

Feel safe - promoting personal safety



Personal safety skills are one way to help children to be safe or know how to find safety. This factsheet talks about how to help children build skills that may protect them from the grooming tactics used in child sexual abuse.

What are personal safety skills?

Many parents and carers are concerned about the safety of their children. This is a valid concern, as the statistics on sexual abuse show that the issue is very real.

Sexual abuse is against the law. It includes any sexual contact with a child and showing a child sexual acts or material. Sexual abuse can happen to any child.

It is important children know they have a right to be safe, and to know what they can do if they don't feel safe. It is the responsibility of adults to prevent child and adolescent sexual abuse, by being informed and teaching young people personal safety skills.

Avoid focusing on stranger danger. People who abuse children are typically someone the child already knows. They may use tricks or bribery to get to know a child over time before they abuse them. This is called grooming.

Parents and carers can reduce the risk of abuse. Giving children information and skills about personal safety can help.

When to start

Early! Children are never too young to learn about being safe and who they can talk to if they need help. All children, including those with disability, can and should learn about personal safety from an early age.

What you can do

- make time to talk
- listen to your child's feelings
- teach personal safety skills
- celebrate your child and let them know you care for them

Feelings

Help children to understand and recognise different feelings such as happy, safe, angry, sad, scared, worried/confused, tired, excited and how to talk about these feelings with an adult they trust. Understanding how different emotions feel in the body will help them better recognise when situations are unsafe.

Early warning signs

Teach children to know when their body tells them something is wrong. Help children to know how their body reacts at times of stress including scary, confusing and sad situations. When the body does this, it gives warning signs such as the heart beating fast, sweating, wanting to run, crying and shaking.

Body parts

Teach children the correct names of private body parts in the same way you teach about public body parts. Use words such as vulva, vagina, penis, testicles, anus, and breasts. It is also important for children to know the functions of these body parts and what the difference is between public and private body parts.

Body ownership

Reinforce to children and young people that their body belongs to them. They should not be forced to give people affection, and whenever possible (and safe) - should be able to make decisions about their own bodies. It is ok to say NO when they feel uncomfortable about an activity (like tickling) or a type of touch.

Types of touch/Rules about touch

Children need to know about the many different types of touch in their lives and recognise whether a touch is a loving, friendly, helping, sexy or a NO touch. Teach them that:

It is NOT ok for:

- anyone to touch their body if they don't want them to
- anyone to make them touch their body
- anyone in the family to touch in a sexy way
- any adults to touch any children in a sexy way
- people to be sexy in front of children—being sexy is private
- to show photos from mobile phones, or devices that show private body parts or people being sexy
- touch to be a secret, if anyone asks to keep touch secret it is usually because they know they are breaking the rules.

Understanding these types of touch teaches children that sexy touch is only for people who are old enough. This knowledge helps to set up the rules of touch, including that it is never ok for an adult to be sexy with a child. All adults know this is wrong behaviour.

For children receiving personal care (such as helping touch – toileting/showering) or children who experience difficulty identifying feelings/warning feelings, understanding types of touch and the rules about touch helps to build protective knowledge, attitudes and skills.

What to do

Practice NO GO TELL with children:

NO! Tell the person “NO” (or STOP) in a clear and loud and strong voice.

GO To a safe place, as soon as possible.

TELL A trusted adult. Keep telling until someone listens, believes, and helps you to feel safe.

Teach children to be clear, loud and assertive. Acknowledge sometimes children are unable to say NO or GO to a safe place. Remind them they can always tell a trusted adult if something has happened.

Who to tell

Make a list of 5 people they can talk to and how they can contact them.

Encourage them to keep telling trusted adults until they feel safe.

Let the adults know that the child has chosen them to be their safe adult and clarify the best way the child can contact them and the way you expect the adult to respond.

Practice safety techniques using made up situations or use ones from TV shows or books. Ask children to say what they

would do and how they would get help in different situations where they felt worried or unsafe.

Assertiveness

Support children to stand up for themselves. Tell children that it is ok to say NO if they feel uncomfortable or to stop playing a game that doesn't feel fun anymore. This is teaching them about consent. It is important that they learn how to make decisions and have real choices (particularly about their body). Remember, you are their best role model.

Rules about touch

Knowing the rules helps children to be aware of their rights. Clear rules help children to know touch (that might feel good) is NOT OK if it breaks the rules about touch. For example, anyone trying to keep touch a secret, or trying to make you touch their private body parts. Children then know they should tell on anyone breaking the rules.

Giving information

Do not worry about giving too much information. Children will only take in as much information as they are able to understand.

Have short, regular talks about personal safety and incorporate teaching safety skills in everyday activities.

What to do if a child talks about sexual abuse

You can help by:

- not panicking or expressing shock or outrage as this may make the child think that they have done something wrong
- listening
- telling them that you believe them thanking them for telling you and saying that it was the right thing to do
- emphasising that whatever has happened was not their fault
- telling them that some people do bad things
- talking in private
- acknowledging that it is hard to talk about such things
- not giving promises that cannot be kept, for example, that you will not tell anyone or that the person will go to jail.
- contacting the appropriate support services

- Avoid investigating the child's disclosure – leave this to specialists such as child safety or police. Instead focus on acknowledging the child's feelings of fear, hurt, anger or confusion and reiterate the child's courage in speaking up.

Not all children can or will tell you if something has happened. Often there are other signs or behaviours that may indicate abuse. Talk to support services if you suspect something has happened.

Abuse is rarely a one-off situation. Remember to trust your own warning signs and seek help. If a child is assaulting others take it seriously.

Be supportive and find out how you can best help them and stop abuse from happening again. Abuse is rarely a one-off situation.

How to help yourself

It is important to seek support for yourself if your child has been sexually abused. It can be an extremely emotional and difficult time. It may help to talk to people you trust, gather information from support services and books and see a counsellor. Some people may seek help through police and legal services.

Where to get more help

Parent Line
1300 301 300

Department of Children, Youth Justice and
Multicultural Affairs
13 74 68 (13 QGOV)
1800 811 810

Policelink
131 444

Lifeline (24 hour crisis counselling)
13 11 14

Immigrant Women's Support Service
07 3846 3490
iwss.org.au

Australian Indigenous Health Info Net
www.healthinfolnet.ecu.edu.au

Talking families (Formerly known as Family
and Child Commission)
www.talkingfamilies.qld.gov.au

References

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VI-190509