

PREVENTION & INTERVENTION OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

Information for Parents (Loving Caregivers)

Listed below are suggestions to assist parents in the prevention and intervention of childhood sexual abuse.

PREVENTION for ALL children

1) Create a safe, predictable, and supportive living environment for your child

2) Be cognizant of your child's developmental limitations, which put them at higher risk of being sexually abused

- Children are at higher risk for being victimized due to their more limited cognitive abilities, limited language/ communication abilities, limited life experience & knowledge, small physical size, and complete dependence on adults.

3) Be vigilant about who you allow to have unsupervised contact with your children

The large majority of childhood sexual abuse incidents are committed by people the child knows and trusts.

- Caution must be used when making decisions about who you allow to have unsupervised contact with your children.

4) Educate your children about the 'names of body parts' including their very special private parts (e.g., nose, mouth, arms, legs, vagina, penis, breasts, buttocks)

This will help children communicate more clearly about their bodies and create a norm within the family to talk openly about sexuality and sexual abuse prevention.

5) Educate your children about 'the when and by whom' of private parts touching

When it is okay (e.g., when taking a bath; when getting help wiping after using bathroom; at the doctor's office) and *by whom* (identify a select few loving caregivers who can assist your child).

6) Educate your children about 'who' and 'how' to tell if they think or feel they experienced private parts touching that was not supposed to happen

It can be helpful to ask children questions about potential sexual abuse scenarios:

- "If someone touches your private parts (or has you touch their private parts) and tells you not to tell anyone, what should you do?" "Who should you tell?" ...Tell a grown up.
- "If you ever feel confused or uncomfortable about private parts touching, what should you do?" ...Tell a grown up.
- "Who are the grown-ups you could tell?"

Note: The goal is to educate your child without scaring them or making them feel bad about their bodies

7) Talk openly and honestly with your children about healthy sexuality and healthy relationships

Talk about how their bodies are wonderful and special (not bad).

- Childhood exploration of their bodies including private parts is a natural part of growing up, but you may need to explain the boundaries of these experiences (e.g. only when alone in bedroom).
- As your children age, it will be important to have discussions about what makes a healthy relationship (e.g., respect, empathy, listening).

A children's book to help address the above concepts: Our Very Special Bodies (Powell, 2014)

INTERVENTION for children who have been sexually abused

1) Give your child ‘lots of love’ and create a ‘safe, predictable, and supportive living environment’

2) ‘Closely supervise’ your child’s interactions with others

- Children who have been sexually abused are often confused about what is normal, acceptable behavior. In addition, incidents of sexual abuse can sometimes lead to sexually reactive behaviors in children (e.g., excessive masturbation and/or sexually acting out onto other children).
- Close supervision of your child is a must.
- Setting clear boundaries and using behavioral-substitution strategies can be helpful.

3) Help ‘correct any misperceptions’ your child may have about their sexual victimization

For example, a child may think they are bad or that sexuality is bad based on their perception of how their parents/loving caregivers react to the discovery of the sexual abuse.

- Parents/ loving caregivers’ immediate reaction is often feelings of anger at the situation and fear for their child's welfare.
- It is easy for children to misinterpret these emotional reactions (e.g., they may think their parent is angry *at them*).
- It is helpful for parents to talk openly with their child in order to prevent any misperceptions that can cause unintended trauma.
- *Let your child know you love them, you are proud of them, and they did nothing wrong.*

4) Keep in mind that your child’s developmental understanding of their victimization experiences (and sexuality in general) will change as they age

- As your child developmentally matures (not only physiologically, but how they think and feel) issues may arise about their past victimization.
- Therefore, it is important to keep the lines of communication open.
- Mental health services may need to be sought out.