

Stop It Now!

By Yvonne Cournoyer, Stop It Now!

Too often the news carries stories about a bus driver, teacher, or even coach who sexually abuses a child, stories that leave us wringing our hands. And yet, how many of us know what to watch out for or how to talk to our child when the risk of sexual abuse is more complicated than the scary guy at the playground offering them candy to get in his car?

To help parents, we've put together tips on how to talk with children about coaches or other adults who show signs of sexual interest in children. Take time to learn to recognize and speak up before a child is harmed.

Talk about who sexually abuses children.

90% of the time, children are sexually abused by someone they know. Children are most at risk of abuse by someone they have regular contact with, including relatives, coaches, teachers, neighbors, babysitters, etc. Use this knowledge when talking about who sexually abuses children. Say, "What if a neighbor asked you to look at some pictures of naked people. What would you do?" Or, "What if the babysitter always comes in the bathroom without knocking. What would you do?"

Talk about and help them recognize concerning behaviors.

People who sexually abuse children often show signs before they abuse. While there is no fool-proof warning, certain behaviors are cause for concern. Talk about why it's important to tell a safe adult if anyone's behavior makes the child uncomfortable. Say, "Some people need help if they can't remember the rules for how to behave around kids." Since most of the time kids know and often like the person who abuses them, it's helpful to use neutral language like "the rules" rather than talking about "perverts," "predators," etc.

Talk about boundaries.

People who sexually abuse kids may disrespect or ignore a kid's personal space or tease or belittle them when the kid tries to set a limit. Sometimes this adult will hug, touch, kiss, tickle, wrestle with, or hold a child even when he or she doesn't want this contact or attention. Ask your child to talk with you or a safe adult if this happens to them or to a friend.

Talk about inappropriate behavior between adults and kids.

People who sexually abuse kids can be more focused on relationships with kids than with other adults. They may turn to a child for emotional or physical comfort or share personal or

private information or activities with a child or treat the child more like a peer. They might allow kids to get away with inappropriate behaviors or point out sexual images or tell dirty or suggestive jokes or talk with them about sexual interactions or images. They might be overly interested in the kids' bodies or their dating relationships. Sometimes they will spend excessive time emailing, text messaging, or calling children or youth. Ask your child or teen to tell you or another safe adult if this happens to them or a friend.

Talk about how someone creates opportunities to sexually abuse children.

People who abuse kids often first build a relationship with the kid. They may "test" the child to see how they react to different situations. For example, the adult may put their arm around a kid then move to hugging them or asking them to sit on their lap. They might also give a child special treatment like buying them things, giving them special privileges, offering alcohol or drugs or sharing sexual material, explaining that these are their (the adult's and the kid's) special secret.

Talk with your child about these "tricks" and how, because they've enjoyed the extra privileges or attention, it can be harder for them to tell a safe adult. Tell them, "No matter what, other people aren't allowed to make you uncomfortable by talking with you or touching you in ways that feel uncomfortable or that you don't like. When that happens, tell a safe adult."

Talk about why it's important to tell a safe adult.

Anticipate and talk with your child about how someone might discourage them from talking to a safe adult. Say, "Sometimes people will scare you by saying Mom or Dad won't believe you or you'll get in trouble or even that it's your fault. But Mom and Dad will believe you and you won't get in trouble. Sometimes this adult will even say they'll hurt Mom and Dad or the family pet. We know how to handle these things. We'll be safe and you'll be safer if you tell a safe adult."

Talk about and help kids identify "safe adults."

All kids need safe adults they can talk with, in addition to their parents. Ask your child whom they would talk to if they had a concern or were worried about something and you weren't available or they weren't comfortable talking with you about this.

If your child can't come up with someone, help them think through whom they might consider. If your child mentions someone whom you don't trust, talk with them about alternative adults. Say, "I want you to talk with these adults whenever you feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused about someone's behavior toward you."

Speak up when you see or experience concerning behaviors.

If a child reports behaviors that aren't explicitly sexual (for example, someone who gives them the creeps), don't ignore it. At a minimum, talk with the person whose behavior is concerning your child. Don't accuse them. Instead, describe the behavior and ask them to stop. Say, "When you do XYZ, Jimmy doesn't like it. Please don't do that any more." If you're uncomfortable talking directly with the person, report your concerns to someone in authority or ask another adult to support you as you talk with the person.

If you observe interactions or behaviors that concern you, speak up. Say, "I'm uncomfortable when you hug Ana after every race. How about high-fiving instead?" If your child suddenly loses interest in an activity they previously enjoyed or tells you they want to quit, consider the possibility that someone has made them uncomfortable or unsafe. Support their "no" while trying to understand what's behind it.

Report anything you know or suspect might be sexual abuse. While some professionals (e.g., teachers, child care providers, etc.) are mandated to report their concerns about sexual abuse, anyone can make a report if they're concerned a child has been or is at risk for sexual abuse. If a child tells you about someone touching them or asking them to touch them in a sexual way or showing them sexually explicit photos, report it. In most cases, start by calling your local police. Don't feel you need to have proof. It's not your job to investigate or even to ask for more details. Leave this to the experts.

It can be hard to imagine someone you or your child knows could be sexually interested in kids. Without certain proof of abuse, it's easy to dismiss such thoughts or think you're overreacting. You may also be worried about the possible consequences of taking action, especially if the concern involves someone known and respected by other people. Remember, your report may prevent other kids from being harmed.

To learn more, visit www.StopItNow.org.