

## 12. Teaching children to protect themselves from sexual abuse

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We must let go of our unrealistic wish to protect our children from life's hardships and cruelty and focus instead on strengthening their resilience. Children develop resilience by being encouraged to recognise their abilities and inner resources. They need help to acquire skills to cope, recover from hardships and to prepare for future challenges.

### **Why teach children about preventing sexual abuse?**

Learning about sexual abuse prevention is necessary, but it is not enough to ensure children's safety. Prevention of this type of abuse and teaching about it are the responsibility of adults.

Children by nature are particularly vulnerable to all types of abuse because of their temporary helplessness and dependence on adults and their lack of knowledge about danger and self-protection.

Researchers point out that statistics on sexual abuse reveal only the tip of the iceberg. Feelings of guilt, helplessness and shame, combined with a fear of how those closest to them will react and of the perpetrator's threats are the most common reasons why children, and often adults important to them who are aware of the abuse, do not report the abuse and seek help. If the abuse is reported, it is often months or years afterwards, especially if the abuser is a person close to a child.

In at least 80% of cases, sexual perpetrators are known to children. They may be parents or step-parents, relatives, family friends or caregivers. Perpetrators go to great lengths to gain access to children, and often choose jobs that provide them with a legitimate, unrestricted and unsupervised approach to children. They carefully choose obedient, submissive and emotionally needy children with low self-esteem, who know little about human sexuality and are passive and fearful. Such children are the least likely to withstand victimisation. Contrary to a common misconception, perpetrators do not look like monsters: they are seemingly normal, pleasant and polite people. They use grooming techniques on a targeted child and often on the child's parents, so as to win their confidence, affection and acceptance.

They use many methods to keep children silent: bribes, threats, emotional blackmail and physical abuse. The majority of perpetrators are heterosexual males. Not many have a criminal history (around 5%). People who abuse children outside their families most frequently abuse children inside their families as well. Studies show that female perpetrators account for 20% and 5% of abuse of boys and girls respectively. In around 30% of sexual abuse cases, the perpetrators are adolescents under 17 years of age. Many of them are victims of sexual abuse themselves (Sanderson, 2004.)

To teach children effectively, parents and teachers should be well informed about the complex impact of sexual abuse on children and other key facts. Whatever advice or instructions are given to children, they must be grounded in honest explanation and a good knowledge of the facts. It is thus extremely important that parents and teachers distinguish facts from misconceptions. Sex offenders count on misconceptions and turn them into an advantage. Parents and teachers should also know that some of our frequent messages to children may actually contribute to their victimisation (Adults are always right! A policeman will take you away if you don't behave! Give your uncle a kiss!). Finkelhor (2007:643) writes: "There is broad agreement that the burden of preventing victimisation should not lie exclusively

in the hands of children. However, if there are potentially effective things that children can do, it would also be morally reprehensible not to equip them with such skills.”

### **Developing a supportive environment to ensure children’s safety**

Distrust and lack of safety have become topical issues. There is a growing trend to perceive cordiality and kindness, especially between children and adults, with suspicion and scepticism, making the development of a safe environment for children a challenging issue.

Having good communication with children is of key importance. It implies openness, determination, straightforwardness and a friendly, non-intimidating atmosphere. It can facilitate giving children clear guidelines to ensure their safety and teaching them how to recognise potential dangers. This is the only way for adults to pave the way for children to speak openly about their concerns and doubts, or disclose sexual abuse.

Discussions with children about the prevention of sexual abuse should follow the same logic as other safety messages – focus on safe behaviour and skills rather than on the risks. A supportive environment facilitates the sexual education of children. This includes teaching them the interpersonal skills that are indispensable for safe and satisfactory relationships. Yet some societies are unwilling to introduce it. This is particularly depriving for children from families that ignore the subject or maintain a negative discourse about human sexuality. Sexually naïve children are more prone to victimisation and readily fall into an offender’s trap of secrecy.

Once sexual abuse has been revealed, re-establishing a safe environment is the key to a child’s recovery. Children are very often distrustful, especially if the perpetrator is a family member. An inappropriate reaction from the adult to whom the child has revealed the abuse may cause more psychological damage than abuse itself. It is crucial to listen carefully to a child, ask questions to obtain more

information, take measures to protect the child victim and report the incident to police and social services. Children must understand that they are not being blamed for abuse and that they have done the right thing by speaking up. This is important because perpetrators often throw responsibility for abuse onto the victim.

A safer children's environment can be ensured by attentive adults in the community who, upon discovering or suspecting abuse, do their best to stop it and to support victims. Adults must be aware of their responsibility to protect children and report abuse, because judicial proceedings and the sentencing of perpetrators also contribute to increasing safety for children and the community.

### **Teaching children to protect themselves and disclose abuse – key concepts**

Nowadays there is an abundance of literature and websites on how to teach children to protect themselves from sexual abuse. During the past three decades, many educational preventive programmes have been developed and implemented in kindergartens and schools. The majority of the programmes also include information for parents and school staff. Irrespective of the many methodological limitations in assessing the effectiveness of the programmes, it is clear that they have contributed to increasing children's awareness of sexual abuse and to teaching them skills with which to protect themselves (Finkelhor, 2007; Barron and Topping, 2009).

Efforts focused on empowering children to prevent sexual abuse can be channelled into the following:

- preparing for everyday life;
- identifying and responding to potentially dangerous situations;
- identifying, preventing and stopping sexual abuse;
- seeking help.

### *Preparing children for everyday life*

Promoting children's physical, social and emotional health by boosting their powers is the key to preparing them for everyday life. Building up healthy self-esteem and encouraging children to respect and have empathy for others are essential, and parents are important role models.

Healthy self-esteem can be developed in many ways and includes:

- *Respect for individuality.* Help children to take pride in their own individuality. Teach them the importance of respecting others as individuals and to recognise diversity as something that makes everyone special.
- *Self-assertiveness and expressing needs and feelings.* Teach children to recognise and accept their feelings, to speak out about their needs and to reject unjustified and inappropriate proposals.
- *Problem-solving and decision-making skills.* Encourage using these skills in everyday life when confronted with a challenging situation. Avoid doing things for children or telling them what to do.
- *Self-respect and respect from others.* Encourage children to respect themselves and to expect respect from others. Help them to set clear boundaries for unacceptable behaviour; talk about what to do if someone crosses these boundaries.
- *Respect and empathy for others.* Teaching children to respect and empathise with others is an important part of becoming responsible individuals. Clear rules should be set with regard to acceptable behaviour towards others both at home and at school, with clear limits and boundaries. When rules are broken and children have not paid attention to the consequences of their behaviour, adults should be consistent in their reactions. Children should be active participants in setting up the rules and defining the consequences when broken.

- *Positive communication about sex.* Sexuality, genitals or a child's interest in their own body should not be cast in a negative light. An open discussion about sexual abuse should be encouraged.

Sexual offenders rarely choose self-confident children because they know that they are less prone to victimisation, and will more readily stop abuse attempts and report them.

### *Determining an effective response to potentially dangerous situations*

The last thing that children need is to have unnecessary boundaries and limits imposed on them. These risk stifling their joyous and adventurous spirit. Intimidation leads to fear and isolation, which only increases the risk of victimisation.

To empower children to recognise and react effectively to potentially dangerous situations, the key concept is that everyone has the right to safety. Once children recognise this, the more readily they will understand the need to respond. Having the right to be safe with other people implies being responsible and caring for oneself, and knowing how to react when threatened. The right to safety also encompasses respect for other people's right to safety and encourages children to help others as well.

Children are entitled to a simple but blunt explanation of the situations that could jeopardise this right. It is particularly important to give them examples of inappropriate adult behaviour and teach them how to respond when they feel threatened or uncomfortable. Children should also be taught to pay attention to their body's early warning signs of feeling threatened (butterflies in the stomach, increased heartbeat, weak knees, etc.). A key reaction to potential danger should be to seek help from a trusted adult. Children must realise that they are not "snitching" and that seeking help is their right.

Parents and teachers can significantly contribute to children's ability to respond in time by going over every action they can take if caught in a dangerous situation.

### *Identifying, preventing and stopping sexual abuse*

There are many safety messages that can help children to more easily identify, prevent and stop abuse. Parents and teachers must pass these on according to the child's cognitive capacity. Rather than frighten children, this will increase their ability to identify risk, model proper strategies and boost their courage to take action.

- *“Your body is your own”*. Teach children that their body is their own and that no one can touch it without permission. Establishing open and direct communication at a very early age about sexuality and “private body parts”, using the correct names for genitals and other parts of the body, will help children understand what is and what is not allowed for adults in contact with them. This will also help them recognise embarrassing or abusive behaviour.
- *Safe and unsafe touching*. Teach children the difference between safe/appropriate and unsafe/inappropriate touching. Tell children it is not okay if someone looks at or touches their private parts or asks them to look at or touch someone's private parts, and that inappropriate touches are wrong and against the law. If they are not sure whether someone else's behaviour towards them is acceptable, make sure they know to ask a trusted adult for help.
- *“No! Go! Tell!” strategy*. Children should be taught and trained to instantly and firmly say “No” to inappropriate physical contacts, to get away from unsafe situations and to tell a trusted adult as soon as possible. It is particularly important to stress that they should continue telling trusted adults until they are listened to and believed, and until measures are taken to restore their safety.

- *A bad secret and a good secret.* Teach children the difference between a bad secret and a good one (a surprise). Secrecy is a main tactic of sexual abusers. They ensure it in many ways, from bribes to serious threats. Given that children are taught not to betray an adult's confidence in them and that they should not "sneak" or air dirty linen, they often get confused. Therefore, they should be taught to differentiate between "bad secrets" and "good secrets". Every secret that makes them anxious, uncomfortable, fearful or depressed is not good and should not be kept but reported to a trustworthy adult.
- *The offender is a known person.* For children, especially younger ones, it is hard to understand that someone who knows them could abuse them. Parents must keep in mind the grooming process that offenders usually employ to win both their and their children's trust. Informing regularly about someone who gives gifts, asks children to keep a secret or tries to spend time alone with them must be a set rule in the home.
- *The offender is a stranger.* Although this is a less common situation, children must be warned of the risk of attack or kidnapping by a stranger. They should know that such persons look and behave normally, may be friendly and caring and that they can be females as well. Teach children safety rules: instruct them never to get into a car with anyone they do not know, nor to accept gifts or invitations to someone's home without their parent's permission. If a stranger proposes any of these, they must instantly get away and tell parents or a trusting adult. Self-defence skills and screaming are proven, useful tools that will discourage many ambivalent perpetrators or those in fear of being caught (Finkelhor, 2007). Children must be told that not all strangers, not even the majority of them, are dangerous. They should know that in dangerous situations they can also get help from strangers (policemen, sales assistants or any parent with children). It is a good idea to establish a family plan in case a child gets lost



in a public place – define a meeting point and a person to ask for help. Children should also be made aware of tricks that kidnappers frequently use, such as telling a child that their parents have had an accident and that they will take them to the hospital. Children should know to first check this information with a trusted person.

- *Seeking help.* Children should be taught how to obtain help from trusted adults and other resources in the local community. This will encourage disclosure of sexual abuse. Disclosure can only improve a child's situation by ending or shortening abuse, mobilising assistance and reducing isolation (Finkelhor, 2007:643).
- Having open communication with children builds relationships that are based on mutual confidence and increases the likelihood of disclosure. Trusted adults, including a family member, a teacher or other person can give advice and help children address the problem and find relief. Having such a person to turn to increases children's confidence that solutions can be found to their problems.
- *Safety network.* Children need to be instructed about adults who can be part of their safety network. They should be encouraged to select adults whom they trust, are available and ready to listen and help when needed. Only one member of the safety network should live with a child; the others should be outside the immediate family circle in case the problem is home-related. Children should know how to seek help from a network member. If children are clear about how to do this, it is probable that they will do so if necessary. It should be a rule to seek help until the problem has been resolved and the child's safety re-established.
- *Helping others.* Encouraging empathy, friendship and caring relations among children facilitates their pro-social behaviour and understanding that their peers can also be a source of help.

## Conclusion

Empowering children to protect themselves and disclose abuse are the priority tasks of responsible adults, and there are no alternatives to these tasks. Understanding the risks that children face; empowering parents and teachers to identify them; knowing how to respond to them; improving social and community services that can be mobilised to provide specialist support; and ensuring ongoing monitoring and vigilance are all essential to the protection of children from sexual abuse (Daphne Booklets, 2007).

## References

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