



Protecting God's Children™
Teaching Touching Safety

A Guide for Parents, Guardians, and Other Caring Adults



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Printed in the United States of America

06 05 04 3 2 1

ISBN 1-932492-07-0

Overview and Founding Principles of Our Programs

“The Church has always affirmed that parents have the duty and the right to be the first and the principle educators of their children.” This statement from *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*¹ is the core principle upon which two of our programs—the *Protecting God’s Children* program for parents and guardians and the *Touching Safety* program—are founded and designed.

Parents are the primary educators of their children.² This right of parents to educate their children, particularly in the area of morals, values, and human sexuality, is also recognized by the Church as “an educational duty.”³ The Church knows that, “In many cases parents have given up their duty in this field or agreed to delegate it to others, because of the difficulty and their own lack of preparation.”⁴

Other parents have made a decision to take their children out of school-based sex education programs. While the Church affirms the parents’ right to approve any education program dealing with this subject matter, it reminds those parents who remove their children from sex education outside the home that they “have *the duty* to give [children] an adequate formation, appropriate to each child or young person’s state of development”⁵ (emphasis added).

The parent’s program establishes guidelines and principles to assist parents in this important task. The program was developed to help parents provide their children with education in this critical area of human development. And, it responds to parents’ concerns about their own ability to accomplish the task.⁶

The job of ensuring children’s safety is a monumental undertaking. In this effort, the Church provides for collaboration between parents and competent educators.⁷ The role of teachers is to assist and complete the work of the parents.⁸

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¹ *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, Pontifical Council for the Family, Guidelines for Education Within the Family, November 21, 1995.

² *Declaration on Christian Education, Gravissimum educationis*, Proclaimed by Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965. Article 3.

³ *Ibid.* at 44.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 1.

⁵ *Ibid.* at 117.

⁶ “It is not easy for parents to take on this educational commitment because today it appears to be rather complex, and greater than what the family could offer, also because, in most cases, it is not possible to refer to what one’s own parents did in this regard.” *Ibid.* at 47.

⁷ *Ibid.* at 64.

⁸ “The primary role of parents to educate their children must be upheld in all forms of collaboration between parents, teachers, and school authorities...” *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, Article 5e.

Overview and Founding Principles of Our Programs (continued)

The *Protecting God's Children* programs were developed consistent with these guidelines established by the Church. These programs assume that the primary education of children is in the hands of the parents and that responsible, thoughtful, classroom instruction that enters into "the same spirit that animates the parents"⁹ can enhance and reinforce the parents' teaching and increase the child's ability to resist the overtures of potential child molesters.

These programs are not sex education and are not intended to be a substitute for the responsibility of parents in educating their children in the area of human sexuality and love. Rather, through these programs, teachers, catechists, and youth ministers become partners with parents in assuring that all of God's children have the tools they need to protect themselves and to resist the overtures of persons in the community who want to prey on them.

Teaching children to protect themselves is part of the mandate of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in June 2002. Article 12 of the Charter states:

Dioceses/eparchies will establish "safe environment" programs. They will cooperate with parents, civil authorities, educators, and community organizations to provide education and training for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, and others about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children.

The *Protecting God's Children* program for parents and guardians, and *Touching Safety* (our school-based curriculum) are vehicles available to parents and the Church to assist in accomplishing this important mission.

⁹ *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* at 43; APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE EPISCOPATE TO THE CLERGY AND TO THE FAITHFUL OF THE WHOLE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY IN THE MODERN WORLD. November 22, 1981.

As with any competent safety program, touching safety begins with education and understanding. For example, bicycle safety starts with knowing how a bicycle works and understanding the safety risks involved with bicycling. When we have competency in those two areas, we can create a safety program that teaches children and others how to protect against the risks of harm associated with cycling.

Touching safety is the same. First we need to understand how boundaries are established in relationships, and then look to see where the risks of boundary violations arise. Once we achieve basic competency in these two areas, we can teach touching safety to everyone.

Teaching touching safety begins, therefore, with defining boundaries. What are boundaries? Why are boundaries important to personal safety? And, how are they established and maintained?



Boundary Definition and Formation

Unless someone “crosses the line,” most people don’t give a great deal of thought to personal boundaries. For example, when someone gets too close to us—to the point that we feel uncomfortable—we simply step away to create distance, or leave altogether if our level of discomfort is great enough. We learn how to deflect questions that are “too personal” by changing the subject or pretending we didn’t hear. We feel uncomfortable when a clerk at a retail store asks for our phone number or address before he or she begins to total our purchases. In fact, we frequently provide the requested personal information, and then we wish we hadn’t done so.

So, what exactly are “boundaries?” Boundaries are the limits that define one person as separate from another or from others. Boundaries promote and preserve personal integrity. Boundaries give each person a clear sense of “self” and a framework for how to function in relation to others. Boundaries bring order to our lives and empower each of us to determine how others will interact with us.

An appropriate relationship boundary is determined by evaluating the role of a particular individual and relationship within the context of our beliefs and values. For example, appropriate boundaries between a husband and wife are not the same as appropriate boundaries between friends or acquaintances. And, appropriate boundaries between a parent and child are not the same as appropriate boundaries between the child and a priest, teacher, or counselor.

How are Personal Boundaries Formed?

Personal boundaries are established during our early years. They are formed as we react to the amount and

type of attention we get from our parents and from the other influential adults in our lives. Parents say or do things that provide their children with a role model for the appropriateness of particular boundaries in a variety of relationships.

For example, a parent who demands that a child kiss grandma and grandpa goodbye—even when the child doesn't want to—can leave a child believing that individual wants should be suppressed in favor of the wants and wishes of other, more influential people.

Also, if a parent repeatedly tells a child that his or her actions are “breaking my heart,” or says “how could you do this to me,” or reacts in anger when the child doesn't follow the rules, the child might grow up thinking that he or she has the power to determine someone else's feelings. If that's the case, the child may apply that belief in any number of ways to his or her own personal relationships—including as a tool to manipulate and control others.

Parents can see the impact of the influential adults in their own lives by answering a few simple questions:

1. As a child or young person, what values, opinions, and points of view were you expected to embrace as your own?
2. What behaviors and attitudes were you expected to share with the adults in your life?
3. How does your life as an adult reflect the expectations imposed on you by the adults in your childhood?

Parents cannot avoid their influence on children. In fact, it is critical that parents and other influential adults embrace this responsibility and take it seriously—particularly when our children's safety is at stake.

Teaching Touching Safety

Teaching touching safety requires parents and other caring adults to help children learn appropriate relationship boundaries and how to protect themselves from violators. By teaching touching safety, we can empower children to respond in the best possible ways when those boundaries are violated.

Touching safety is not sex education. Although some of the information provided in sexual abuse prevention education is also provided in sex education, these are two distinctly different areas of education. They have different objectives and two different contexts for providing the information.



Sex education is teaching children how to live as adults in a loving, chaste, sexual relationship with their marriage partner.

Sexual abuse prevention education for children involves teaching children about touching safety. It is about empowering children to resist the advances of child molesters, and the lures of manipulative, controlling people who would exploit children for their own sexual gratification.

Preparing Yourself to Teach Touching Safety

Young children are generally comfortable learning about touching safety. It is parents who typically exhibit discomfort. To teach children about touching safety, parents should be prepared. The following points can

help parents do an effective job of presenting this information to children of all ages:

- Provide a setting where the child’s attention is focused on you and nothing else. Select a time when interruptions and distractions are few, if any, and when you will have time to answer all of the child’s questions—completely and without interruption.
- Keep the rules simple. *Touching safety rules* must be simple and easy to understand.
- Take advantage of teachable moments such as when a child asks a question that provides an opportunity to discuss touching safety.
- Give specific examples to the child when you are describing **safe touches** (e.g., when grandpa bounces your child on his knee), as well as **unsafe touches** (e.g., when one child hits another child).
- Name the people who are known **safe friends** and **safe adults** (e.g., Grandma Judy, Uncle Joe, etc.). If you know people who have shown that they are not safe, name them also.
- Identify the child’s **special safe adults** (e.g., mother, father, doctor)—those very few special safe adults who can see or touch a child’s private body parts, but only to help keep the child clean and healthy.
- Give examples of when it’s okay for a special safe adult to see or touch a child’s private body parts (e.g., when you help your child towel dry after a bath, or when the doctor must give your child an injection in his or her buttocks).
- Teach respect. A child who respects his or her own body and demands respect from others is more likely to be in control of his or her physical well-being than peers who lack an understanding of respect.
- Be careful to avoid training children to fear others. Children and adults must know the difference between having a *healthy suspicion* and *being afraid of everyone*.



What You Are Teaching

Touching safety follows two general principles:

1. Children must be able to identify and resist any touch that can harm them—sexual or non-sexual.
2. Children must respect their own health and safety and the health and safety of others.

Specifically, touching safety has six primary points for parents to remember. Children must know:

1. The anatomically correct names for their private body parts (begin teaching these body parts as early as 18 months).
2. How to identify their safe friends and safe adults.
3. The difference between safe and unsafe touches.

4. The names of the few special safe adults in their lives.
5. What to do if a child, adolescent, or adult touches them in an unsafe manner.
6. Do not keep secrets about unsafe touches.

Point One—Teaching About the Private Body Parts

Children are naturally curious, and they have questions about their bodies. Children who are not provided adequate answers from their parents, guardians, or other safe adults are more vulnerable to abuse.

Teaching children about their body parts is important to the developmental process. Parents begin by teaching young children about their fingers, toes, knees, and nose when their children are just a few months old. At the age of approximately 18 months, children should also begin to learn the names of their private body parts.



Children should know:

- The names a doctor would use to describe private body parts.
- That their private body parts are “private” for a reason.
- That private body parts are “off limits” to almost everyone.
- That nobody has the right to touch or see a child’s private body parts except for the purpose of helping keep the child clean and healthy.

When you teach children about their private body parts, they learn that it’s okay to ask questions about their bodies. Children who know that they can ask their parents anything are more likely to speak up if someone makes inappropriate advances toward them.

A child who is not allowed to discuss his or her body may decide that any talk about touching is “taboo.” Such a child is more likely to remain silent about touching safety, abuse, or even serious health concerns, than a peer who has open and frank communication with his or her parents.

One of the most important reasons to teach a child the proper names of body parts is to give the child the ability to accurately communicate about his or her body to parents, medical personnel, or even to the police if the child is ever harmed.

Teaching About Private Body Parts—How to Begin

The American Association of Pediatrics recommends that children begin learning the names of body parts at the age of 18 months. Young children begin by learning about their arms, ears, eyes, etc. Parents also need to teach the child the private body parts: penis, scrotum, buttocks, and anus (for boys) and vagina, buttocks, anus, and breasts (for girls). Make learning the names of body parts a game.

It is, however, *never too late* to teach a child the proper names of body parts. Even children who already *know and use* slang terms to describe private body parts should learn the names a doctor would use to describe those same body parts. And, parents should take advantage of teachable moments with children. As a child ages, the discussions will change. Some simple age-appropriate things for parents to discuss with their children are:¹



- *Three to five years*—teach children how to say “No!” to someone who makes sexual advances or makes requests that cause the child to feel uncomfortable. Give your child direct answers to questions about sex.
- *Five to eight years*—talk about safety away from home, scary experiences, and the difference between safe touches and unsafe touches.
- *Eight to 12 years*—teach and focus on personal safety issues.
- *13 to 18 years*—discuss personal safety issues such as rape, date rape, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy.

Remember that abuse can happen at any age. Teaching children the names of body parts is an important first step in teaching them touching safety and empowering them to resist the advances of a child molester.

Point Two—Who are Safe Friends and Safe Adults?

For the purposes of teaching touching safety, safe friends and safe adults are people who:

- Won’t hurt the child without a good reason and won’t confuse or scare the child intentionally, i.e., medical exams, vaccinations, throat swabs, etc.; and
- Are sure to respect the child’s wishes and the wishes and the rules of the child’s parents, guardians, and caretakers when it comes to personal safety—including touching safety.

Discussing Pornography

Sexual predators often use pornography to arouse or entrap a child. Parents should explain what pornography is and establish that pictures of naked kids or adults are not safe for children to see. Teach your child to avoid pornography; but remember to tell them that if anyone else shows them naked pictures, they can and should tell you about it, and under those circumstances, they won’t be in trouble for looking. They should also know that they can and should tell you whenever an adult asks to take their (the child’s) picture for no apparent reason or asks to take a naked picture of him or her.

¹Please reference the *Overview and Founding Principles of Our Programs* located at the beginning of this booklet.

How Do You Know Who is Safe?

Children, by nature, trust people—even people they don't know. This trust is what attracts people to children—people with both good and bad intentions. How can you, as a parent or caring adult, maintain a child's trusting innocence while also keeping the child safe?

First, you should teach a child that most people are safe and most people deserve respect. You should also explain that some people do not know how to behave safely. So, until your child knows an adult, adolescent, or other child is safe, he or she should play it safe and not go anywhere with or do anything for a person until the child's parent or caretaker says it's okay to do so.



Children should know that:

1. Safe people may not behave safely all of the time, and
2. The mere fact that someone behaves safely “this time” does not confirm that the person is a safe person. For example, a hug that makes you feel good does not automatically mean that the person giving the hug is a safe adult—especially if that person does something that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Point Three—The Difference Between Safe and Unsafe Touches

Safe Touches

One way a child can tell if someone is safe is by observing how the person touches others. Safe friends and safe adults touch children in safe ways and not in ways that are scary or confusing. Safe friends and safe adults don't touch children in ways that seem strange, or that hurt without a good reason, such as a dental exam or removing a splinter.

You should explain safe touches by emphasizing a child's own experiences:

- “A safe touch is when I kiss you good night on the cheek.”
- “A safe touch is when your dad hugs you after he comes home from work.”
- “A safe touch is the ‘high five’ you give Tommy when you make a basket during a ball game.”

You should then explain *why* these touches are safe. They are touches that have a good purpose, are not intended to hurt, and are familiar and safe. Teach children that safe touches are safe, even if they don't know the person well, as long as those touches are appropriate for the particular relationship. Children need caring, safe touches from relatives, teachers, and friends. They need the reassurance provided by safe touches. You should teach children which touches are safe and give them specific examples such as:

- Shaking hands with someone they just met.
- Getting a hug from a teacher.
- Receiving a pat on the back from a coach.

- Getting a tug on the cheek from an aunt or uncle.
- Having their grandpa bounce them on his knee.
- Riding on their uncle’s shoulders.
- Holding hands with a good friend.
- Sharing the Peace greeting with the people around you at Sunday Mass.

A young child may think that the only safe touches are those that feel good. They may assume that all touches that feel good are safe and all painful touches are unsafe. It is important to teach the child that *feeling good* is not the way to judge whether a touch is a safe touch. A safe touch is a touch that is not intended to confuse or scare the child or to do deliberate harm to the child. That does not, however, mean that safe touches always feel good.

Touches such as those from a doctor, nurse, dentist, or “Dr. Mom,” need special explanation because they are safe and necessary—and sometimes they can hurt. You should let children know that, although these touches hurt, they are not unsafe. These touches hurt for a “good” reason. They are meant to keep children healthy.

Give specific examples from the child’s life of uncomfortable or painful situations in which healthcare professionals or family members have touched the child in a way that was unpleasant or painful, but was for the purpose of helping keep the child healthy. For example:

- “When the doctor gave you stitches on your knee after you fell off your bike.”
- “When the nurse gave you a shot to keep you from getting sick.”
- “When the dentist cleaned your teeth to keep cavities away.”
- “When mom applied ointment to a cut to fight infection.”
- “When dad put drops in your eyes to flush out some grains of sand.”

Avoiding Stranger Danger

Most child molesters are known and trusted by the victim and/or the victim’s parents. However, there is merit to teaching children to be cautious of strangers—both those that appear on the street and those that show up on the Internet. But, saying to a child, “Don’t talk to strangers,” or “Don’t take candy from a stranger,” often creates unnecessary apprehension in a child; and, it implies incorrectly that if someone is not a stranger he or she is safe. One very effective way to teach children about strangers is to tell them to make sure they get permission from their parent, guardian, or caretaker before speaking to a stranger.

Children should know that most strangers are safe; but, because we don’t know them, we don’t yet know if they are safe. Also, tell your child that before going anywhere with or doing anything for a stranger, he or she must introduce you (the child’s parent or guardian) to the stranger—no matter what.

Because abductions are known to occur when a child molester asks a child for help, quiz your child regarding what he or she would do if a stranger or mild acquaintance asks the child to help find a lost kitten or asks the child to get into a car. The child should answer that he or she must ask you first before doing anything for or going anywhere with a stranger or an acquaintance.

You should also describe accidental touches. Accidental touches are touches that are not intentional. While accidental touches are not necessarily safe touches, they also are not necessarily unsafe. For example, bumping against someone at the mall or accidentally falling on someone at a playground does not make that person unsafe.

Unsafe Touches

An unsafe touch is any touch that is meant to hurt or scare someone. Hitting, punching, tripping, kicking, and spitting are examples of unsafe touches. In addition to these examples, parents must also explain that touching private body parts can also be an unsafe touch.

For the child to understand touching safety, the child needs to know that we treat our private body parts special by keeping them covered. One reason is to help keep them clean and healthy. Only a few special safe adults may see or touch a child's private body parts—and only to help keep the child clean and healthy.

Let your child know that any touch that is new, scary, or confusing—or a touch that starts out okay but becomes scary or confusing—may be an unsafe touch. Teach children to trust their own instincts and to speak up when something makes them uncomfortable.

When your child knows and understands the difference between safe, unsafe, and accidental touches, explain that there is a difference between people who cause accidents and those who are reckless and cause accidents. People who cause accidents through recklessness—even though unintentional—are unsafe people. For example, an adult or teenager who drives too fast or a child who plays with matches—even though they mean no harm—are unsafe.

Point Four—Teaching Children to Identify Their Special Safe Adults

A child's life may include many, many safe friends and safe adults. That's why it is important for a child to know about special safe adults. Most people who are considered safe adults do not have the right to see or touch a child's private body parts for any purpose. Once children understand *safe friends and safe adults* and *safe and unsafe touches*, you must explain the specific meaning of *special safe adults*.

Special safe adults are people who may see or touch a child's private body parts, but only for the purpose of helping keep the child clean and healthy. Special safe adults have permission to help the child when bathing, going to the restroom, putting on clothes, or when the child is sick. Not everyone has this permission and not every special safe adult has unrestricted authorization. Some adults are special safe adults for specific occasions or reasons. For example, a doctor's permission to touch the child's private body parts is limited to specific examinations for a specific purpose and only when a parent or nurse is also present.



Parents must begin by identifying your child's special safe adults. Establish the criteria for determining your child's special safe adults by asking yourself these two questions:

1. "Who, other than myself, would respect my child's physical safety and respect my wishes regarding my child's safety—including the safety of his or her private body parts?"
2. "Of these people, who might ever be put into a position to see or touch my child's private body parts for the purpose of helping keep my child clean or healthy?"

After identifying your child's special safe adults, list the circumstances in which each special safe adult may have a reason to see or touch your child's private body parts. And, be specific when you discuss this with your child. For example:

- “Grandma—when you need her help in the bathroom, when you are taking a bath, or when you need her help putting on your clothes.”
- “Dad—when you need him to help you get clean or to teach you about using the bathroom.”
- “Your teacher—if you need help going to the restroom while you're at daycare or school.”



Point Five—Teaching What to Do if Touched in an Unsafe Manner

Teach your child a simple rule for what to do if someone tries to touch him or her in an unsafe way. The child must send a clear signal to any child or adult whose behavior is unsafe—a signal that unsafe behavior will not be tolerated.

A child needs to know that any time someone tries to touch his or her private body parts or tries to get the child to touch the private body parts of the other person, the child should say words that mean “No!” and then should tell the child's mother or father or another safe adult as soon as possible.

Instruct young children to run away if the touching involves private body parts or if they don't feel safe for any other reason. Let children know that you will believe them, and that they will not be in trouble for saying “No!” and running away.

Tell older children to immediately get away from the person who touched them inappropriately. This may mean walking away or backing away from the person, or it may mean altogether leaving the location of the unsafe person.

If the unsafe person asks what is wrong, your child should say, “Stop touching me that way...I don't like it!” or other words that mean “No!” If the unsafe person apologizes, an older child may accept an apology or an explanation from the person, but he or she still needs to tell a parent or guardian about the incident. Children need to know that it is not safe to keep secrets about unsafe touches—even if the person apologized or said it was an accident.

A molester may say the wrongful touch was a mistake or an accident in an effort to *confuse the child* or to make the child feel guilty about what happened. That's why it is critical for parents to remind children how

Avoid saying “Touches that Feel Good”

You should avoid saying that safe touches are touches that “feel good,” are “loving,” or “show someone loves you.” Touching of genitalia can feel good and can seem to a child to be as loving as a hug or kiss. A child molester will often tell a child that touching in such a manner is a way of showing love. To counter this, you should tell your child that safe touches are touches he or she knows are safe and are not new and different, confusing, or scary. Tell your child that if he or she is unsure about a touch—a touch that someone wants to do or has done—that, before the child allows the touch to begin or continue, he or she should say, “Stop it!” should run away from the other person involved in the touch, and should ask a parent or guardian if the touch is safe. Reassure your child that a parent or guardian will let the child know whether a particular touch is a “safe touch” or an “unsafe touch.”

Who Should You Select as a Special Safe Adult?

Choosing a special safe adult is a big decision. You should consider your own experiences before making a choice. If you know that your father, for example, was safe with you and your siblings, then, unless circumstances have shown otherwise, you can assume that he is a good candidate as a special safe adult if he ever has a reason to help your child with the toilet, bath, or other activity that involves your child's private body parts. Please remember that your love for a person should never compromise your role as protector of your children. Stepfathers, uncles, boyfriends, and other loved ones, male or female, are responsible for a high percentage of child sexual abuse. So, until you are certain, it is better to play it safe and to limit special access to your child to only those who have a flawless record of safety. Provide unlimited clearance only to those you know are safe and you know you can trust.

important it is to tell a parent, guardian, or other safe adult when someone touches them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable—even if the child is not sure what happened. By telling his or her parents or guardians, the child provides caring adults with an opportunity to take the actions necessary to protect the child and to provide the child with appropriate support.

Parents, guardians, and caring adults should remember that most children do not lie about abuse. So, when a child discloses abuse—directly or indirectly (such as telling about a friend who is being hurt by someone)—it is important to provide support for the child. By following some simple rules, you can assure children that they are safe and that telling was the right thing to do.

1. **Let children talk.** Let them tell what happened, and just listen.
2. **Avoid displays of shock or disgust.** While this may be challenging, it is essential for the child to know that the adult is listening and not judging. Remember, the adult abuser has probably already told the child that nobody will believe him or her. An emotional or otherwise uncontrolled response by the person the child trusts with the story may entirely shut down the child's willingness to communicate.



3. **Respect the child's privacy.** Find a private place to listen to the report and write down what happened. Do not rely on memory for names, dates, times, and locations. This will spare children from extensive questioning, which can make a child feel as if trusted adults do not believe the child's report.



4. **Address the child's feelings and let him or her know that you trust the child and that the story will be investigated.** A child molester may threaten children with dire consequences if the child tells what happened. When a child overcomes that fear and is willing to talk, it is critical to trust the child and to treat the child's story as if it is completely true.

5. **Be honest with the child about what will happen next.** Tell the child that the incident will be reported to the proper authorities and that you will share the information about the incident with only those people who need to know to help keep the child safe.

6. **Do not scold the child.** No matter how many times a child has been told not to keep secrets or not to go somewhere with a stranger, this is not the time to punish the child or to express your anger about the incident. Such a reaction may confirm the child's fears about reporting and may stop the child from trusting his or her parents or other safe adults in the future.

7. **Get immediate medical attention if necessary.** Contact local medical professionals to determine who is best qualified to examine the child for the physical effects of sexual abuse and to test for sexually transmitted diseases, if necessary.

8. **Get counseling/therapy for the child.** Get the best professional help available to provide the child and the parents or guardians with support to deal with the effects of sexual abuse.

9. **Don't be surprised or upset if the child reports the incident to someone outside of the family.** In most instances, the abuser is someone the child knows and trusts—frequently a family member or trusted friend. Children become very concerned about a parent's reaction and often seek the advice and support of someone else to get through the initial period of telling an adult about the abuse.

Your response to a disclosure by a child has three primary goals. **First**, to protect the child from further abuse. **Second**, to stop the molester from abusing any other child. And, **third**, to address the child's symptoms and the harm done to the victim and the victim's family.

Praise the child for reporting the touching incident—regardless of which particular adult to whom the

How a Suspicious Person May React

When confronted by a person who triggers your "healthy suspicion," he or she may argue, become upset, place the blame on the child, or agree to your boundaries, only to continue the suspicious behavior. If this occurs, you should keep your child away from the person in question and, if you suspect abuse may be occurring, immediately call child protective services.

child reported. Reassure the child that he or she will be loved and protected—*no matter what*.

If you have reasonable suspicion that abuse occurred, contact child protective services within your area and shield your child from future abuse. If it appears that a touching boundary was violated accidentally, discuss appropriate boundaries with the adult or child in question. Parents will need to explain to the child why the touch was an accident. Additionally, discuss your touching rules regarding that particular boundary and request that in the future, the other person honor your child's boundaries.

When approached in this manner, a caring adult will understand—and a potential child molester is put on notice that you are paying attention and that your child talks openly with you about everything that happens to the child.



Point Six—Teaching “No Secrets”

Communication is necessary to prevent abuse. It is difficult for children to talk about child sexual abuse—even children who understand and practice touching safety. It is not uncommon for children to keep abuse hidden, and child molesters rely on this secrecy. That's why you should establish this important point:

Your child can tell you about anything that makes him or her feel unsafe—even if someone told him or her to keep it a secret or threatened the child if he or she told.

Assure your child that you will listen to him or her and not get angry, and that your child's safety is your top priority.

A child molester will often try to manipulate a child into silence or drive a wedge between the child and the parent or guardian. For example, an abuser may threaten a child's loved one or may manipulate the child into doing something that the child knows the parents or guardians would forbid—in an effort to drive a wedge between the child and the parent or guardian. The molester's actions are intended to trap the child in a cycle of secrecy that protects the molester from detection.

Let children know that there are no secrets when it comes to personal and physical safety. Tell children that it is wrong for an adult or another child to ask a child to keep a secret about safety—especially unsafe touches—because that is a way for people to get hurt. When a child knows that he or she doesn't have to keep a secret—and that no matter what the molester says, the child will not be in trouble for telling what happened—he or she is more likely to reveal boundary violations.

Making Touching Safety Work

Once is not enough where the rules of touching safety are concerned. After you have established your child's touching safety rules, frequently remind the child about those rules—just as you would with any other safety rule:

- Take advantage of learning opportunities and teachable moments to reinforce the rules—such as when a child says something in a conversation that opens the door to a review of the touching rules.
- Make sure that you go over the rules before placing a child in the custody of a third party.

Such occasions include:

- ✓ Sleepovers, summer or athletic camps, and overnight field trips.
 - ✓ Any outing where sleeping or bathing is involved.
 - ✓ Any outing when someone may have the opportunity to take your child into seclusion, away from other caring adults.
- For older children, engage them in conversation about touching safety issues that have made the news or appeared in movies or TV shows.



Did you read in the newspaper today that a man was arrested for soliciting sex over the Internet? Do me a favor and read this article and let's discuss why it happened and how it could have been prevented.

- If your child has access to a computer, discuss the Internet and Internet safety. Closely monitor chat room activity and email relationships. Stress the dangers of meeting face-to-face with anyone your child has met over the Internet. Do not allow your child to physically meet an Internet acquaintance unless you have met the person first, know the person's background, and are certain the person is safe.
- Be wary of people posing as *modeling agents*, *photographers*, or anyone wanting your older child to help with *business ventures*. Check them out first by asking for a business card, and references from other local clients and parents. You should also contact the Better Business Bureau to see if they have a record of complaints—or any record at all. Go to their place of business to confirm their validity before allowing your older child to meet with them. Even then, do not allow older children to meet these people without having you or another trusted adult present as a chaperon.
- Be aware of the added risk created when a teacher, coach, or other instructor singles out a particular child or student—one who is particularly gifted or particularly challenged—for “special” attention or “after school” instruction. Any attempt by an adult to isolate a child or student should be viewed with healthy suspicion.
- Stress to older children that child molesters often use dating services or other organized networks or chat rooms to meet their victims.
- Maintain a positive approach and make yourself available to talk about these issues at any time of the day or night.
- Let a child know that he or she can call you for help whenever a situation seems uncomfortable or “not right.” Convey that your child's safety is your first priority.
- Finally, if abuse happens within your family, follow the same rules. Protect your child from the abuser, call child protective services as soon as possible, and seek counseling for your child and everyone else affected.

Conclusion

Teaching touching safety is only one part of a multi-faceted solution for protecting children from child sexual abuse. More is required because child molesters have many ways to get around the rules. Remember that:

- Victims, parents, and guardians often know the child molester. Parents and guardians may trust the person with their child. This trust allows child molesters to manipulate parents and guardians and their child victims—even children who have been trained on touching safety.
- A child molester may threaten to harm their victims or threaten to hurt loved ones such as the victim's family members, friends, or even a family pet. These threats force child victims to choose between their own safety and the safety of those they love. This is a hard decision to make, and the child may succumb to the abuser's manipulation tactics. It is important for parents and others to remind children repeatedly that no matter what the abuser says or does, the child will not be in trouble for telling a parent, guardian, or other trusted adult.
- A child molester will manipulate and confuse his or her victims. A child molester may be bright, charismatic, and attentive to the victim's needs. The molester may give the victim gifts, or disguise sexual actions as love, friendship, playfulness, or teaching. The child molester may overcome a child's resistance by confusing the victim in this way.
- A child molester will often introduce children to drugs, alcohol, and pornography in an attempt to make them feel complicit, and to keep children from reporting the abuse. Also, the use of drugs and alcohol impairs judgment and reduces children's ability to protect themselves—even children who know about touching safety.
- A child molester may use his or her standing in society (as a principal, teacher, coach, minister, or priest) to confuse victims about his or her motives—even children who understand touching safety.

