

Talking to Kids About Sexual Abuse

 childmind.org/article/talking-kids-sexual-abuse

How to teach children to recognize inappropriate behavior, and speak up if it happens

Writer: [Harry Kimball](#)

Clinical Experts: [Harold S. Koplewicz, MD](#) , [Jamie Howard, PhD](#)

High-profile cases of sexual abuse of children at respected places—the Horace Mann School, Joe Paterno’s locker room at Penn State, the offices of revered pediatrician Melvin Levine, the cloisters of the Catholic Church—serve to illustrate that [abuse is very hard to anticipate](#). “We delude ourselves in to thinking that certain situations are without danger,” says [Harold Koplewicz](#), MD, President of the Child Mind Institute.

“At the same time,” Dr. Koplewicz continues, “we don’t want our kids to be fearful of the world.” And this means giving them a thorough education in what is and what is not appropriate behavior to expect from other adults, as well as teaching them that speaking up about possible abuse is always the right thing to do. When parents talk to kids, Dr. Koplewicz says, they should stress that “if this happens, you don’t have anything to feel bad about.”

How else can you help children understand the severity of the situation—and the proper way to respond—all without terrifying them? It’s not difficult, says [Jamie Howard](#), PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute who specializes in families and trauma. “I am less worried about scaring a child than about the child being unprepared if he or she must face an uncomfortable or even dangerous situation.”

So what is the best preparation? “When I talk to younger kids about sex and their bodies, I think the most important thing to do is be concrete,” Dr. Howard continues. “You can say, ‘the only grownups that touch your body are mom and dad and the doctor, particularly private parts.’ This changes, of course, as kids get older, but being developmentally appropriate in your conversations does *not* mean you can’t be concrete as well.”

Encourage kids to talk

“This directness will serve kids well as they grow, too. [Silence in the face of sexual abuse often stems from embarrassment and guilt, which in turn come from parents modeling these reactions to sex and sexual topics](#). So parents should instead model directness, and not worry about being intrusive. If you are worried about an adolescent boy, just ask him, ‘Is someone touching your penis?’ If he is being abused, he’ll tell you. If he isn’t, he’ll yell at you, but that’s what adolescents do.”

Whether we are talking about schools, doctors, or churches, the sexual abuses we discuss are most often in the fairly distant past. It is terrible but true that because of shame and embarrassment and misplaced guilt, it often takes years for these trespasses to come to light. And the past was different in terms of public awareness about sexual predators. Today children are [taught from a young age that unwelcome touches are not O.K., are not their fault, and should be reported immediately](#).

Are the procedures and culture we cultivate to protect children enough so that we won’t hear the same sad tales in 20 or 30 years? “The safeguards we’ve put in place in institutional and educational environments have done a lot to make people more aware of how adults interact with children, and to simplify reporting,” says Alan Ravitz, MD, a *forensicpsychiatrist*.

“But I think it would be naive to think they have reduced the number of predators. So vigilance on the part of parents, and above all the education of children on how to respond to awkward or potentially harmful situations, are still of paramount importance. The main strategy should be encouraging kids to [*talk to their parents*](#), no matter what.”

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