

A Parent's Guide to Child Safety

Prevention of Child Abuse

Without spooking them to nightmares, children have to know about the dangers of sexual abuse. This will not only give them knowledge to protect themselves but it will also make them more open to divulge abuse should it occur. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

- Teach your children the names of their body parts and that their body is private and not supposed to be touched without their permission.
- Give them your unconditional permission to say "no" even to a family member.
- Tell them to tell you if they are asked by anybody to be touched, to tell you about it immediately.
- Some secrets are fun; others, especially between a child and an adult should be shared with a parent.
- Make it clear that you are available, open and on their side if an adult ever touches them in such a way that makes them feel uncomfortable and that you will protect them.

How do I talk to my kids about this information . . .

There are 2 main types of signs that parent(s) should watch for regarding child abuse – **indicators and disclosures**. Parents should be prepared to act on both.

A child who has been abused may often demonstrate that they have been victims of abuse through behaviours like:

- displays knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate to his or her age, or even seductive behaviour
- flinches when touched
- makes strong efforts to avoid a specific person, without an obvious reason
- doesn't want to change clothes in front of others or participate in physical activities
- not wanting to go to a regularly scheduled activity
- changes in performance
- has unexplained developmental setbacks (toileting, etc.)
- emotions, artwork, writing assignments, concerns, fears or simple discussions with their parents including statements like "...I was told not to tell...or...an adult is hurting my friend..."

It is important to note that many indicators, especially those of a behavioral nature, may be signs of other problems. However, a series or cluster of indicators observed over a period of time may be a child's reaction to some form of abuse and may appear as significant changes from the child's normal behaviour. Recognizing these as different from their child's normal behaviour, parents need to know more about the circumstances. When parents see indicators and suspect their child may have been abused, they should:

- **Choose your approach carefully** – The child may be fearful or reluctant to talk about the incident.
- **Be relaxed and casual** – If you appear anxious the child might withdraw.
- **Keep it private** – Take the time to chat and listen in a safe place with few interruptions.
- **Be a good listener** – Listen carefully and express your confidence in the child. This shows your concern for his/her safety and well-being.

Find a way to get the conversation on the table to ask your child if he/she has ever been touched inappropriately.

Possible conversation starters:

- Has anyone ever made you feel uncomfortable at school? Hey, would you tell me if someone did something to you that you didn't like . . .
- I was reading about something that has got me thinking . . . and I'm wondering what you would do if something like this happened to one of your friends . . .
- What are some kinds of secrets that would be fun secrets? (e. g., a surprise birthday party). What are some secrets that shouldn't be secrets? (e. g., somebody asks you to do something that feels funny, that doesn't feel right).
- Use a family activity such as a 'what if' game that helps your child think about and respond to different situations – e. g., What would you do if somebody made you do something that made you feel uncomfortable?

What to do if you suspect your child has been abused

Children may often tell their parents directly if they or their friends have been the victim of abuse. When a child discloses that they may have been abused, parents should:

- **Stay calm and listen** – Let the child tell their story. You may feel angry or shocked or scared, but you need to be calm for the child's sake. For that reason they know that it is okay to talk about what happened.
- **Go slowly** – Let the child tell you what happened in their own way and at their own pace. Questions such as, "Can you tell me more about what happened?" can help.
- **Be supportive** – Let the child know that they are not in trouble and have done nothing wrong, they did the right thing by telling you, you are sorry this has happened to them, you will do everything that you can to help, you know other people who can help too.
- **Get only the basic facts** – You do not need a lot of details. You just need to know what happened in general so that you may pass the information on to the appropriate authorities. You may find it helpful to take notes after the conversation so that you remember the details that need to be passed on.
- **Tell the child what will happen next** – Let them know that you will be talking to the police and/or other authority who will help.

If you have reason to believe your child was the victim of abuse, report the incident to the RCMP or Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), or the School Principal, if appropriate.

Contact Numbers

MCFD: 604-944-2500 or 604-927-4429

RCMP: 604-945-1550

Link to *BC Handbook for Action on Child Abuse and Neglect*

http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection/pdf/handbook_action_child_abuse.pdf