



"Askable Parents": Help Combat Childhood Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is a problem that most of us wish would just go away.

Many of us are sad and angry to find out that our families and communities are not always the safe, happy, caring places that we thought they were. It is hard for many of us to imagine a friend or loved one ever touching our children in a sexual way. It is much easier to believe "bad strangers" sexually abuse children, rather than family or friends.

It is also easier to think that we can protect our children from abuse by teaching them "never talk to strangers" and enrolling them in self-defense classes.

But, because our children are more likely to be molested by people in our own homes and communities, we need to talk to our children about their bodies. We must also teach them about asking for help if a person tells them to keep a "touching secret".

Although these ideas sound simple, many people find them difficult to carry out. When telling children about their bodies in the past, many families never mentioned the genitals. In families that did mention "those parts", nicknames were often used. Many adults are still uncomfortable saying the words penis or vulva (the dictionary word for the outer parts of the female genitals). Parents and toy makers in North America have also decided to leave off or cover up the genitals of dolls, storybooks, puzzles and dressing toy pictures.

All of this cover-up and secrecy in the past has made it easy for child molesters to get kids to be quiet about sexual touching.

Children, by school age, have learned that "we don't talk about those parts". Many children are too embarrassed to even mention their genitals, when asked to list the parts of their bodies. Some have learned that they can send adults up the wall by using street words to refer to sexual body parts and acts.

Children therefore, when exposed to sexual abuse, have a hard time telling adults about the experience.

So What Can You Do To Change Things?

When you are talking to your children, and naming their body parts for them (from birth onward) include words like: nipples, breasts, penis, vulva, vagina, testes, anus.

Buy or make toys and books for your children that are anatomically correct.

Don't make up fairytales when children ask questions such as "Where do babies come from?" and "Why doesn't she have a penis?"

Correct answers don't need to be complicated. They just need to be honest. For example "Grown ups can make babies. They grow inside the Mommy's uterus." (Avoid saying tummy because many little children think of the tummy as the place where food goes.) "Girls and boys have many body parts that are the same, and a few that are different. A boy has a penis and testes. A girl has a vulva and vagina."

If you don't know how to answer a question, tell your child that you don't know, but will try to find out. (Call the Health Unit or check out the books in your library.)

By talking to your children about these topics from the beginning, they learn that we are "ASKABLE PARENTS". Then they are more likely to ask for help if they are confused about sexual touching or talk, that they see, hear or experience.

Other helpful messages that we can give to our children are:

- Touching never needs to be a secret.
- It's fine to talk about and ask for hugs, strokes and touched that make us feel warm, comforted and loved. They aren't secrets.
- We know that little children need help with many things. It's no secret that adults have to touch children to help them with bathing, toileting and dressing. However, adults are not supposed to play with a child's penis or vulva or other private parts.
- Older children and adults can look after their own bathing, toileting and dressing. They don't need help from other children. If an older child or adult needs help with their private parts, they should ask another adult, not a child.
- Finally, it's not OK for people to hurt one another. So people may always ask for help if they are being hurt.

If you need more help dealing with this issue, call a Public Health Nurse or the Health Unit.

Taken from Parent's Education Session of Care For Kids Program Leeds, Grenville & Lanark District Health Unit