

# How to Talk to Kids about Sexual Abuse

## **Use Concrete Examples**

When talking with children, remember that in 90% of situations where someone sexually harms a child, the child often knows the person who is acting in an inappropriate way. Use examples and situations that acknowledge this. For example, “What if you are at Sammy’s house and her older brother asks you to play a game where you take off your clothes?” “If that happens, be sure to tell Mom and Dad or another trusted adult so we can help that person learn the rules.”

## **Model Healthy Boundaries**

Sometimes we confuse children by insisting they hug Grandma even when they don’t want to or when we say, “Do what the babysitter tells you to do.” Help your children practice setting healthy boundaries. When children say they don’t want to hug and kiss everyone at a family gathering, let them know it is OK and find alternative ways to show respect to family members. Model saying “no” and teach your children that their “no” will be respected. If adults in your child’s life don’t respect your child’s boundaries, as the adult you should reinforce your family rules and your child’s rights to set boundaries.

## **Talking about Touch**

Remember that sexual touch can be confusing. In strictly a physical sense, sexual touch can feel good for the victim, which can create more shame and confusion about the situation. Many families prefer to talk about “secret” touch or touch that makes a child uncomfortable. “It is not OK for anyone to touch you in any way that makes you feel uncomfortable—not Mom, Dad, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers or even your friends. Your body is yours, and you have the right to say NO to everyone.”

## **Talk about Tricks**

Some people who sexually abuse children tell the child that it is their fault, that no one will believe them, that if they tell anyone they will hurt their family or pet, etc. Explain that these are “tricks” and are not OK. Assure them that you can handle the situation. “As your parent, caretaker, teacher, I will always be here to keep you safe and will always love you.” “If someone touches you in an uncomfortable way, it is not your fault and they just tell you that to trick you.

## **Involve Other Adults**

Children need to know that there are other adults in whom they can confide. Sometimes children are afraid they will “get in trouble” if they tell their parents about something that happened. This fear can be reinforced by the person who is harming them. Help your children realize that there are other adults who can help if they don’t feel like they can talk to Mom or Dad. “If you don’t feel comfortable talking to me about something, who else can you talk to?” or “What if something happens at school, church, or the park? Who could you talk to?”

## **Be Approachable**

By initiating conversations about healthy sexual boundaries, by answering questions accurately and respectfully, by handling disclosures calmly and reassuringly, you send the message that you are someone your child or other children can talk to even when something has already happened.