



## **TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE**

*By Mary L. Pulido, Ph.D.*

If you are like most parents, you're likely to think that sexual abuse can never happen to your child. It's someone else's nightmare that you occasionally hear about on the news. When you do hear these horror stories, you're just thankful that your own child is safe. However, parents should not be complacent. Your child may not be safe as thousands of children are sexually abused each year. Even more upsetting is the fact that the abuse is usually perpetrated by someone the child knows and trusts, such as a mother's boyfriend, a family member, or a neighbor.

The NYSPCC advises parents to discuss this issue with their children. While this can be an uncomfortable subject, particularly if they think their child is too young, children in kindergarten have shown the capability to grasp these concepts if age-appropriate language is used. Parents need to use their discretion depending on the child's age, but the important thing is to HAVE the conversation. Statistics show that children of all ages are in danger of being targeted for abuse. It's more common as children reach the ages of eight to twelve, but younger children are easy prey for perpetrators too.

So, how do you start this conversation?

A basic concept that a parent can use in their conversation with their child is to frame the discussion around "safety" rather than "abuse," which might be less scary for the child. Parents might start by discussing "private parts." If parents and their children refer to these body parts with certain words (butt, breasts, pee pee, etc.), it might be helpful to use them in the conversation. The NYSPCC recommends using the correct names for body parts, but the most important thing in this conversation is that both the parent and the child are referring to the same body part.

For example, “I want to have a special talk with you about safety regarding your body. You have “private parts” on your body. They are the parts that are covered by your swimsuit or underwear. Only certain adults are allowed to touch your private parts.” Then, let the child know that there are two kinds of touches, safe and not safe touches. The NYSPCC uses the terms “safe/unsafe” instead of “good/bad” as it makes it clearer for the child. For example, sometimes a good touch - vaccination in the doctor’s office - can feel bad to the child’s body and a bad touch - inappropriate tickling/fondling - can feel good to the child’s body. The terms safe/unsafe eliminate this confusion. The parent should give examples of safe touches, such as a doctor or nurse during an exam with Mom or Dad in the room, Mom changing the baby’s diaper, or giving the toddler sister a bath. “These are safe touches and are okay.” You may ask the child to give you an example of a safe touch so that you are sure they understand the concept.

Unfortunately, “sometimes there are people, and they could be people that you know and like, that may try to touch your private parts in ways that make you feel sad, mad, confused or uncomfortable. These are unsafe touches.” Give an example of someone putting their hand under a girl’s shirt or down a boy’s pants to touch their private parts. “The person may tell you that it’s a game, or that you will like these touches.” Again, ask the child to give you an example of an unsafe touch.

Then, focus the conversation on the fact that they must tell you right away if this ever happens to them. “What’s important is that you tell me or Dad (or whomever the child trusts) right away, so we can keep you safe.” Work with the child to identify several key adults that they trust and could go to if something happens. Ask them “So who would you tell if this happened to you?” The NYSPCC recommends a list of three to four adults in case the parents are not available or in case the parents are preoccupied and not clearly interpreting the child’s cues on the matter. What’s important is that the child keeps telling until someone believes them and takes action.

The parent should also address the issue of secrecy or threat that some perpetrators use with children to keep them quiet about the abuse. “Even if the person who is touching you makes you promise not to tell, or tells you that they will be mad at you or they may hurt you if you tell, that does not matter. What they are doing is bad and **not your fault**. You must not keep it a secret, you must tell me right away. Then, I promise that I will take the steps needed to keep you safe.”

The NYSPCC stresses that it’s important to reinforce with the child that **it’s never their fault** if they were touched in an unsafe way. It’s always the adult’s fault. And the parent’s job is to protect them.

For more information on keeping children safe, please visit our website at [www.nyspcc.org](http://www.nyspcc.org).