



Category: Child Sexual Abuse

Safety Tips for Parents

As a parent, one of your primary concerns is your child's safety. While some dangers--a hot stove, traffic or an electrical outlet--seem easy to explain, dangers that involve violence may seem more difficult to talk about. You may be afraid that you will frighten your child. You may not know how to explain violence, or where to start. You may also not want to recognize that your child could become a victim of a crime. Unfortunately, children of all ages are victims of crime. Any child can be a crime victim, regardless of age, gender, religious or ethnic affiliation, appearance, size or strength. The best thing that you can do to try to prevent your child from being victimized is to talk openly and honestly about safety, and about what your child can do if anyone ever tries to harm him or her.

The old advice, "keep away from strangers," simply isn't enough. It also isn't enough to address the issue of safety only once. Just as each time you cross a street with your child, you remind him or her to "look both ways," there are many ways you can incorporate safety information into your child's daily routine. You can decide when, where and how you want to start talking about these issues with your child. You could talk to your child alone, involve others in your family, or start by reading a story.

The following tips have been collected from a wide variety of sources, including organizations and individuals that work directly with young victims of crime. The information is divided into several major categories: *Keeping Records; Stranger Rules; Gun Safety; Safety at Home; Child Sexual Abuse; Preschool or Child Care Center Safety; Safety at School; Halloween Safety; Child Abuse; and If Your Child Becomes a Victim of Crime*. The information provided in the following pages is intended to be used with the National Center for Victims of Crime *Get Help Series* bulletins "Safety Tips for Children" and "Child Sexual Abuse Information for Middle School Students," which provide you with written information to read with your child and then allow him or her to keep. Unfortunately, none of these tips can guarantee safety for your child. However, teaching your child about safety gives him or her the tools to recognize and respond to potentially dangerous situations--tools that could save your child's life.

Basics

- Try to create a climate where your child feels comfortable talking to you. Tell the child that it is okay to talk to you about anything and that you always want to know if someone upsets him or her, even if it is someone you care about. A child needs to know that if she or he tells you something difficult, they will be believed.

- Teach your child his or her full name, your full name, telephone number and the address where you live, including the name of the town and state. For smaller children, putting this information to a familiar song can help them remember it.
- Make sure your child knows how to make an emergency phone call and a collect phone call.
- Establish routines with your children that keep you informed about where they are and when they will be home. For instance, if your child has to stay after school or wants to go somewhere after school, make sure they always call you first.
- Create a support system for your child. Help your child make a list of all the people in his or her life to whom they can turn for help.
- Try to teach your child how to resolve conflicts without violence. You can be a role model by using non-violent discipline techniques, such as time-outs, removal of privileges and restrictions.
- Role play situations with your child, so that your child can practice responding to potentially dangerous situations. "What if. . ." games (such as, "What if someone you don't know asks you to see his puppies or find his lost kitten?") can teach your child how to say no to or escape from potential abductors or abusers.

Keeping Records

- Keep a complete and updated written description of your child which includes eye color, hair color, height, weight, date of birth and any unique physical attributes. Include information about glasses, braces, pierced ears and any birthmarks, scars or blemishes.
- Take color photographs of your child every six months that are in good focus and are good, accurate likenesses.
- Make sure that your dentist has on file up-to-date dental charts and x-rays for your child. If you move, get a copy of these records to take with you.
- Know where your child's medical records are kept.
- Maintain current addresses and telephone numbers of your child's friends and schools.

Stranger Rules

- Teach your child the tricks people sometimes use to interest children, such as: offering a ride in bad weather; offering candy or money; asking for help looking for a lost pet; or saying that "your Mommy or Daddy sent me to pick you up." If someone other than mom or dad is picking them up, explain that to your child beforehand or contact their school.
- It is important to teach your child that it is not bad behavior to say "no" to someone who asks for help. Talk over alternatives (like calling 911) if someone is hurt.
- Instead of warning your child not to "talk to strangers," explain specific situations that might happen and what your child can do in those situations. Children may not have an understanding of what "stranger" means; for instance, some children think that someone who takes the time to befriend them is not a stranger. This also helps children to understand that certain behaviors are wrong no matter who does them--remember people your child knows are much more likely to harm them than "strangers."

- Teach your child never to go anywhere with someone he or she doesn't know. Also teach your child never to go anywhere with someone he or she does know (such as a teacher, bus driver, neighbor, church official or member, etc.), unless your child heard directly from you that it is okay to go. Explain that sometimes people will say that you sent them or that you are hurt as a trick.
- Role play situations with your child so they can practice saying "**NO**" and avoiding dangerous situations. Talk about how hard it can be to say no to an adult, especially if the adult is asking for help or offering something fun to the child. Review with your child the "Safety Tips for Children" bulletin which addresses how a child can avoid an abduction attempt.
- Don't put your child's name on any of his or her clothing, school supplies or school bags. A stranger might use your child's name as a way of suggesting that she or he knows your child or you.
- Walk your neighborhood with your child and pick out the safest routes to school, friends' houses or other places your child walks. Identify with your child safe places to go in an emergency, such as a trusted neighbor, open business or fire station.
- Teach your child what to do if he or she gets separated from you at a store or other public place.
- Don't leave your child alone (for instance, in a car or in the toy department of a store).
- Keep an eye on your child. Be especially careful at places where you might get distracted, such as at an ATM or with the cashier in a store.
- Your child also needs to know which strangers can be helpful, such as a police officer, fire fighter, store clerk or cashier, or a mother with small children.

Gun Safety

Guns are dangerous. If you have a gun in your home or are considering buying a gun, there are a few facts you should consider:

- Studies show that a firearm in the home is more than 40 times more likely to hurt or kill a family member than to stop a crime.
- Every six hours a youth between the ages of 10-19 commits suicide with a gun, accidental or otherwise.
- Talk to your child about guns. Even if you don't have one in your house, your child may see them at school or at other people's homes. Explain that guns kill people, even accidentally, and that they should never be touched by children. Ask them to tell you if anyone shows them a gun.
- Teach your child how to deal with anger and conflict. Disagreements that used to turn into a schoolyard punching match could today turn into a schoolyard shooting.
- Explain to your child that guns don't solve problems--they can kill or cause life-long disability and pain.
- Talk to your child about the differences between television or movie violence and real-life violence.
- If you keep any types of weapons in your house, keep them locked away out of your child's reach. Do not show them to your child or let your child know where you keep them. If you have a gun, keep any ammunition in a separate locked area.

- Teach your child what to do if they do see a gun or hear one being fired. Review with your child the "Safety Tips for Children" bulletin concerning gun safety.

Safety at Home

- Use a babysitter until your child is old enough to be responsible in a crisis.
- Check out every babysitter. Meet them, and ask for references before you hire them. Let the child meet them, too. Set clear rules in front of the sitter and the child together, for instance: "Sarah should not be given a bath and should be in bed at 9:00 on the dot."
- Have a set of safety rules for your child if he or she is alone in the house. Be sure your child knows never to open the door or to tell someone on the phone that he or she is alone.
- Make rules with your child about bringing home friends and inviting people over when you aren't home.
- Your child should always check with you before leaving the apartment or house for any reason, unless it is an emergency, such as a fire.
- Keep important numbers posted by each phone, such as 911, a trustworthy neighbor, poison control, etc. Make sure your child can reach the phone and knows what numbers to call in an emergency.
- Keep windows and doors to your home locked. Intruders often enter through unlocked entrances. Make sure your child knows how to work door and window locks.
- Teach your child what to do if she or he comes home to an apartment or house that looks broken into. Tell your child never to go in if it looks like the home has been broken into--the burglar could still be inside. Also talk about what to do if someone tries to break into the house while your child is inside. Teach him or her to get out of the house, if possible, and to run away to seek help.
- Don't hang a house key around your child's neck. It advertises that the child goes home to an empty house. Put it inside a pocket or on a ring in your child's backpack.
- If your child comes home before you, establish a rule that he or she must call you upon arriving home.
- Make sure your child knows an adult neighbor, friend or family member that she or he can call in an emergency or if she or he gets lonely or scared.

Child Sexual Abuse

The most important sexual abuse prevention strategy is good communication with your child. Take the time every day to talk with your child, and make sure that you can really listen and observe your child while he or she talks. Learn about your child's activities, but also about his or her feelings. Encourage your child to always share his or her problems and concerns with you. Talk to your child about sexual abuse. Always mention people the child knows as well as strangers. (Remember your child is about four times more likely to be sexually abused by someone she or he knows than by a stranger!) This can increase your child's safety because it is easier for your child to respond to something she or he knows can happen, and it will definitely help your child to talk with you if anything ever happens. Try including this topic in discussions you have about other risks your child may face (such as crossing busy streets, fire safety, or what

to do if lost). Reassure your child by emphasizing that the vast majority of adults never do bad things to children and that most adults want to protect children from harm.

Use the proper words for sex organs, such as penis and vagina. It is hard for a child to talk openly about sexual abuse if she or he doesn't have the words or has been taught that parts of the body are dirty or bad. Explain that some areas of your body--the parts your bathing suit covers--are private, and no older person should touch them, except a doctor when you are in the room with them. One way to approach what "private" means is to use things that belong to your child, such as toys, books, bed -- anything of your child's which someone else should ask permission to touch or use. Suggest solutions to your child, such as: "If someone touches you in a way that feels uncomfortable, tell them to stop. If someone pretends that touching you was an accident, move away or firmly take the person's hand off of you."

Be specific. Tell your child that an adult or older child should **NEVER**:

- Put their hands down your pants or up your skirt.
- Touch your private parts, even through clothes or pajamas.
- Ask you to touch their private parts, or ask you to remove their clothes.
- Take off your clothes.
- Take pictures of you with your clothes off.
- Take their clothes off in front of you.

Most parents try to teach their children to listen to adults and to "do as they are told." Teach your child that there are times that it is okay to say "no" to an adult, and that you will support your child when she or he does so. Even things that seem harmless, like making your child kiss a relative goodbye, can make a child more vulnerable to sexual assault.

Teach your child that they can always say "no" to someone who wants to touch or hug them--even to you. Practice with your child ways of saying "no" that feel comfortable in various situations. Be on the lookout for signs that something is wrong. If your child says she or he doesn't like someone or shows reluctance or discomfort around an adult or teenager, ask why. Ask if the person has done something to make him or her uncomfortable. A sexually abused child may show unusual interest in sexuality, or may exhibit changes in behavior such as becoming withdrawn or violent. Ask your child to tell you if someone touches them in a way that makes them feel funny. Explain that the person may ask a child to promise not to tell or may threaten the child. A child may be told something terrible will happen (such as their Mom or Dad will be killed) if she or he tells anyone about the abuse. Ask your child to report any time an older child or adult asks them to keep a secret.

Preschool & Child Care Center Safety

Before enrolling your child into a preschool or child care program, check with state or local licensing agencies and child care information services to make sure the program is reputable and to check if there have been past complaints.

- Find out about the school or center's hiring policies and practices. Ask how they recruit and select staff. Find out if they examine references, background checks and previous employment history.
- Ensure that you have the right to drop in and visit the program at any time--and then do so!
- Prohibit, in writing, the release of your child to anyone without your authorization. Also give the school or center the name of anyone other than yourself who will be responsible for picking up your child regularly. Introduce this person to the staff so they can recognize him or her.

Safety at School

Throughout the United States, children and teenagers are increasingly carrying guns and other dangerous weapons to school. From small towns to big cities, children have increased access to weapons, and many children feel they need guns for "protection." As a parent, it is important for you to realize that school and playgrounds could be potentially dangerous to your child.

- Encourage your child to talk to you about anything that happens at school, including things that upset him or her.
- School bullies have always been a problem; however, bullying can take place outside of the classroom as well: on the internet. Be mindful of your child's activity online as well and keep the dialogue open about what they are doing and who they may be talking to.
- Reinforce school policies against carrying weapons to school by talking about them with your child. Also talk to your child about his or her fears of safety while at school.
- Other children are not the only threat to your child at school. Child abductors or molesters sometimes take their victims from schools or playgrounds. Remember that "strangers" are not the only potential threat. People who harm children can also be teachers, principals, coaches, counselors, custodians, bus drivers and other types of school employees -- all of whom have access to large numbers of children. This threat exists regardless of whether your child attends a public, private or parochial school.
- Be involved in your children's school, and attend school board meetings and hearings. Speak out about safety concerns you have. Other parents probably have them, too.
- If your school does not automatically contact you when your child does not appear for class, work with other families to get such policies established.

Halloween Safety

- Children's costumes should not keep them from being able to see clearly or move easily and quickly. Avoid masks that block any part of your child's vision.
- Children should trick-or-treat in groups, with a buddy system, and be accompanied by an adult who can remain in the background.
- Stop only at familiar apartments or homes in your neighborhood.
- It's best to trick-or-treat when it's light outside, but if that isn't possible, give children flashlights and keep them in well-lit areas. Always walk on the sidewalks, never in the streets.

- Teach children never to go into anyone's house, apartment or car for candy.
- Give children treats before they go out so they will be less tempted to eat candy you haven't had a chance to examine. Children should not eat any of the treats they receive until they get home. The adult traveling with the children can carry candy for eating during trick-or-treating.
- Eat only treats that are wrapped and unopened. A parent should examine all candy and throw out anything that seems suspicious. Fruits or homemade items should be thrown out.

If Your Child Becomes a Victim of Crime

Above all else, believe your child. Many children who tell adults about crimes are afraid they will not be believed. Many are not. Be sure to take your child seriously, even if a violent crime was not committed. Reassure the child that ***what happened is not their fault.*** A child who was hurt or accosted while breaking a rule (such as being somewhere you said they were not allowed to go) may be especially afraid that you will be upset with him or her. Other ways to help or intervene can include:

- Immediately get him or her any needed medical attention. In the case of a sexual assault, an injury might not be obvious, and a medical exam is needed to detect internal injuries and screen for possible exposure to disease or infection.
- Try to temper your own reaction. Your child is likely to become very upset if she or he sees that you are upset. They may also think that they did something wrong and take responsibility for your pain. They may decide it is better not to keep talking to you if you exhibit extreme emotions.
- Trying to pretend something didn't happen or telling your child to "just forget about it" will not help. Both you and your child will experience stress related to the crime, whether or not you acknowledge it. The best way to cope with the problem is to talk, listen and get support.
- Do not try to take the law into your hands. Your child needs you, and needs to try to get back some normalcy in his or her life. If you try to harm someone who has hurt your child, you could be arrested and even go to jail. Your child must then cope with this added trauma.
- Report the crime -- even a suspected crime -- to the police.
- Get support. Contact a local crime victim agency or child advocacy center. They can offer you and your child support and important information about your rights. Don't try to handle this alone. There are many organizations that can help you.
- Many resources exist through a quick web search, your local law enforcement agency, or a hospital can help you find myriad of services. You can also call the National Child Abuse Hotline where they can provide additional referrals for counseling and law enforcement options: 1-(800) 4-A-Child (423-4453).

Information for Parents of Teens

If your teen is a victim of crime

Teens are particularly vulnerable to crime and unfortunately become victims of crime more than any other age group. They experience all the same crimes that adults do—from robbery, sexual assault, and car theft, to intimate partner violence, assaults and bullying. How you—and other adults—respond can make a big difference in how your child copes with and recovers from the event.

Trauma and victimization affects people in different ways, but there are some behaviors to be on the lookout for with your teen. Some common reactions to experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event include:

- Change in eating or sleeping habits
- Acting out: aggressive or inappropriate behavior
- Attention seeking behavior
- Increased risk taking
- Deteriorating school performance
- Fear of attending school
- Poor peer relations, withdrawal
- Physical signs of stress: headache, stomachache
- Nightmares
- Anger
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Loss of control or powerlessness
- Concentration difficulties
- Clinginess
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Anxiety

Rapid behavior changes can also be indicators of victimization and trauma. For example: a child who was always deeply concerned about looks and appearance, who stops being interested in how people view her; a strong student who no longer is interested in achievement; or a child who now expresses fear about doing something, such as taking the bus, attending school, or going somewhere frequented in the past. Although keeping a child's victimization quiet or trying to forget about it can be an instinctive response, a victim has little chance of healing from the experience if they want to talk about it with someone, but can't. *Forcing a person to suppress feelings and memories can damage a person's emotional, psychological, and even physical health.*

How you can help

- Remain calm in front of your teen.
- Remember that your teen will be aware of and affected by your reactions.
- Focus on what your teen needs.

- Avoid being judgmental. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone makes bad decisions. This NEVER means it's ok for one person to harm another.
- Just listen—Let your child vent and don't try to have answers for everything.
- Validate that the event was horrible, and that you are sorry that it happened.
- Ask your child to talk about how he or she reacted to the event.
- Accept that your teen may be acting differently, but set appropriate limits. For instance, your teen may be expressing a lot of anger, but it is still inappropriate for him or her to throw things, break things, or be violent.
- Give your teen time to process what happened.
- Help your teen mobilize his or her own resources—friends, teachers, coaches, siblings, and other family who can be supportive.

Exploring Options

Explore options for addressing the situation (reporting to the police, speaking with school authorities) with your child. Options for addressing safety and holding perpetrators accountable for the crime include:

- Contacting victim service providers for emotional support, safety planning, and more information about other resources and legal rights;
- Reporting to police and beginning the criminal justice process;
- Reporting to school authorities;
- Accessing mental health and medical services;
- Consider civil justice options (filing a civil suit against the perpetrator or other responsible parties).
- Explore what will happen with each choice and make decisions together.
- Prepare for every step of the process. Victim service providers often provide information about what to expect at different points, such as when making a police report or during court hearings. Understand that children, especially teens, may be extremely concerned about how peers and classmates will respond.

Helpful Statements

- Nothing you did (or didn't do) makes you deserve this.
- I'm glad you told me.
- How can I/we help you feel safer?
- I love you.
- I'm proud of you.
- This happens to other people. Would it help to see if you can talk with some of them?
- I'm sorry this happened.
- I believe you.
- I'll support your decisions.

Negative Statements

- This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't (had)
- I told you not to: go to that party, date that person, hang out with those people.
- Just forget it ever happened.
- Get over it.
- This is private. Don't tell anyone what happened.
- Try not to think about it.
- This is all my fault.
- I want to kill the person who hurt you.

Family and Friends

Sometimes, family and friends of victims also feel the impact of the crime and experience emotional and physical reactions. This is called secondary victimization. If you or any other members of your family have experienced crime or other traumatic events in the past, the victimization of a child may retraumatize or potentially trigger memories and feelings of that time. Explore support options for you and your teen, individually and together. Local victim service providers, mental health programs, or religious organizations can often work with the victim, family, and friends, to help you through this time. If you are having difficulty finding services for you or your child, call the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network's (RAINN) hotline at 1(800) 656-4673.

Resources:

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network

1(800) 656-4673

National Parent Helpline

1(855) 427-2736

Prevent Child Abuse America

1(800) CHILDREN

Local Department of Education helpline for parents/teachers or school social workers