

# 10 Ways to Teach Children to Speak Up About Sexual Abuse

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Straight talk about body parts and a no-secrets policy can empower kids to get help when they need it

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We teach our young children all sorts of ways to keep themselves safe. We teach them to watch the hot stove, we teach them to look both ways before they cross the street. But, more often than not, body safety [is not taught until much older](#) — until sometimes, it is too late. Research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that approximately 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are sexually abused before the age of 18. You want to hear something even scarier? According to the US Department of Justice (nsopw.org) only 10% of perpetrators were strangers to the child and 23% of the perpetrators were *children* themselves!

These statistics do not surprise me. In my practice I meet children on a weekly basis who have been victims of sexual abuse. Many of them are under five years old. Almost all of them knew their perpetrator and more often than not, it is another kid!

Parents will frequently tell me that they didn't think this could happen to them. That they never leave their children with strangers. That they always keep their children within their eyesight.

Do your children go on play dates? Do they go to daycare or pre-school? Do you have friends or family over to your house? Do they play at the neighbor's house? The fact is, you cannot fully prevent the risk of your child being sexually abused.

The children I have worked with have come from good neighborhoods, and good homes, and go to really good schools. I have worked with children who have been sexually abused on play dates, sleepovers, in the classroom, on the playground, on the school bus, in their playroom and out in their backyard.

Now that I have officially scared you to death, let's walk you back down from that cliff. We have to allow our children to go out into the world and interact with those around them. But we can arm them with knowledge that might save them from being victimized.

Parents do not always talk to their children about body safety early enough. They think kids are too young. It is too scary. But it is never too soon, and it doesn't have to be a scary conversation. Here are things 10 things that could help your child be less vulnerable to sexual abuse:

## 1. Talk about body parts early

Name body parts and talk about them very early. Use proper names for body parts, or at least teach your child what the actual words are for their body parts. I can't tell you how many young children I have worked with who have called their vagina their "bottom." Feeling comfortable using these words and knowing what they mean can help a child talk clearly if something inappropriate has happened.

## **2. Teach them that some body parts are private**

Tell your child that their private parts are called private because they are not for everyone to see. Explain that mommy and daddy can see them naked, but people outside of the home should only see them with their clothes on. Explain how their doctor can see them without their clothes because mommy and daddy are there with them and the doctor is checking their body.

## **3. Teach your child body boundaries**

Tell your child matter-of-factly that no one should touch their private parts and that no one should ask them to touch somebody else's private parts. Parents will often forget the second part of this sentence. Sexual abuse often begins with the perpetrator asking the child to touch them or someone else.

## **4. Tell your child that body secrets are not okay**

Most perpetrators will tell the child to keep the abuse a secret. This can be done in a friendly way, such as, "I love playing with you, but if you tell anyone else what we played they won't let me come over again." Or it can be a threat: "This is our secret. If you tell anyone I will tell them it was your idea and you will get in big trouble!" Tell your kids that no matter what anyone tells them, body secrets are not okay and they should always tell you if someone tries to make them keep a body secret.

## **5. Tell your child that no one should take pictures of their private parts**

This one is often missed by parents. There is a whole sick world out there of pedophiles who love to take and trade pictures of naked children online. This is an epidemic and it puts your child at risk. Tell your kids that [no one should ever take pictures of their private parts](#).

## **6. Teach your child how to get out of scary or uncomfortable situations**

Some children are uncomfortable with telling people "no"—especially older peers or adults. Tell them that [it's okay to tell an adult they have to leave](#), if something that feels wrong is happening, and help give them words to get out of uncomfortable situations. Tell your child that if someone wants to see or touch private parts they can tell them that they need to leave to go potty.

## **7. Have a code word your children can use when they feel unsafe or want to be picked up**

As children get a little bit older, you can give them a code word that they can use when they are feeling unsafe. This can be used at home, when there are guests in the house or when they are on a play date or a sleepover.

## **8. Tell your children they will never be in trouble if they tell you a body secret**

Children often tell me that they didn't say anything because they thought they would get in trouble, too. This fear is often used by the perpetrator. Tell your child that no matter what happens, when they tell you anything about body safety or body secrets they will NEVER get in trouble.

## **9. Tell your child that a body touch might tickle or feel good**

Many parents and books talk about “good touch and bad touch,” but this can be confusing because often these touches do not hurt or feel bad. I prefer the term “secret touch,” as it is a more accurate depiction of what might happen.

## **10. Tell your child that these rules apply even with people they know and even with another child**

This is an important point to discuss with your child. When you ask a young child what a “bad guy” looks like they will most likely describe a cartoonish villain. You can say something like, “Mommy and daddy might touch your private parts when we are cleaning you or if you need cream — but no one else should touch you there. Not friends, not aunts or uncles, not teachers or coaches. Even if you like them or think they are in charge, they should still not touch your private parts.”

I am not naïve enough to believe that these discussions will absolutely prevent [sexual abuse](#), but knowledge is a powerful deterrent, especially with young children who are targeted due to their innocence and ignorance in this area.

And one discussion is not enough. Find natural times to reiterate these messages, such as bath time or when they are running around naked. And please share this article with those you love and care about and help me spread the message of body safety!

*This article first appeared on Natasha Daniels' website, [Anxious Toddlers](#).*

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