



KEEPING KIDS SAFE: AGES 0-5

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe resource pages were created to help parents and primary caregivers of children and teens learn concrete ways to keep them safe from sexual abuse. These resource pages introduce key concepts and age-appropriate activities that you can use to help protect the children you love and help them build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized.

TALK ABOUT BODIES

When we use nicknames for body parts, especially private body parts, children learn that it's not okay to talk openly about our bodies. They might even learn to be embarrassed or ashamed of their bodies. We don't want that. We do want children to be able to communicate clearly about their bodies if they are hurt or sick. Even if you feel uncomfortable with these conversations, it's best for your child's development for you to talk openly and matter-of-factly about all body parts. Use accurate terms to identify and label body parts (particularly private body parts such as penis, vagina, vulva, breasts, nipples, and butt or buttocks) when talking with your child. Again, while this may feel uncomfortable or even inappropriate at first, your child needs to know the right words to use for their body parts.

Expect and accept your child's curiosity. Young children are curious about just about everything, especially bodies. For example, a little boy may ask his mother, "Why don't you have a penis like Dad and me?" while a young girl might ask her father, "Why don't your breasts stick out like Mom's?"

Remember that young children are just trying to figure out how the world—and their bodies—work. Respond to your child's questions and curiosity in a calm, matter-of-fact tone, using age-appropriate language: "I'm a woman and I have a vagina, not a penis." "Mommy is a woman and sometimes women have breasts that stick out farther than men's do." Your child will learn from such responses that it's okay to ask questions and that we don't need to be ashamed of our bodies. As you know, your child will sometimes ask questions that catch you off guard or that you don't know the answer to. Instead of brushing them off or changing the subject, you could say, "You know, I don't know the answer to that right now. Let me think about it and we can talk about it later." Be sure to follow up and talk the answer through with your child later. You could also use the question to help your child learn how to learn by responding with something like, "I don't know. Let's go look it up."

Young children are discovering and exploring their own bodies. They may touch their genitals or even masturbate. This is normal behavior. It is important not to shame your child for exploring their own body. You can ignore this behavior or say something about it like, "You're touching your penis." As your child gets older, you may want to set limits on when such touching is appropriate. For example, you could say, "It's not okay to touch your penis in public. That's something you can do in private, like when you're alone in your room."

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Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets we have chosen to use the inclusive words they, their, and them as singular, nongendered pronouns.

We know that families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A family may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. Parents may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else. When we use the words family and parent in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.



TEACH CHILDREN THEY OWN THEIR BODIES

Young children don't have much say about most of what happens to them, but they should be allowed to make decisions about their bodies. Allow your child to decide who touches their body and how. For example, during bath time, you can say "It's time to wash your vulva/penis. Do you want to do it or do you want me to do it?" Then listen to and act on their decision. Or, if you're holding your child and they ask to be put down, do so quickly (unless it is a safety issue) to show them that you respect the decisions they make about their body.



Teach your child about consent. Before you hug or kiss them, ask if that's okay by saying, for example, "Can I give you a hug?" If they say no, respect their wishes. Remember that even a child who generally appreciates other physical contact (such as hugs) may reject it sometimes.

Never force your child to kiss, hug, or otherwise touch family or friends. If a child chooses not to show affection physically, you can teach them less intrusive ways to acknowledge people, such as waving, shaking hands, bumping fists, or simply saying, "It's nice to see you!"

It's also important to help your child learn to ask other people if they want to be touched. If your child wants to give snuggles and kisses to their sibling, teach them to say "Can I give you snuggles right now?" and to listen and comply with their sibling's wishes.

TEACH & RESPECT BOUNDARIES

Teach your child the power of "no" and "stop." These are forceful words that require immediate action. For example, when an adult yells "Stop!" at a young child from across the room to keep the child from touching an electrical outlet, the child needs to stop reaching for that outlet right away to avoid a shock. Your child can use "no" and "stop" to communicate their wishes, too. For example, you can teach your child to say something like "Stop hitting me, I don't like that!" if a friend or sibling is hitting them.

When your child uses such words, it's crucial for you and the other adults in your child's life to listen and act on their words immediately. If you're tickling your child and they say "Stop!" do so right away. You can then reinforce their choice by saying something like, "When you want someone to stop touching your body and you say 'Stop,' they should stop right away."

Young children have to be taught what personal space is. They want to be on your lap, to be next to you on the couch, to be touching you, or to otherwise be in your personal space much of the time. Teach your child that they get to set boundaries on their personal space and that other people do, too.

You could help your child learn to set boundaries on their personal space by teaching them to say something like, "You're standing too close to me and I need some space." You can help your child learn to respect your personal space by telling them, "I don't want you to sit on my lap right now because I'm feeling crowded and I need some space."





TEACH YOUR CHILD BODY SAFETY

When you're teaching your child about body parts and that they own their body, it's important to also teach them that some parts of their body are private. One simple approach is to explain that their private parts are the ones covered up by their swimsuit or underwear. (At some point in the conversation, also be sure to name those parts using appropriate terms.)

Tell your child that private parts should only be touched by another person to keep them safe, like when a doctor does a check-up or a parent or another adult helps them clean up after using the toilet. Explain that those touches should be quick and shouldn't be kept a secret. Tell your child that if someone touches their private parts and they don't know if it's an okay touch, they can always ask you for help.

TEACH ABOUT SECRETS

Talk to your child about secrets. Explain that sometimes secrets can be fun, like if they're keeping a secret about surprising Mommy with breakfast in bed. But sometimes secrets can hurt people, like if somebody touches their private parts and tells them it's a secret they can't tell anybody else. Talk to children about what to do when someone asks them to keep a secret. You can say, "If someone asks you to keep a secret and says not to tell anyone else about it, you should tell Mommy or Daddy because that might be a secret that could hurt you or somebody else."



TEACH YOUR CHILD HOW TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS

Help your child identify and label their feelings. You can help them develop an emotional vocabulary that goes beyond happy, mad, and sad by using a variety of words to describe their emotions. When you see your child experiencing a strong feeling, encourage them to say what they're feeling. You can say, "You sound like you're really mad that you can't play outside right now. When you're angry, you can say 'I'm really mad!' or 'I'm so angry!'"

When your child expresses their feelings, take them seriously. If you dismiss or downplay your child's emotions by saying something like "Oh c'mon, you're not hurt that bad," after they've had an accident of some sort, they'll learn two things: not to trust their feelings and that you won't always support them when they're feeling a strong emotion. When you accept and validate your child's feelings, they learn to trust their feelings and that they and their feelings matter to you.

Teach your child to trust their gut feelings (sometimes called instincts or intuition). Explain that sometimes a person feels an emotion but doesn't know why. You could offer the example of someone being scared of a new neighbor without exactly knowing why. Help your child understand that it's okay to listen to their gut instincts and that they can come to you for help talking about these confusing feelings.

Try not to force your child to ignore or go against their gut feelings. If they're telling you that they're uncomfortable going to play at their friend's house—they may even pretend to have a stomachache to get out of going—follow their lead and don't force them to keep the play date. This kind of discomfort is different from your child being hesitant about trying a new food or not wanting to go to Grandma Judy's house because they would rather play video games. It's important to pay attention to your child's cues and if they seem nervous, worried, or anxious beyond the normal worry of trying something new, follow their lead.



BE A CONSTANT SUPPORT FOR YOUR CHILD



Your child needs your presence and your support in their life. Stepping in to solve every little problem your young child faces will keep them from learning how to be an independent problem solver. But when your child genuinely needs adult help to solve a problem, you need to be there for them with your words and actions.

Reassure them that when they have a problem, you'll be there to help them, then follow through by helping them learn to solve their problems. If you show your child they can trust you to be there when they have little problems, they'll be more likely to come to you for help later when they have bigger problems.

EMPOWER YOUR CHILD

Empower your child by giving them real choices to make. Children in this age range aren't capable of deciding everything for themselves but learning to make small choices gives them a sense of ownership and control. Give your child a set of limited options to choose from, because too many choices can be overwhelming. For example, let them decide which of two vegetables to have with dinner, whether to wear the red superhero shirt or the green shirt with horses on it to child care, or whether they want to brush their teeth or put their pajamas on first at bedtime.

When you give your child real choices, they feel empowered and respected, and you're laying a foundation that will help them learn to make good choices on the big decisions coming their way in the future.



LISTEN, LISTEN & LISTEN SOME MORE



It's easy for adults to listen at children instead of listening to and really hearing them. Your child needs to know that you're really listening to them.

Listening carefully to your child shows that you love, value, and respect their perspective, thoughts, opinions, and ideas. Communicate that respect by sitting down with them, making eye contact, and giving them your full attention when they want or need to talk with you.

Reflect back what you hear your child say; for example, "It sounds like you were really frustrated because Leland wouldn't share the truck with you today." This helps your child process what they are thinking and feeling and clarify what happened. If your child shares something that is particularly important to them, follow up with them later to see how they're feeling about the issue and whether they need your help with it.



BE INVOLVED IN YOUR CHILD'S INTERACTIONS WITH OTHERS

It's important for you to know the adults and young people who interact with or are around your child. Whether they're family or friends, teachers or other school employees, coaches, store clerks, child care providers, medical professionals, faith leaders, neighbors, or the parents or siblings of your child's friends, you need to get to know them. Never leave your child alone with an unfamiliar older child or adult, even if the person is somehow linked to someone you trust, such as someone who is a friend of your brother. Do your homework. It is your right and your responsibility to know who is interacting with your child. When your child is or may be interacting with someone new, consider checking on the person by:

- Running a background check.
- Searching for the person's name in the Michigan Sex Offender Registry.
- Asking the person to supply personal references.
- Speaking to people who know and have worked or interacted with that person.

Be present and engaged during your child's first several interactions with a new adult and stay involved in monitoring their subsequent interactions. Watch how the person interacts with your child, with other children, and with adults. Do the interactions seem positive or does something seem off? Does the person engage children while maintaining adult boundaries and providing guidance or discipline when necessary? Is the person overly physical when interacting with children? Check in with your child occasionally by asking questions such as, "How do you like your piano lessons with Ms. G? Is she nice to you? What do you talk about? Where does she sit when you're practicing?"

Trust your own gut feelings. Earlier we talked about teaching children to trust and follow their intuition if something doesn't feel right. You should do the same. If a person or a situation doesn't feel right and you just can't figure out why, follow your instincts. Cancel the appointment, don't drop your child off, make other plans. Following your intuition will help keep your child safe.

LIMIT & MONITOR TECHNOLOGY USE CLOSELY

Children need lots of play time that doesn't involve screens and technology. But even if you strictly limit your child's screen time, it's important that you also monitor how they are actually using technology. Kids can too easily stumble into online spaces with inappropriate or potentially hazardous content. Lock down access to tablets, smart phones, computers, and other electronic devices in your household. Create secure passwords and consider other ways to limit your child's access to devices.

Engage with your child when they're using technology. Sit next to them, watch what they're doing, and talk with them about it. Keep technology out of reach and out of sight when you're not available to monitor your child's usage. It's important for you to be aware of the open nature of the internet. The internet and related technology offer lots of great opportunities for kids (and adults) to play and learn. They also offer plenty of opportunities for your child to engage with inappropriate and potentially harmful activities, content, and people. It's easy for online users of any age to start off watching an innocent video online and eventually be led by the site's algorithms to increasingly inappropriate content. Similarly, photos, videos, and other content that you post online can be accessed and misused by other people.

Be cautious about the information you share about yourself and your child. Photos, videos, and other content that you post online can be accessed and misused by other people. Be particularly careful about what you share about your child online. Posting that first day of school photo on social media is a great way to connect with family and friends. But sharing the name of your child's school, grade, teacher's name, and other personal information may put your child and others at risk. Pay attention to the privacy and security settings on your devices and social media apps, and think twice before sharing information about your child online.

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KEEP THESE HELPFUL TIPS IN MIND

Keeping their children safe is a top priority for most parents. You can use the following tips as a guide to help you create environments where you can protect your child and help them learn important skills that will help them stay safe.

- Think about and treat the issues of body safety, personal space, and consent just as you would any other life lesson your child needs to learn. You can't teach it all and they can't learn it all in one sitting. You and your child will need to revisit these issues repeatedly over time.
- Introduce the concepts covered in this fact sheet one at a time.
- Find appropriate times to talk about these concepts. If you or your child are stressed out or experiencing high emotions, wait for another time.
- Think about where your child is developmentally. Ask yourself, "Is my child ready to hear this?" Keep your conversations developmentally appropriate.
- Be open and honest. When you approach your child with openness and honesty, they'll learn that you're trustworthy, committed, and supportive.
- Be present. Being an engaged parent means more than just showing up at your child's school or extracurricular events. It means being an actively involved and interested spectator and participant in your child's life. Ask your child open-ended questions about their activities, their experiences, and their life, such as, "Tell me about your favorite part of your day today—what made it your favorite?" "What did it feel like to build such a tall tower of blocks today?"



EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, be actively involved in their lives, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming or like they're overkill, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in both protecting your child and helping them build the skills and competencies that will help them stay safe as they get older.



This doesn't mean that you have to prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. It's a reminder, instead, to use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. There are a lot of things you can do to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living and enjoying the world around you.



FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out the other titles in the Keeping Kids Safe series. These MSU Extension fact sheets are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; and sharing about kids on social media. There are currently four titles in the series:

- Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5
- Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11
- Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17
- Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). Family media plan. Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2011). Preventing and identifying child sexual abuse—Tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Retrieved from <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/Pages/Parent-Tips-for-Preventing-and-Identifying-Child-Sexual-Abuse.aspx>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2019). Media and children communication toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Pages/Media-and-Children.aspx>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). Resources. Retrieved from <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). Preventing child sexual abuse resources. Retrieved from <https://www.nsvrc.org/preventing-child-sexual-abuse-resources>

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