

Practical Advice for Parents

On Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

A Resource Provided to You Through the Protecting God's Children[®] Program



EDITOR'S NOTE: Parenting is the most influential responsibility an adult undertakes in life. It is also the one job for which adults receive the least amount of training. Society expects parents to know what to do, to always take appropriate actions, and to behave daily in a manner that provides a wonderful role model for their children. However, society does not provide parents the tools and skills they need to live up to these expectations. The National Catholic Risk Retention Group, Inc., provides parents with this free handbook to help them focus on practical steps designed to help protect children from sexual abuse. This handbook was produced for our Protecting God's Children program as a part of our VIRTUS[®] programs.

The first step to protecting children from sexual abuse is educating parents about the nature of the problem. Awareness about child sexual abuse—what it is and who commits it—opens the door to some simple steps parents can take to protect children. No one has more at stake or a more vested interest in protecting children than the people who gave them life. Awareness, education, and responsible parenting give a child the best tools for her or his defense—and the child may be more likely to tell an adult if something happens.

The Protecting God's Children program is designed for adults in our faith community—to raise their awareness about the nature of child sexual abuse, to educate them on how to recognize the warning signs, and to train them about what to do when they suspect a child is being victimized. The program includes awareness sessions, videos, web-based training modules, online training bulletins, and other programs specifically designed to assist parents and other adults.

The first of two centerpiece videos, *A Time to Protect God's Children*, presents an accurate, clear, and effective introduction to the subject of child sexual abuse. Awareness usually gives rise to the question: "What can I do?" The second video, *A Plan to Protect God's Children*, trains adults to recognize some of the primary symptoms of child sexual abuse and what to do if a child reports abuse.

We recognize that parents need practical advice. Parents bear the primary responsibility for the safety and well-being of their children. Here are some practical actions that parents can take to help protect their children from sexual abuse:



1. By virtue of their physical size, adults have power over children—and that increases a child's vulnerability. For example, parents and other authority figures teach children to "obey adults." When children hear this message, they may interpret it to mean that *all* adults have the authority to tell *all* children what to do, *all* the time. If this is a child's interpretation, then the message has created additional vulnerability for the child. Yet, some simple, common sense steps can help minimize a child's vulnerability. For example:

- Do NOT insist that children hug or kiss relatives or friends. Let children express affection on their own terms.

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- Let children know that their feelings are important to you. Intervene if you notice that your child is uncomfortable doing something that another adult asks him or her to do. Let the child know that you will protect him or her from this discomfort. That doesn't necessarily mean that you should let children off the hook when it comes to doing their chores or cleaning up a mess they've made.

2. Learn to recognize and take advantage of teachable moments with children. Be willing to openly discuss sensitive issues. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following age-appropriate conversations with children:

- From ages 18 months to 3 years—begin teaching children the proper names for all body parts.
- Ages 3 to 5 years—teach children about private body parts and how to say “no” to anyone who touches them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. Give them direct answers to questions about sex.
- Ages 5 to 8 years—talk about good touches and bad touches, and safety away from home.
- Ages 8 to 12 years—focus on personal safety issues.
- Ages 13 to 18 years—discuss issues such as rape, date rape, HIV, other sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy. There are also professionals in the community who can provide assistance with forming age-appropriate responses to children's questions and concerns. Remember, regardless of the child's age: **Take advantage of teachable moments.**



3. Games are a great way to reinforce the lessons you teach your children about safety issues. For example, children are always asking parents, “What if?” Using this same game, parents can raise their own concerns and encourage their children to *think* and *make decisions* relying on the lessons they have learned.

4. Teach children to say, “Stop it,” to instructions that might encourage them to do things that they *really* do not want to do. Reinforce the rule that children should say, “Stop it,” to requests or demands that make them uncomfortable, even if they *think* they should obey. A discussion of these rules can teach a child that there are some times when it is okay to say, “Stop it,” and other times when it is okay to go along with the instructions. Everything hinges on context. Parents must teach their children how to discern between an *appropriate* request and an *inappropriate* request.

For example, it is appropriate to follow the instruction to “Be nice,” as long as the instruction is within an appropriate context, such as, “Be nice and don't throw things at the other children.” But, tell children it's okay to disobey this request if, for example, someone says, “Be nice and take off your clothes.”



5. Know where children spend their time. Get to know the adults who show up at the various locations in the community where children gather and where they play together. Be wary of any adult who seems more interested in creating a relationship with a child than with other adults. Pay attention when an adult seems to single out a particular child for a relationship or for special attention. Warning signs include treats, gifts, vacations, or other special favors offered only to one specific child.

6. Make unannounced visits to the child's nursery, babysitter, daycare center, or school. When choosing a nursery, daycare center, or school, make sure that there are no areas where children play or work that are “off limits” to parents. Taking these actions raises awareness among caregivers, and reinforces the responsibility they have for the safety of the children in their charge.

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7. Find out if the child's school or church religious education programs include a sex abuse prevention curriculum. If not, volunteer to be on a committee to establish such a program. Work with teachers to review available programs and make recommendations to school administrators. Talk with other parents about supporting the addition of child sexual abuse prevention material to existing child safety programs.



Do NOT allow a child to go alone on "vacation" with *any* adult other than the child's parent.

Do NOT allow a child to spend the night alone with *any* adult other than the child's parent or another **safe** adult.ⁱ

Except in the case of a serious emergency, Do NOT allow a child to travel alone—even for a very short distance—with *any* adult other than the child's parent or another **safe** adult. You should also prohibit children from accepting expensive gifts from an adult, particularly if one child is singled out for special attention.

Parents can make an important difference. However, without a supporting organization to help bring together a community's resources, experts, and commitment, parents are limited in their ability to impact community-wide child abuse prevention. That's where we can help.

The Church can join with parents to build a society where children are no longer at risk of being sexually abused, where those who have been victimized can find the resources and courage to heal, and where all people live together in loving, supportive relationships.

Resources:

Child Sexual Abuse: What It Is and How to Prevent It, American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999.

Adams, C., and Fay, J., *No More Secrets: Protecting Your Child From Sexual Abuse*, Impact Publishers, Ninth Printing, 1991.

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ⁱ "Safe adult" is a special designation used in the VIRTUS *Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program for Parents and Guardians* to describe adults who have demonstrated that they behave in a safe manner when interacting with children.

