

# Talking about tough topics with kids

Among all the heated debates and varying opinions surrounding parenting, there are a few things that almost all parents agree on.

1. We love our kids.
2. We want nothing more than to keep them safe.

But there's one thing that many parents skip, despite these facts. Many caregivers don't talk to kids about tough topics that can keep them safe from sex abuse.

We cannot rely only on our children to protect themselves. As adults, we have a responsibility to help keep kids safe. And while we all want to believe that this couldn't happen in our families, the truth is that it could. About 20 percent of American women and up to 16 percent of American men experienced some form of sexual abuse as a child.

And up to half of child sexual abuse victims are under the age of 7.

So what can we do? How can we keep our kids safe?



It starts with words. Talking with your children about their bodies and sexual development is the first step. And keeping the lines of communication open means your children feel comfortable talking to you.

Here are a few tips for talking about tough topics.

## **Get comfortable.**

For some caregivers, talking about tough topics is as uncomfortable for you as it is for your kids.

"You may have to practice," says Angie Kendall, director of development and communications at the Child Abuse Council. "If you can't say vagina or sex, you probably aren't ready."

If you want to talk to your kids about sex or their bodies or staying safe, try practicing in the mirror or with your partner. Read about the topic and take some time to feel ready for the conversation.

**now what? Keep Learning.**

# Talking about tough topics with kids

## Don't try to cover everything at once.

This is not something you talk about at one time. Instead, talking about tough topics like sexual development is ongoing and starts at a young age.

"There's no specific time to start talking," Angie explains. "There's no magic age."

Instead, bring it up as it works into conversation - when kids ask questions about their bodies, when you see something on television, or you overhear a conversation with a child and friends.

This gives you a chance to bring up the topic later - you can ask if they know what certain words mean, if they have opinions on the topic, and if they have any questions for you.

## Put kids at ease.

Conversations about sex, bodies and abuse are best handled delicately. So try to determine a time to bring up these topics when your child will be more likely to feel comfortable and willing to talk to you. Here are a few ideas to help put your kids at ease while talking about tough topics:

- Read books to help kids develop emotional literacy and teach them to protect their bodies. This is something that will already be easily integrated into your routine.
- Give children the correct words to use when talking about their body. (For example, use the word vagina or penis when they point to those body parts.)
- As kids get older, don't force eye contact and don't make them talk to you. Try bringing up the topics in low-pressure situations (like a car ride home from school when eye contact isn't necessary). Don't be afraid to bring it up, but also be ready to drop it if the child isn't talking.

## Create boundaries with your family.

There are a lot of gray areas when it comes to keeping your kids safe - and this is when your family (led by you) must set boundaries.

Talk to your kids about appropriate boundaries for:

- Bathing.
- Going to the bathroom.
- Changing clothes.
- Hugs and kisses.

"It's not up to someone else to establish these boundaries," Angie says. "But they should be healthy and safe for your family."

For example, if your daughter doesn't like you to be in the room when she's changing her clothes, you may try letting her get dressed on her own. Talk to her about why you are respecting her privacy and make it clear that you are available if she needs help.

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## Foster open communication with your kids.

Making your kids feel safe is an important part of talking with them about tough topics. By making them feel comfortable talking to you, you are leaving the door open to have these conversations. This doesn't happen overnight - but try a few of these tips to ensure your kids know they can talk to you:

- Ask your kids about their day.
- Show your kids you love them unconditionally.
- Eat dinner together.
- Start and maintain family traditions.

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It's our job to keep kids safe. And as caregivers, talking to them about sensitive subjects and setting healthy boundaries are important parts of this.

Don't worry about doing everything right now, but make a promise to yourself and your kids to start the conversation.

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*Originally posted on the Now What? Blog on 2.18.15 The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to*

- 1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention*
- 2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse*
- 3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors*

*Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.*

**now what? Keep Learning.**

