make inappropriate comments, take inappropriate photos or show the child their own private parts. Sometimes, the abuse is more aggressive. Children cannot consent to any sexual activity. Child sexual abuse is a crime and has serious, lasting effects on the health and well-being of a child.

**How to talk to children about private parts and body safety:** To help protect your child from sexual abuse, be proactive. Start talking with your child about their body parts by at least age 3 or 4. Teaching your child about private parts and body safety may feel uncomfortable, but it doesn't need to be. It's an important part of keeping your child safe and healthy. Here are tips to help:

**Teach children the names of their body parts early and clearly.** Use accurate terms when teaching children about their body parts – such as penis or vagina. “Whatever words you choose, be consistent,” says Dr. Dakil. “Kids need to know the right language so they can describe what happens to them and your family knows how to interpret the situation.”

**Keep it simple at first.** For example, if young siblings or cousins are in the bathroom at the same time, simply explain, “You have your body parts, and they have their parts. And we don't touch each other's parts.” Speaking about body parts consistently and calmly lays the groundwork for establishing boundaries.

**Give your child body boundaries.** From a young age, teach your child that their private parts are their own. You can say, “Your penis is yours, and no one else should look at it or touch it. No one should ask you to touch or look at their private body parts either. Not even an aunt, uncle or teacher. If that happens, please tell me right away.” Explain that their private parts are special and not something to share with others when they're little.

**Explain the only times it's OK for someone else to look at their private parts.** Make sure your child understands the only situations in which someone should see their private parts. “Sometimes mommy/daddy (or name of trusted caregiver) help you bathe or go to the bathroom. Sometimes, the doctor examines you to make sure you're healthy. That's okay because we're there with you and know what's happening.”

**Assure children that if something happens, they can tell you no matter what.** Tell your child you want to know if someone is bothering them or touching their body. It's important for children to know they will never get in trouble for sharing this information. “If anyone talks with you about private parts or shows you their private parts, please tell me right away. You won't get in trouble.”

**Explain that your family does not keep body secrets.** Sometimes a sexual perpetrator will tell the child to keep the abuse a secret. Tell your child that your family does not keep body secrets and that no one, no matter who they are, should ever ask them to keep a secret about their body. This includes people they know. You can explain the difference between secrets and surprises. “We may buy a present for daddy's birthday and not tell daddy. But on his birthday, the surprise will be revealed. Our family does not keep secrets.”

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**What are the signs of sexual abuse in kids?** To spot child sexual abuse, watch for major behavioral changes, such as:

Aggressive or self-destructive behavior

Bedwetting

Changes in appetite

Depression and anxiety

New interest in talking about private parts (beyond a child's natural curiosity)

Nightmares

Poor school performance

Sudden hesitation to be with certain adults or children or go to a certain family's home

Sudden withdrawal from family and friends

Be aware that other issues can cause behavioral changes too, such as divorce, death, a move or something else. Some children who are victims of sexual abuse may not display any outward symptoms.

**How to ask children about inappropriate touching.** Child sexual abuse is a type of abuse that involves any sexual behavior or act with a child. Abuse happens in a variety of ways. Someone might touch a child inappropriately, make inappropriate comments, take inappropriate photos or show the child their own private parts. Sometimes, the abuse is more aggressive. Children cannot consent to any sexual activity. Child sexual abuse is a crime and has serious, lasting effects on the health and well-being of a child.

**Other ways to prevent child sexual abuse.** Unfortunately, there is no one way to prevent child abuse entirely. However, there are ways to lessen the risk. In addition to teaching your child about body safety and boundaries, take steps to:

Surround your child with people you trust.

Be aware of adults who offer children special toys, gifts and invitations.

Enroll your child in daycare programs that have an "open door" policy for parents.

Participate in activities whenever possible. Consider your family policy about playdates and sleepovers. Find out who will be there and get familiar with those who are around your child.

Tell your child to call you if they ever feel uncomfortable in a situation.

Create a home environment in which sexual topics can be discussed openly. As children grow older, use news reports of child sexual abuse to start discussions. Stress that children should always tell you if someone is taking advantage of them, and that you are there for them.

Often, we may think that having a one-time talk with our children about their bodies is enough, but it is important to continue to educate them as they change and transition to different developmental stages in their life.

Access more information at [children.com/preventing-sexual-abuse-in-children](https://www.children.com/preventing-sexual-abuse-in-children).

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