

Tips for Child Sex Abuse Prevention

How to protect your kids from pedophiles, from having that first talk to recognizing signs of sexual abuse

By Patty Onderko

The news about former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky's alleged sexual abuse of young boys is sickening and scary. And sadly, it's not uncommon. But instead of pulling the covers over our heads, we can use news like this as an opportunity to learn about the signs of abuse so we can prevent it from happening again. There *are* things we can do to keep our children safe. Keep reading for tips that can strengthen our kids, our families, and our communities against the threat of pedophiles.

Having "The Talk"

You don't have to scare your children in order to keep them safe. Teaching them the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching will go a long way in protecting them from predators. As early as age 3, children should understand that parts of their body are private and that it's not okay for just anyone to touch them. Here are some things to keep in mind as you start the conversation.

Start simple.

There's no need to go into the mechanics of how babies are made; keep the birds and the bees conversation separate from the one about "okay" and "not okay" touching. After all, pedophilia is not about sex as much as it's about abuse. Ease into it by explaining how certain parts of their body, those covered by a swimsuit, are private. No one should touch them there except for Mommy and Daddy (or primary caregiver) when they're being cleaned—and the doctor, too, but only if Mom or Dad is there in the room. Don't go into a whole "some people are bad and do things that hurt kids" explanation; just focus on appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Use real names for body parts.

Avoid calling your child's private parts by cutesy, made-up names. "It makes kids think that there is something weird or shameful about their bodies, and they'll be less likely to tell you if someone touches them," says Sharon W. Doty, author of *Keeping Them Safe: Protecting*

Children from Sexual Predators and Evil in Our Midst: Protecting Children from Sexual Predators. Use “penis,” “testicles,” “vulva,” “vagina,” and “breasts” instead.

Think beyond “stranger danger.”

Instructing your child to never talk to strangers is good advice. But the truth is, 80 to 90 percent of abuse is committed not by strangers but by someone the child knows well—and possibly loves. “Abduction is a lesser concern,” says Char Rivette, executive director of the Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center. “You have to worry more about who your child spends time with on daily basis.”

Don’t keep secrets.

Sex abusers almost always manipulate the children they molest through secrets. They’ll tell kids, “This is our secret. You can’t tell your mom because she’ll be very mad at you.” Remind your child frequently that no adult should ever ask her to keep secrets. And that includes you. “If you keep a secret with your child, it confuses the message that it’s not okay for other grown-ups to do,” says Rivette.

Believe your child.

Establish a relationship of faith and trust with your kids. If you’re constantly questioning what they say, they may be more reluctant to tell you if something has happened to them. When you’re talking about inappropriate touching, let them know—explicitly—that you will believe them and that you will *never* be mad.

Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Abuse

You can’t drive yourself crazy being suspicious of every adult that comes into contact with your child, but since abuse often follows the same pattern, there are some warning signs you should be familiar with.

Know what to look for.

No one wants to be suspicious of their own friends and family members. But you don’t have to be if you’re familiar with the most common red flags of a pedophile:

- Prefers spending most of his or her time with children over peers
- Allows children to do things that their parents don’t allow
- Makes fun of children’s body parts or describes children with sexual words such as “stud” or “sexy”
- Seems obsessed with the sexual activities of teens and kids
- Asks adult partners to dress or act like a child or teen during sexual activity
- Looks frequently at child pornography
- Masturbates so often that it gets in the way of important day-to-day activities
- Has put themselves in a position of dealing with children (coach, teacher, counselor, etc.), in addition to other troubling signs

Be suspicious if your child is singled out as "special."

It's always flattering when a teacher, coach, or counselor recognizes all the wonderful qualities your child possesses and seems to favor him or her over other kids. But this can be a major warning sign. "Perpetrators groom kids by singling them out and making them feel special," says Rivette. True professionals are not so transparent about preferences.

Be extremely wary of one-on-one time.

Once a pedophile has singled out a particular child, the next step is getting that child alone. The perpetrator may suggest private tutoring time, one-on-one tennis lessons, or even sleepovers or camping trips. As flattering as it may seem or as excited as your child may be, don't allow this private time.

Don't ignore family history.

"Abuse tends to be intergenerational," says Rivette. "If you have a history of sexual abuse in your family, your child may be more likely to be a victim."

Choose your child's own male role models.

Many child sex abusers prey on the kids of single mothers, who may be more anxious for a male figure in their lives (and 95 percent of all perpetrators are male). These men also take advantage of the fact that a single mother likely has less time and less help, and may welcome someone who offers to babysit or help out.

Don't take sleepovers lightly.

As parents, we're used to making sleepover plans with our kids' friends' families on the fly. But Rivette warns that we shouldn't be so casual when it comes to where our children spend the night. "Don't allow a sleepover unless you know the family well and have been to their home many times. Ask exactly who will be there and what they will be doing. If anything strikes you as odd, trust your instinct."

Evaluating a Program for Safety

How can you make sure that sports team or after-school club you're signing your kid up for has done everything it can to weed out potential abusers?

Ask about background checks.

Most schools and youth organizations conduct criminal background checks, but they may not screen for child abuse and neglect. Encourage them to do so. (And even if the school/program says they screened everyone, ask if they checked fingerprints.) Also, you should ask: do employees receive training in child-abuse prevention?

Meet everyone who will be working with your child.

Often, we'll meet the head counselor of a camp, but not the possibly dozens of other counselors and instructors who will be with your child on a daily basis. Make it a point to ask the program director to introduce you to all of the employees. Besides getting to know them, you send predators the message that you are a parent who pays attention. "Sex abusers don't choose kids whose parents are very involved," says Rivette.

If You Suspect Abuse

We hope you never have to have this conversation, but if you have a bad feeling that your child might have been abused, there are steps you should take.

Ask questions.

To encourage your child to talk, simple, open-ended queries such as "What's the best thing about going to Sam's house?" or "What's the worst thing about going to his house?" help open up discussion, says Doty. You can also preface a conversation with something that gives the child some freedom. For example, you might say, "I remember once I did something that I thought my Dad and Mom would be upset about, so I didn't want to tell them. But I finally did tell them and it was okay. Has anything like that happened to you?"

Look for changes in your child.

Signs that something might be going on:

- Sexual behavior that is way beyond their years (a 4-year-old imitating sexual humping, for example, or using R-rated words for body parts that they've never used before)
- Regressive behavior (acting much younger than they are)
- Increased dependency on non-abusing adults
- Withdrawal and isolation from others
- Increased aggressiveness or hostility
- Sudden fear of the dark
- Frequent nightmares
- Changes in sleep (either insomnia or increased sleeping)

Act quickly.

If you suspect something, stop all contact between your child and the person, then call your state's children's [protective services hotline](#). The hotline professionals may also instruct you to call 911, as well. Don't confront the suspect, as that only gives them time to mount a defense. If you're unsure if anything has happened and worried about slandering a possibly innocent person's name, "always err on the side of protecting kids," advises Rivette.

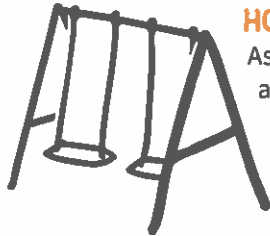
TIPS FOR PARENTS: SAFETY SCENARIOS



Safety is about more than memorizing rules. It's also about knowing **how** to act **when** it matters. Use these tips and practice scenarios to help your child learn what to do in potentially dangerous situations.

TELL YOUR CHILD:

It's OK to be rude if someone is making you uncomfortable. Say "no," walk away and tell a trusted adult.



HOW TO PRACTICE:

Ask children to pretend they are at the playground. An adult approaches and asks for help. What should they do? (Say "no," and walk away. Adults shouldn't ask children for help; they should ask other adults.)

TELL YOUR CHILD:

Always go places with a friend and stay with the group. If a friend walks away from the group, tell a trusted adult right away.

HOW TO PRACTICE:

Ask children to pretend they are walking home with friends. One friend wants to leave the group. What should they do? (Remind the friend that it is safer to stay together.) If the friend still leaves, ask children what they should do. (Tell a trusted adult right away.)

TELL YOUR CHILD:

You should never approach or get into a vehicle without my permission. If someone is following you in a vehicle, turn and run in the other direction. Tell me or another trusted adult what happened right away.



HOW TO PRACTICE:

Using a parked car as a prop, have children pretend someone is driving along beside them. Have them practice refusing the ride and running in the opposite direction.

TELL YOUR CHILD:

When you are home alone, do not open the door for anyone.

HOW TO PRACTICE:

Ask children to pretend they are home alone when someone comes to the door with a delivery. Ask children what they would do. (Not answer the door; call you if the person does not go away.)

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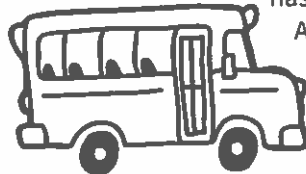


TIPS FOR PARENTS: SAFETY SCENARIOS



TELL YOUR CHILD:

It's important for me to know where you are and where you are going. If you want to change plans, check with me first.



HOW TO PRACTICE:

Ask children to pretend that one of their friends has invited them to come over after school.

Ask children how they should respond.

(I have to check with my mom/dad before changing my plans.)

TELL YOUR CHILD:

If we are separated and you need help, ask a police officer, a store clerk or a parent with children.

HOW TO PRACTICE:

When going places, point out people that children can ask for help, especially when you take them somewhere new. Let children practice interactions with these helpful people, like asking a store clerk for help finding an item. This will make it easier for children to approach them in case of an emergency.

TELL YOUR CHILD:

If someone grabs you, kick, yell and pull away.

HOW TO PRACTICE:

Adults may believe that a yelling child is misbehaving. The phrases below make it clearer that a child is asking for help. Have your children practice saying them in a strong, confident voice.

No!

Stop it!

Leave me alone!

I don't like that!

You're not my mom/dad!

TELL YOUR CHILD:

You can always tell me about anything that makes you feel sad, scared or confused.

HOW TO PRACTICE:

Help children get into the habit of sharing with you by taking the time to listen to them on a regular basis. Try to react calmly, even when children share upsetting information.

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