Protecting Children Against Sexual Abuse

Say *No!*

Office of Children and Family Services

Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor

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Definition

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse and maltreatment include situations in which the parent, caregiver, or another person legally responsible for a child under 18 years of age, commits or **allows to be committed** any one of the following activities:

- Touching a child's mouth, genitals, buttocks, breasts or other intimate parts for the purpose of gratifying sexual desire; or forcing or encouraging the child to touch the caregiver, or other person legally responsible, in this way for the purpose of gratifying sexual desire.
- Engaging or attempting to engage the child in sexual intercourse or sodomy
- Forcing or encouraging a child to engage in sexual activity with other children or adults.
- Exposing a child to sexual activity or exhibitionism for the purpose of sexual stimulation or gratification of another.
- Permitting a child to engage in sexual activity which is not developmentally appropriate when such activity results in the child suffering emotional impairment.
- Using a child in a sexual performance such as a photograph, play, motion picture or dance regardless of whether the material itself is obscene.

In addition, it is a crime to give indecent material to a child.

Sexual abuse and maltreatment include such criminal offenses as rape, sodomy, other non-consensual sexual conduct, and prostitution.

Sexual Abuse

Good communication between the parent or caregiver and child is the most important step in protecting a child against sexual abuse. While talking with children about *anything* is sometimes challenging for parents and caregivers, talking about child sexual abuse can be even more difficult. This booklet is for caregivers who want a little help in finding the right way to talk about sexual abuse with their children.

Getting Ready

You might feel uncomfortable because you may not know how to begin, or because you feel you do not have the answers to all the questions your child may ask.

You may worry that you could destroy your child's ability to trust adults and share affection, or leave the child thinking that sex is "bad" or "dirty." You may be afraid of confusing or frightening the child by saying the wrong thing.

If you present the information as being a lesson in personal safety *(as when you told your child to walk facing traffic or not to touch a hot stove)*, you will realize that the subject can be handled in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way.

How to Start

You can start by teaching your child that his or her body is special and should be protected. Begin as soon as you think your child is old enough to understand, usually at about age three. Start simple and keep it that way. While you should try to use the correct names for body parts, this is not a requirement. Using the correct names will help the child develop a healthy respect for his or her body. If you have trouble doing this, use other names — just start talking!

Do not try to cover everything in one discussion. Talking to your child about sexual abuse and personal safety should be an ongoing process. And, do not make a big thing of these talks. Be casual and informal, and choose a time when the child feels safe and relaxed. For example, talk to the child:

- while the child is playing;
- during a leisurely walk, or while riding in the car, or on a bus;
- while fixing a meal together;
- while watching TV, or
- when discussing events in the newspaper, on the news, or on the Internet;
- in connection with a remark made by the child; or
- while tucking the child into bed at night..

What to Discuss

When you talk is not as important as what is said. Here are the main ideas you should convey:

- You are special and important.
- Your body is your own.
- You have the right to say *"NO!"* if someone wants to touch you in any way that makes you feel uncomfortable, afraid, or confused.
- There are parts of your body that are private. You have the right to say *"NO!"* to anyone who wants to touch your vagina, penis, breasts or buttocks. You have my permission to say *"NO!"* even if that person is an adult, even if it's a grown-up you know.
- Pay attention to your feelings. Trust your feelings about the way people touch you.
- If someone bothers you, I want you to tell me. I promise that I will believe you.
- If someone touches you in a way that does not seem right, it is not your fault.

Children need to know that the safety rules about touching apply all the time and not only with strangers, men or babysitters.

In many cases reported in New York State and nationwide, children are sexually abused by people they know and trust: relatives *(even parents or siblings),* friends of the family, and authority figures *(teachers, youth group leaders, clergy, etc.)*. Sexual abuse usually occurs in places where children feel comfortable or safe, at home or in the home of a family friend.

Keep in mind: abusers seldom need to use physical force to get a child to participate in sexual activities. Rather, they take advantage of the child's trust or friendship and use threats to keep the activity a secret. For example, a child may be told that his or her parent or caregiver "will not believe a kid." Other commonly used threats are:

- "If you tell, I will hurt you."
- "I will hurt your mother."
- "I will have to go to jail."
- "The family will break up."

Unfortunately, abusers can use threats successfully because children are taught to believe and obey adults.

Other Rules to Follow

Children learn best when given simple rules to follow.

- Establish a set of family rules about personal safety and repeat them often.
- Include touching rules when you talk about other types of safety.
- Teach children that adults may not always be right.
- Remember that there are differences between what younger children and older children can understand.
- Play the “What If” game *(see next page).*

The “What If” Game

One way to help children protect themselves is to practice responses to potentially dangerous situations. That way, if necessary, the children can react properly and quickly. The “What If” game can make practicing easy and fun. Every time you play, say this to your child, in your own words:

“Your body belongs to you and you have a right to decide how and when anyone can touch you. If somebody tries to touch you in a way that doesn't feel good, or doesn't seem right, say “NO!” It’s even OK to shout and yell “NO!” then run away and tell somebody. If the first person doesn’t believe you, keep telling people until someone does. Always remember, it’s not your fault!”

Here are some “**What Ifs”** to start you off:

1. **What If** something was bothering you and you did not know what to do about it? Who might be able to help you?

   Answer: People you trust, such as a parent, caregiver, another relative, neighbor, teacher, school nurse, police officer, or clergy.

2. **What If** someone touched you in a way you did not like and offered you a candy bar, a brand new doll, or something else you really wanted so you would keep a secret?

   Answer: Say “*NO!*” and tell someone.

3. **What If** a stranger offered you a ride in a shiny new car?

   Answer: Never accept rides from a stranger.

4. **What If** you did not want to be hugged by a particular adult?

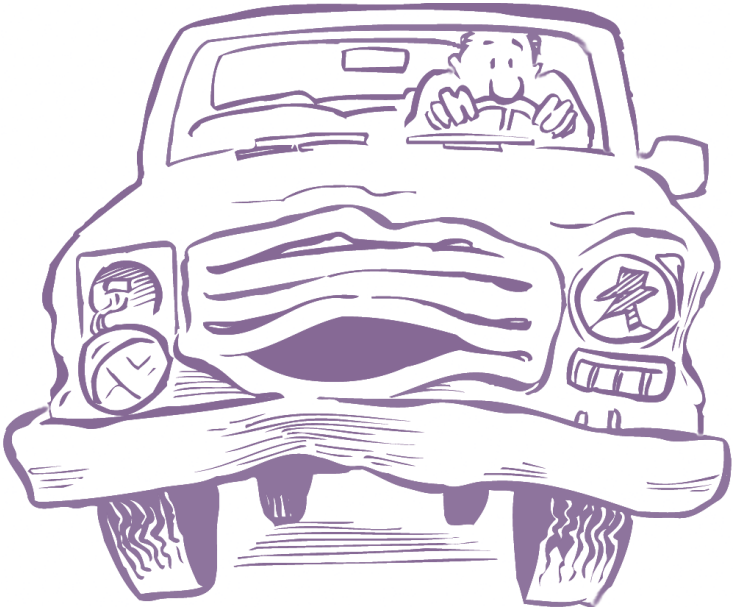
   Answer: Say "*NO!*" to that adult. You may like the person, but you may not want to be hugged at that time.

5. **What If** you got a "bad feeling" or felt "yucky" when a grown up gave you a hug or a big squeeze?

   Answer: Tell the person you do not like it. You have the right to decide when you want to be hugged or touched. Trust your feelings about the way people touch you.

6. **What If** someone you do not know comes to take you home from school?

   Answer: Never go with a stranger unless the stranger gives you our special code word. *(Select a simple code word and teach it to your child. Make sure the child understands the importance of the word.)*



7. **What If** someone is tickling you and it starts to hurt?

   Answer: Tell them to stop. If they will not stop, call for help. If I'm not home at the time, tell me about it later.

8. **What If** Mommy, daddy or a doctor touched the private part of your body?

   Answer: There are times when others may need to touch your private parts. For example, mommy or daddy may touch your private parts when they are bathing you; or a doctor may need to touch you during an examination-but, if the touching hurts or bothers you, tell them.

   Alternate: Grown-ups do not usually need to touch children in private areas unless it is for health reasons.

9. **What If** the babysitter wanted to touch you under your night clothes?

   Answer: No one has the right to put their hand under your clothes, to force you to touch them, to touch your body, or to touch your private body parts.

10. **What If** your uncle (or aunt) wanted you to sit on his (or her) lap and if you do not want to?

    Answer: You can say "*NO!*" to your uncle (or aunt) if, for some reason, you do not want to do it.

You can make up many more ***"What Ifs"*** from your child's own everyday experiences, using familiar names and places. Discuss only one or two per talk. But be sure to practice regularly so that your child learns to recognize when to say *"NO!"* and when help is needed. This will increase your child's ability to act quickly and calmly. Emphasize that the child always has a right to say *"NO!"* Children are safer if they know what to do when they feel threatened.

Just in Case

You cannot prepare children for every single type of situation that can occur. Caregivers must be on guard and observant at all times. Here are some signs that may indicate a child is being sexually abused:

- Unusual sexual knowledge or behavior.
- Any changes in behavior, such as loss of appetite, nightmares, inability to sleep, or withdrawal from usual activities;
- Poor relationships with friends;
- Return to bedwetting or thumb-sucking;
- Genital disease; genital irritation or bleeding; or swelling, pain, itching, cuts or bruises in genital, vaginal or anal areas;
- Difficulty concentrating at school;
- Fear of a person, or an intense dislike of being left somewhere or with someone;
- Pregnancy;
- Aggressive or disruptive behavior, delinquency, running away, or prostitution;
- Self-destructive behavior;

If your child tells you that he or she was touched inappropriately by an adult or that an adult has committed any of the acts listed under the "definition" of child sexual abuse *(see inside front cover)*, there are certain things you *must* do:

- Listen and believe your child. Do not deny the problem or blame your child.
- Stay calm! If you get upset or angry, you will frighten the child. Try to talk quietly with the child.
- Tell the child that he or she did nothing wrong. Sexual abuse is the fault of the abuser.

- Tell the child that he or she is safe and will not be harmed.
- Tell your child that he or she did the right thing by telling you.
- Do not confront the alleged perpetrator.
- Call the authorities.

If you believe that your child has been sexually abused by a caregiver, parent, guardian, or relative, or by a day care provider or staff member of a day care program, call:

New York's Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment

1-800-342-3720

If you believe that the child has been sexually abused by someone who is not any of the types above, or if you don't know who may have sexually abused the child, call your local police or sheriff's department.

If you believe that your child has been abused in a residential facility call:

New York State Vulnerable Persons' Central Register (VPCR) Hotline at:

1-855-373-2122

Other Resources

For Parents and Caregivers

Helping Children Affected by Abuse: A Parent's and Teacher's Handbook for Increasing Awareness, by Angelo P. Giardino, M.D. (2007). G.W. Medical Publishing, Inc.

Helping Your Child Recover from Sexual Abuse*,* by Caren Adams and Jennifer Fay. (1992). University of Washington Press.

A Parent's and Teacher's Handbook on Identifying and Preventing Child Abuse*,* by James A. Monteleone, M.D. (1998). G.W. Medical Publishing, Inc.

The Safe Child Book: A Commonsense Approach to Protecting Children and Teaching Children to Protect Themselves*,* by Sherryll Kraizer and Mary Komblum. (1996). Fireside.

For Children

A Better Safe than Sorry Book: A Family Guide for Sexual Assault Prevention*,* by Sol Gordon and Judith Gordon. (1992). Prometheus Books.

It Happens to Boys Too*,* by Jane Santullo and Russell Bradway. (1987). Elizabeth Freeman Center.

It's My Body: A Book to Teach Young Children How to Resist Uncomfortable Touch*,* by Lory Freeman. (1984). Parenting Press, Inc.

My Body Is Private*,* by Linda Walvoord Girard and Rodney Pate. (1992). Albert Whitman & Co.

No More Secrets for Me*,* by Oralee Wachter and Jane Aaron. (2002). Little Brown & Company.

Secrets that Hurt: Sexual Abuse Activity Book*,* by Jim Boulden and Joan Boulden. (1993). Boulden Publishing

Something Happened and I'm Scared to Tell: A Book for Young Victims of Abuse*,* by Patricia Kehoe and Carol Deach. (1987). Parenting Press, Inc.

For Adolescents

Dear Elizabeth: A Diary, by Helen Swan and Gene Mackey. (1993). KIDSRIGHTS, JIST Publishing.

Everything You Need to Know About Sexual Abuse, by Evan Stark and Marsha Holly. (1995). The Rosen Publishing Group.

Telling, by Marilyn Reynolds. (1996). Morning Glory Press.

Top Secret: Sexual Assault Information for Teenagers Only, by Jennifer Fay and Billy Jo Fierchinger. (1988). ACT for Kids.

This booklet was updated by the

New York State Office of Children and Family Services.

Office of Children and Family Services

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Visit our website at:
ocfs.ny.gov

For child care, foster care, and adoption information, call:
1-800-345-KIDS (5437)

To report child abuse and maltreatment, call:
1-800-342-3720

New York State Vulnerable Persons' Central Register (VPCR) Hotline at:

1-855-373-2122

For information on the Abandoned Infant Protection Act call:
1-866-505-SAFE (7233)

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