

# Abuse Depends on Silence.

## Communication is the first step to Prevention.

As parents, we are in a dilemma when it comes to informing our children about abuse and neglect. On one hand, we know the kinds of pressures and difficulties they will face when they grow up, and we desire to allow them to keep their innocence as long as possible. It's very hard to interrupt a child's happy-go-lucky life by initiating a discussion about recognizing abuse and neglect!

On the other hand, of course, we desire to do everything in our power to protect our precious children from pain and danger of any kind. Because most children spend a significant amount of time away from their parents and surrounded by other adults, it is critical for their safety that they be able to spot warning signs and respond correctly. Here are some tips for talking with your child about this sensitive but important subject.

### Kinds of Abuse

Although you probably will not go into extensive detail with your child, it is helpful for you to be aware of the different kinds of abuse that they could encounter, since they have different warning signs.

#### Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse does not typically involve physical contact. Abusive adults speak or shout at children with words that are inappropriate, unkind, or destructive. They may also impose punishments that are out of line with the offenses.

#### Physical Abuse

No adult should inflict harm on a child physically; this form of abuse is the easiest one to identify and to warn a child about.

#### Sexual Abuse

Conversely, sexual abuse is the most difficult subject to broach and discuss with a child. It is often a good idea to simply refer to actions by adults doing things that make you feel "strange, uncomfortable, or embarrassed."



**A report of child abuse is made every ten seconds.**

### RESOURCES

National Movement for America's Children:

[www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org)

Childhelp:

[www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Child Welfare Information Gateway:

[www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

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TALKING WITH YOUR  
CHILD ABOUT ABUSE



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## Preparing Yourself to Talk

If you are well prepared for the discussion, it will be easier for your child to understand and value what you say. Make sure that you can display all of these qualities:

**Authority/Stability.** Your child needs to know that you are the rock of stability that they can depend on if something confusing or frightening happens to them. Show your child that you are aware of the dangers that face them, that you understand them, and that you are able to help them solve their problems. Avoiding questions or issues can make it seem as though you are just as unfamiliar with them as your child is.

**Gentleness/Understanding.** Your child must know that he can talk to you about anything without the fear of a “meltdown” on your part. Establishing this trust is a long-term process, the result of many gentle, understanding responses to situations that could easily upset you as a parent. Whatever your internal reaction to what your child tells you, your initial outward reaction should be one that inspires trust and comforts your child.

**Honesty.** Children have a natural ability to tell when adults are being less than honest with them. If what you tell them does not seem

to match what they see in the world, you could damage your relationship and lose trust. Never try to give your child a false view of the world for the sake of avoiding uncomfortable subjects.

## Warning about Abuse

What should you actually tell your child about abuse ahead of time? Balance is important. You can frighten your child if he gets the impression from you that there are predatory adults hiding around every corner, and that they are in constant danger even when in safe environments. Present abuse as a danger that we need to stay away from, but don't make it too weighty by the way you talk about it. Bringing up the subject in a natural way in conversation is a great way to show that it's an important subject without over-emphasizing it.



Role-playing and setting up possible scenarios are very helpful for giving children practical knowledge that they can use. If they have already decided what they will do if an adult contacts them inappropriately in a certain environment, it will be easier for them to respond correctly if it actually happens. As experiential learners, children process information about a topic like this more fully if pretending is involved.

## Responding to Abuse

Every parent fears finding out from their child that someone has abused or neglected them. If your child comes to you with a question or a description of an abusive act, your reaction carries great weight. It has likely taken a lot of courage for your child to confide in you, and your very first words should commend him or her for that courage.

Your first priority is to tend to your child's emotional and physical needs, however inclined you may be to spring into action in order to right the wrong. Don't let your child feel like he or she has been forgotten about. They need to know that their well-being is very important to you.

Your actions after that point depend on the extent and type of abuse that occurred. In the worst case scenario, you should contact local law enforcement if an adult has committed a crime against your child. If your child is your only source of information about who the adult is or what happened, be careful to avoid making him or her feel self-conscious or scared. The presence of flashing lights, sirens, and police officers can have a negative influence on a child's ability to remember facts clearly.

The more common abuse scenario is inappropriate, but not illegal, activity on the part of adults at school, daycare, or in another structured environment. In those cases, the correct response is to bring the incident to the attention of a supervisor, principal,



or social worker. Again, your attitude during these discussions will go far to make the process better or worse. Balanced words and calmness are more helpful than angry shouting.

## Conclusion

Be the strong, gentle, protective influence that your child needs in his or her life. By educating your child in a careful way about abuse and neglect, you can be that influence even during the times that you can't stand by his or her side. Your courage in initiating a conversation could make the critical difference when a difficult situation confronts your child.