



Communication is Key to Keeping Children Safe – Talking Points for Parents

Talking to children about personal safety and child abuse can be overwhelming. Some caregivers are not sure where to start or what to say. It is important to remember that communication is key to keeping children safe.

When do I start talking to my children about their private places?

First it is important to teach children the correct names for their genitals. You can introduce these words when you are teaching your child the names of other parts of their body. “Here’s your nose, elbow, penis and leg.” The earlier you introduce the names the less “taboo” the private places on the body will be.

Why should I use the proper terms for genitals – it makes me uncomfortable?

This is a very common question. If you grew up in a household where private places and body development were not openly talked about it may be hard to have these discussions with your children. However, it is an important way to protect children. Sex offenders often use the fact that we do not discuss sexual development and private places with our children at all or until they are older. The average age of a victim of sexual abuse is nine (9). Education is power and can be a deterrent. If an offender knows a child has been educated, he/she may choose a different child to pursue. Additionally, if a child has been abused and uses the correct terms when disclosing it makes it easier for the person being told to understand what happened and to act. For example if a child tells someone “Uncle Joe ate my cookie” as a way to disclose sexual abuse the person being told may not realize the child’s cookie is a euphemism for their genitals and encourage the child to share instead of reporting the abuse.

What can I say to teach my child about their private places?

Everyone (it does not matter if you are a boy or girl) has four private places on their bodies. They are your mouth, your chest, your penis or vagina and your buttocks or behind. No one should touch your private places without a good reason. There are two reasons it is okay for someone to touch a private place: to keep you clean and healthy.

Should I make my child hug or kiss relatives?

No. It is important to allow children to decide who they share signs of affection with. Forcing a child to hug or kiss someone tells them they do not have the right to choose who they touch and who touches them. Once children learn they have no control over touches and cannot say no (particularly to adults) they are at increased risk for abuse. It is imperative children learn that they decide who they touch and who touches them, and that they have the right to say “no” to any touch they do not want. This can cause contention within families. Explain to the adults in your child’s life why you as their caregiver allows them to decline touches and say no to other adults. Sex offenders often target passive uneducated children who are taught to accept without question or protest any touch given to them. Additionally, when an adult is forcing a child to give or receive a touch the child does not want, it is important that you as the caregiver stand up and back the child’s request. This allows the child to know you are there to protect them and it allows potential offenders to know you will believe and protect your child. This can be a significant deterrent for an offender.

What else should I teach my child about?

It is important to teach children the difference between secrets and surprises, about the three kinds of touches and what and who a safe person is.

What is the difference between a secret and surprise?

A secret is usually something that no one is to know. It is usually about something bad and is never to be told. Secrets make people feel sad, scared, worried or uncomfortable.

Surprises are usually something that someone while know about eventually. It is not something that is bad and does not make someone feel sad, scared, worried or uncomfortable.

Consider having a family rule where there are no secrets only surprises. This may be difficult for us as adults and we may have to be creative but in the long run this will increase safety for your child.

What are the three kinds of touches?

At Prevent Child Abuse Delaware we teach there are three kinds of touches based on the work of Jan Hindman. The three touches are: good, bad and secret touches. Good touches are any touch you like to give and get. They do not hurt or make someone feel sad or scared.

Bad touches are any touch that hurts or makes someone feel sad, scared, or worried.

A secret touch is any touch you are told to keep secret. The occurrence of secret touches must be shared with a safe person.

How do I talk to my child about safe people?

Explain what a safe person is and how a safe person will behave. Common words are kind, helpful, protective, and a good listener. Safe people will not hurt someone, will set limits (like wearing a bicycle helmet or not allowing a child to play a particular video game), will not cross personal boundaries, will not ask children to keep secrets from other safe adults, and will not touch a child's private places unless that person is keeping the child clean or healthy.

Can I have this conversation once?

No. This topic needs to be discussed often. Children need to hear this information more than once and in different contexts. They need to be able to practice applying this knowledge and ask questions. As children get older, the conversation will change. Use examples and practice with the child, for example you might ask, "What would you do if your bus driver wanted to take you for ice cream but didn't want you to tell me because he would get in trouble?" Or "What if you were at your friend's house and that friend's brother asked you to play a game that made you feel uncomfortable?" Rehearsing what to do and having a plan will help your child feel more confident in dealing with difficult situations and ultimately keep them safer.

Should I tell my child not to let anyone touch their private places?

No. It is important to remember that in most cases children cannot say no or keep someone from touching their private places. This puts the responsibility unfairly on the child. IF someone has touched the child, he/she will believe it is their fault and not tell. Instead tell the child "IF anyone touches you, makes you feel uncomfortable, weird or is creepy tell me or another safe adult so we can help protect you. Even if it is dad, grandma, Uncle Jim, your teacher or coach it's okay to tell."

What do I do if my child discloses abuse?

Having a child disclose abuse to you is a difficult situation. It can be hard to hear but your response is key to helping the child heal. It is important to believe the child – even if your automatic response is "no, that person is so nice, or I know that person would never harm a child". Children rarely make up allegations of sexual abuse and sex offenders are very good at manipulating adults into believing they would not hurt a child. Next, listen to what the child is saying and do not ask leading questions. Stay calm so the child will feel comfortable telling. If you get angry or upset often the child will stop talking. Ask the child to tell you more about the

situation. Tell the child he/she is brave for telling and did nothing wrong. Remind the child it was not okay for the person to do what they but, do not talk negatively about the offender. In most cases the child is attached to the offender and does not want the offender to get in trouble. Next report the abuse. Call the Delaware Child Abuse Report line at 1-800-292-9582 or visit https://kids.delaware.gov/fs/fs_iseethesigns.shtml. In Delaware everyone is a mandated reporter. Finally support the child through the investigation and treatment process.

What else can I do to protect children?

- Be familiar with the signs of abuse. Visit <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/whatiscan.pdf> for definitions and signs of abuse.
- Be present. Often children are dropped off at activities or friends' homes as caregivers are busy tending to other activities. Unfortunately, this puts children at risk. Caregivers who are present at their children activities, like sports practices or scouts, send clear messages to the other adults. I am present and aware of what is happening in my child's life. When caregivers drop and run, their children can appear vulnerable and can be at increase risk.
- Be sure all the activities your children participate in are observable and interruptible. Look for programs where children are not in one adult: one child situations.
- Be unpredictable with supervision.
- Be sure to speak up when someone does something that makes you or your child feel uncomfortable. Darkness to Light suggests using these three steps:
 - Describe the behavior
 - Set the limit
 - Move on
 - Example: An adult is tickling a child and the child keeps telling the adult to stop but the adult is not stopping.
 - You say: "Hey, Frankie is asking you to stop tickling him. In our home, when a child says stop to any touch, we stop. Frankie lets go outside and play."
 - This can be hard to do but is very important to protect children. In most cases, the person isn't trying to intentionally hurt the child, but it lets everyone know the limit and that you are willing to enforce that limit. It allows the child to know you are there to protect them and teaches them it is okay to speak up when someone is breaking a boundary. If a child is being hurt, that child is much more likely to tell an adult they've witness setting boundaries.