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Stop It Now! prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.



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For Parents of Children with Disabilities: How to Talk to Your Child to Reduce Vulnerability to Sexual Abuse

NOTE: These tip sheets provide parents and caregivers of children with disabilities the information they need to keep their child safe from sexual abuse. Every child, disability, means of communication, and family situation is unique. Use this information with your situation in mind. This is a lot of information to absorb. And we know that the fear and anxiety we feel when even considering our child could be sexually abused makes it hard to act. We encourage you to start by defining your support team—the people who help you to care for your child including your child's pediatrician, respite providers, teachers, and family members. Then use these tip sheets to reach out and start a conversation. Share any concerns you have about your child, such as changes in behavior. Just as we want our children to have "safe" adults to go to, we also need "safe" people to support us.

It may be hard to think of our children as having sexual feelings, needs, and interests. But, just as they are curious about bugs, airplanes and animals, they will be curious about their bodies and other people's bodies. As parents, it is very important to share information with our children, including information about sex and sexuality, to help them prepare for all aspects of their life. We don't help our children if we ignore the reality of their sexual development. Sometimes our cultural beliefs make it hard for us to talk about sexual development. Many times parents feel awkward, uncomfortable, or even that it's unnecessary. Even so, [teaching our children about sex and sexuality](http://www.stopitnow.org/talking_to_kids) (www.stopitnow.org/talking_to_kids) and talking with them about personal space, boundaries, touching, and saying no helps protect them from sexual harm or abuse.

Instead of planning for "the big talk," make teaching your child about sexuality and relationships a part of everyday life. View this as an ongoing conversation that changes as your child grows older and is exposed to different situations. Expect to have many conversations over time and look for opportunities to reinforce what you are teaching. When you help your child practice these new skills, you have the opportunity to see whether or not the skills get absorbed.

Here are some tips for how and what to communicate to your child about various topics:

Sexual Development

- All children, even those with severe disabilities, need to understand basic concepts like differences between boys and girls, accurate names for all body parts, and where babies come from. When parents present this information in a matter-of-fact way, children learn that it is okay to talk with parents about their questions. Adapt how you present this information to your child by using tools including role playing, structured play with dolls, books and videos, etc.
- All children need to be prepared for the physical changes in their bodies that accompany puberty. Even children with extensive developmental delays experience these physical changes.
- Talk to your child's pediatrician or medical specialist to determine when to begin preparing for these physical changes and about how your child's disability may affect sexual development.

- Learn about [developmentally expected sexual behaviors in children of various ages](http://www.stopitnow.org/age_appropriate_sexual_behavior) (www.stopitnow.org/age_appropriate_sexual_behavior). This knowledge will help you prepare for what your child needs to know as well as tell the difference between expected behaviors and behaviors that may be cause for concern.

Privacy, personal space and boundaries

- Teach your child about private body parts. It is often helpful to define “private” body parts as the parts covered by a swim suit. Use pictures or instructional dolls to show what you mean.
- Teach your child about privacy and how some things are only done in private. Help your child define private spaces in the places where he spends time. For example, your child’s bedroom with the door closed is private as is a stall in a public bathroom.
- Model respect for your child’s personal space and physical boundaries by asking permission or declaring what you are going to do before touching him. Sometimes we inadvertently teach children to be helpless, passive, or compliant by doing things and making decisions for them. We help children learn healthy boundaries when we allow them some independence and input on decisions affecting them.

Touching

- It can be challenging to teach children about touch, especially when caregivers, therapists, or medical personnel touch them in ways that might not be welcome but that are required for their care. Sometimes touch that feels “bad” (for example a shot) is a touch that is necessary and therefore “good”.
- Advocates recommend using concrete concepts like “red flag” and “green flag” to help children understand touch that is okay or “green” versus touch that is not okay or “red.” Start by specifically addressing genital touch and when genital touch is okay (e.g. when getting help from a parent or caregiver with personal care or when being examined by a doctor) and when genital touch is not okay (e.g. when someone asks your child to show his genitals or asks him to look at or touch their genitals).
- Use the touch situations your child experiences regularly to define specific touches that would be considered “green flag” as well as those that would be “red flag.” For example, a “green” touch would be when your child’s caregiver helps him to wipe his bottom after using the toilet and a “red” touch would be the caregiver rubbing your child’s bottom when he is not using the toilet.
- Once you’ve helped your child define specific touches as “green” or “red”, look for opportunities to practice determining whether touches are “green” or “red” and how to respond to “red” touches.
- It is very important for children to understand that touching rules are for everyone. Just as it is not okay for someone to give them a “red” touch, they should not be touching others with “red” touches.

Sexual Behaviors

- It is common for children of various ages to engage in sexual behaviors both alone and with playmates. Use your knowledge of your child and of [developmentally expected sexual behaviors in children](http://www.stopitnow.org/age_appropriate_sexual_behavior) (www.stopitnow.org/age_appropriate_sexual_behavior) to recognize sexual behaviors outside of what is commonly expected in children at similar developmental stages.
- When you find your child engaging in age-appropriate sexual behaviors, for example exploring his own body or playing "doctor" with another child, calmly acknowledge what you've seen and set clear expectations. "It looks like you and Janie are comparing your bodies. Now get dressed. And remember, we keep our clothes on when we're playing."
- When you recognize concerning behaviors you may need to be clearer or firmer in defining and enforcing your rules. Again, adapt your expectations to how your child responds to rules and expectations in other areas of life.
- If you are seeing a pattern of concerning behaviors in your child that doesn’t respond to clear and repeated directions, discuss this with the professionals on your child’s care team and consider seeking help from professionals who are experienced working with children who have problematic sexual behaviors.

Safety Skills

- Saying “no” is an important safety skill. Teach your child to say “no” in lots of different ways. Help him communicate his “no” through speaking, shouting, shaking his head, stamping feet, making faces, etc. Have fun practicing his “no.” Share your child’s way of communicating “no” with his care team. Ask them to respect your child’s “no.”

- Help your child prepare to ask for help from a safe adult. Identify people in the various places your child spends time who he might turn to for help. Consider the particular aspects of your child's personality, his communication skills, and his ability to recognize concerning situations and use role playing or practice scenarios to help him prepare for situations he might encounter.
- Talk with the people you and your child have identified as safe adults. Explain that you and your child have made a plan for how your child will approach them if your child needs help. Ask them to agree to support your child when needed.
- Explain the difference between a secret and a surprise. Surprises are joyful and generate excitement in anticipation of being revealed after a short period of time. Secrets exclude others, often because the information will create upset or anger. When keeping secrets with just one person becomes routine, children are more vulnerable to abuse. Explain that adults should never ask him to keep a secret and, if an adult does, to tell you or another safe adult.

Talking About Sexual Abuse

- Children need to understand the range of [behaviors that are considered sexual abuse](http://www.stopitnow.org/warning_signs_csa_definition) (www.stopitnow.org/warning_signs_csa_definition). Be explicit about what is not okay for someone to do or ask your child to do. For example, "It is not okay for people to show you their private parts or to ask you to show them your private parts. It is not okay for people to touch your private parts or ask you to touch their private parts. It is not okay for people to say or write sexual things about you or your body and it's not okay for you to say or write sexual things about other people or their bodies."
- When talking about sexual abuse, use examples that include people your child knows, including caregivers, relatives, peers, siblings, people in authority, etc. This is important since more than 90% of the time children are sexually abused by someone they know. It is important for children to understand that even people they know and like can be inappropriate and not follow the "rules" about touching children.



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