

Family Safety Chats Can Guard Against Sex Abuse

by Marcia Morgan

Organizing a family safety night is one way to help keep your children safe from sexual abuse. It can be a regular household event where, twice a year, the family gets together to discuss personal safety issues.

Your time together should be free from TV, radio or interruptions. A family safety night provides a forum for maintaining communication and trust with your child, building self-esteem and teaching important safety skills.

The most effective learning technique to use with children during the safety night involves the following three steps:

- Discuss the potential danger and what to do.
- Show visually how to respond to the situation (model it for the child, show a video, draw a picture, read a book with demonstration pictures.)
- Have the child practice the safety skills. This last step is very important, especially with young children.

Children should learn to recognize potentially dangerous situations, say “no” to unwanted and inappropriate touching, leave and tell an adult. A phrase taught to children to help them memorize these steps is “NO-GO-TELL.”

Start off the family safety night by teaching some basic skills. Children should be able to:

1. Know their first and last name, address, telephone number and parents’ names.
2. Learn to recognize “OK” and “NOT OK” touching situations.
3. Feel good about themselves and their bodies and know that they deserve only good, OK touches.
4. Acknowledge that they have body rights and can control whom they touch and who touches them.
5. Learn to listen and trust their instincts and feelings.
6. Learn that secrets about touching are “NOT OK.”
7. Learn what parts of the body are sexual and what parts are non-sexual.
8. Learn they have a right to say “no” or “stop” to anyone who touches them inappropriately, whether it is a stranger or someone they know very well.
9. Learn who they can talk to if they have a touching problem.
10. Identify their support system or who their adult helpers are.
11. Tell another adult who will listen and take some action if the first adult they tell does not believe them.
12. Learn that they are not to blame if someone touches them inappropriately.
13. Know that the act of sexual abuse is wrong and illegal, and that the offender is at fault and needs help.
14. Learn that accusing someone of abuse is a serious allegation.

The following are examples of ways to communicate these safety ideas:

“You know most people are nice people. But there are a few who do things to kids that adults shouldn’t do. They may not stop touching you when you want them to, or touch you on the

sexual parts of your body and want to keep it a secret. I want you to know what to do just in case this type of thing happens to you.

“An ‘OK’ touch is one that makes you feel good about the touch and in control of the situation. Both people should feel good about the touch (give example and have child think of some examples as well.)

“A ‘NOT OK’ touch is anytime someone wants to keep the touching a secret. It is a forced or tricked touch when you do not want to be touched. Many times the person tries to touch your genitals (name the parts of the body) and keep it a secret (give examples of ‘NOT OK’ touches.)

“Your body belongs to you. You are a very special person and deserve only ‘OK’ touches.

“You have my permission to say ‘no’ or ‘stop’ to anyone who bothers, scares, or touches you in a way you do not like. It doesn’t matter if it is someone we know or a stranger—anyone. People who care about you and your feelings will understand.

“You do not have to obey adults if they ask you do something you know is wrong.

“You many want to touch and explore your little friends’ bodies, like playing doctor. It is normal to be curious and see how bodies are different. But it is ‘NOT OK’ to touch each other’s genitals until you are older. Those are special parts you share when you are grownup.

“There may be confusing touches like being examined by a real doctor or getting spanked. But even in those situations, if the touching is to be kept secret, then it is ‘NOT OK.’

“If you ever have a touching problem with anyone or have any questions, come talk to me about it. I will believe you and protect you. You are not going to get into trouble, and you are not to blame for whatever happens.

“Touching can be warm, caring and nice when both people want to touch. But sometimes it can feel uncomfortable or scary. I want you to know about all types of touching, and that you have a right to control who touches your body and whom you touch.”

Discussing safety should not be a one-time proposition. As children get older, they will be confronted with situations requiring new skills and decisions. Therefore, consider organizing a family safety night this winter and again in the spring. This gives you an opportunity to talk about sexual abuse within the context of other safety issues that may affect the entire family.

You may want to practice a fire drill, learn how to lock doors, check to see if emergency numbers are by the telephone and know what to do and who to tell if anyone has a touching problem. The safety night should be an empowering time for the child, not fear-inducing. This can be done by working on safety together in a structure of love and support.

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Original publication date: 12/03/1989 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon