



It's time ... to talk about it! Talk early, talk often. Prevent sexual violence.

Resource for community members

Adults have a responsibility to create a safe environment for children in their community. Falsely, in the past, the responsibility of ending child sexual abuse has been placed on children by emphasizing risk reduction and personal safety strategies that do not work by themselves. Information, education and action are key in empowering everyone to be a part of the solution.

Understanding childhood sexual development and the role this has in child sexual abuse prevention can empower adults to be informed and take appropriate action. Child sexual abuse affects us all, and it is not the responsibility of children to end this abuse. All adults in the community can play a positive role in child sexual abuse prevention by supporting healthy childhood sexual development.

Step One: What do I need to know?

Many unhealthy social norms that contribute to oppression, inequality, and violence also create the conditions for child sexual abuse to occur frequently in settings that should be safe for all children. Although it may be seen as taboo or uncomfortable to discuss childhood sexual development or talk about sexuality with children, it is important that adults are able to identify and support age-appropriate behaviors and model healthy boundaries for the children in their lives. Understanding childhood sexual development equips adults to challenge unhealthy behaviors, inappropriate dynamics, and negative messages that can affect children. Using tools that identify and define healthy,

age-appropriate behaviors, such as those provided in *An overview of healthy childhood sexual development* (National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2013)," assists adults in discussing and responding to unhealthy or abusive touch.

Adults who understand developmentally-expected behavior can talk with other adults to promote healthy boundaries and relationships with children. Having a grasp of healthy development and healthy sexual behaviors can give adults the confidence to speak up when they see adults act in ways that seem inappropriate. Preventing child sexual abuse requires adults talking with other adults and modeling the behaviors and dynamics that support healthy development.

Step two: Resources for support

There are many resources to support adults as allies in child sexual abuse prevention. Information about healthy childhood sexual development equips adults to use this understanding effectively in prevention. The following provide helpful information about preventing and identifying child sexual abuse:



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- **Child Welfare Information Gateway:**
www.childwelfare.gov
- **Darkness to Light:**
www.darkness2light.org
- **National Sexual Violence Resource Center:**
www.nsvrc.org
- **Prevent Child Abuse America:**
www.preventchildabuse.org
- **Stop It Now!:** www.stopcsa.org
- **The Hero Project - A Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape project:** www.heroproject.org

Step three: Play a role in prevention

All adults have a role to play in supporting healthy childhood development, including sexual development, and preventing abuse. As a parent, family member, or loved one you can have a direct role in communicating and supporting the children in your life. Adults may interact with children and other adults in professional or volunteer settings, or simply as a community member and neighbor. Each can take part in preventing child sexual abuse by modeling positive behaviors, educating others, and taking action when appropriate (NSVRC, 2011b):

Educate yourself and talk to other adults.

Take the time to learn more about healthy childhood sexual development as a strategy to prevent child sexual abuse. Educate other adults, promote awareness, and increase conversation about preventing sexual violence. As someone who cares about children and their community, you have a responsibility to support other adults in creating an environment that supports healthy development.

Develop positive, open communication to build confidence and trust. Provide age-appropriate and accurate responses to questions

What is child sexual abuse?

It's important to realize that not all adults may understand or recognize child sexual abuse. A person sexually abuses a child when he or she exposes the child to sexual acts or behaviors. Child sexual abuse is a crime and an abuse of trust, power, and authority that may contribute to serious short- and long-term problems for a child.

Child sexual abuse can involve:

- Sex acts that involve penetration
- Touching the child's breasts or genitals
- Making a child touch the perpetrator's breasts or genitals
- Voyeurism (when a perpetrator looks at a child's naked body)
- Exhibitionism (when a perpetrator shows a child his or her naked body) (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2008)

Additional forms of child sexual abuse:

- Showing a child pornography or using a child in the production of pornography
- Child sexual exploitation, such as trafficking or forcing a child into prostitution
- Internet-based child sexual abuse, such as creating, depicting, and/or distributing sexual images of children online; or stalking, grooming, and/or engaging in sexually explicit behaviors with children (Putnam, 2003)

To learn more about child sexual abuse definitions and rates, warning signs of abuse, and risk factors for perpetration, the NSVRC *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Information Packet* (NSVRC, 2011a) includes an overview and helpful resources.



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about healthy and developmentally expected sexual development as children grow and learn. Share accurate information with parents and other adults. It is important to involve parents and caregivers while also balancing respect family beliefs and value systems.

Model healthy behaviors and reinforce positive messages. Demonstrate the characteristics of healthy relationships such as open communication, equality, and respect. Take the time to praise children when their behaviors show characteristics of healthy friendships and positive boundaries. For example, *"Tommy, that was great that you listened when Jess said she did not want you to tickle her. Good friends always respect their friends' boundaries."* Model positive behaviors, respectful boundaries and open communication for other adults as well.

Promote boundaries and respect privacy. Practice respectful boundaries when it comes to touch and affection by not forcing hugs or other touch. For example, ask *"Can I get a high-five?"* before holding up your hand or stretching out a hand. Reinforce that children have a right to personal space, privacy, and boundaries.

Challenge media and harmful messages. Cultural messages and images in media and advertisements often exploit and sexualize children. Individuals can challenge these messages by speaking up and holding institutions accountable to combat harmful social norms.

Get involved and be aware of red flags. Learn to recognize the warning signs of abuse and act appropriately if an individual's behavior is inappropriate or suspicious. If an adult's behavior toward a child concerns you, be assertive and questioning. There are a number of resources on taking action and how

to respond to other adults' behaviors, such as *"Let's Talk"* by Stop it Now.

Always report suspected child abuse. If you suspect a child is being abused, immediately contact the police or your local child protective services agency, the ChildHelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453), or local sexual violence program. Some individuals have a professional obligation to report suspected abuse, but all adults have the responsibility to report suspected abuse. Many times this can be done anonymously or a concerned adult can call and speak to someone on the hotline about their concerns. Guidance and support are always available.

References

Finkelhor, D., Hammer, H., & Sedlak, A. J. (2008). *Sexually assaulted children: National estimates and characteristics* (NCJ 214383). Retrieved from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/214383.pdf>

National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2011a). *Child sexual abuse prevention information packet*. Available at <http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/child-sexual-abuse-prevention-information-packet>

National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2011b). *Child sexual abuse prevention: Programs for adults*. Retrieved from <http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/child-sexual-abuse-prevention-programs-adults>

Putnam, F. W. (2003). Ten-year research update review: Child sexual abuse. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 42, 269-278. doi:10.1097/00004583-200303000-00006