

Tips for Talking to Your Child about Sexual Abuse

As parents we want to say the right things to our children. Over the years at Our Kids, we've noticed there are things parents may say to children when they're worried about sexual abuse that may inadvertently make it more difficult for a child to disclose abuse. Here is a guide that may help:



| What <u>not</u> to say | The reasons why | Try saying this instead |
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| <p>“Don’t let anyone touch your private parts.” - OR - “No one should ever touch your private parts.”</p> | <p>Adults and older children are bigger, stronger and usually able to intimidate or manipulate a child. If you tell your child not to “let” anyone touch their private parts, children may think they will get in trouble if touching occurs. Children may be hesitant to talk about the event or may even feel responsible. They may think: “Mom or dad told me not to let this happen. It did, so I will get in trouble.”</p> | <p>“If anyone touches your private parts, it’s OK to tell me.” - OR - “It’s always OK to tell if someone touches your private parts.”</p> |
| <p>When referring to your child’s genital area or private parts, calling it a “nasty” or “dirty” part of the body.</p> | <p>It’s important that children of all ages know the names for their body parts — and know ALL of their body is OK. Using substitute names for body parts can be confusing if a child discloses to another adult and uses the substitute name. Avoid names that imply shame or something bad about that part of the body.</p> | <p>“That is your private part.” - OR - Refer to the parts of the body as the “vagina” or “penis.”</p> |
| <p>“Has someone touched you?” - OR - “Has anyone touched you down there?”</p> | <p>Don’t ask your child constantly about being touched. “Has anyone ‘touched’ you?” can be a confusing question for younger children. In the literal mind of a child, of course people “touch” them — young children who need assistance with toilet training may be touched “down there” in ways that are appropriate and necessary.</p> | <p>“Is there anything bothering you?” - OR - “Are you OK?” - OR - “Has anyone done anything that worries or confuses you?”</p> |
| <p>“I promise not to tell anyone.”</p> | <p>Before a child discloses, they may ask you to promise not to tell anyone about the abuse or abuser. Your child needs to have a trusting relationship with you and making a promise you’ll have to break could be damaging to the child, so don’t make one. If there is abuse, it is always in the best interest of the child to report the abuse — and it’s required by law.</p> | <p>“I cannot promise not to tell, but I can promise that I will do what I can to help you. Let’s talk about what is bothering you. I want to help.”</p> |
| <p>“I’ll kill anyone who touches your private parts.”</p> | <p>More than 90% of children who are sexually abused know their abuser — often it’s a relative, caregiver or friend of the family who has a long-term relationship with the child. While your initial reaction to someone touching your child may be very strong, the child may think they’re responsible for the safety or well-being of a person loved by the family. Children are generally afraid of adult anger and worry it’s directed at them, so avoid saying things that fuel that concern.</p> | <p>“My job as your mom (or dad) is to protect you and take care of you. Since I’m not around all the time, I can’t always know what’s happening. So if anyone does anything that makes you feel funny or scared or touches you, it’s OK to tell me.”</p> |

We recommend talking with your child regularly and generally about their activities, people in their life and how they’re feeling. If you’re concerned something or someone is bothering your child, ask specific questions. Lay the groundwork for open, non-scary, non-threatening conversation and children will be more likely to disclose.

If you have concerns about the safety or well-being of a child, you must call 1-877-237-0004 to report your concerns.