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Protecting Your Child Against Sexual Abuse

Know the Stranger Beside You.

We all have mental images of what we think a child abuser looks like, but that's the exception: Fewer than 10 percent of predators are strangers to the children they victimize. **90 percent of childhood sexual abuse is perpetrated by people known to the child and family. As many as 30-40 percent of abusers are immediate or extended family members, and up to 40 percent of abuse occurs by other children.**

Make a point of knowing your child's teachers, coaches, day care providers, youth group leaders, friends' parents/caregivers and other significant adults in their lives. If you are single, be very cautious about giving people you date access to your children; regardless of your feelings for them do not leave them alone with your child.

Be a parent who trusts himself over others; be involved and aware. Make a habit of showing up unannounced when your child is with others, including friends and other children.

Be the Parent Who Respects and Listens to His/Her Child

It is heartbreaking to hear the stories of child victims who had the courage to tell a safe adult that they were being abused, only to have the allegations downplayed or dismissed. Listen to what your child says about others, and how they respond in situations.

The best way to teach your child to trust his or her instincts is for you to trust them. This means accepting your child's decision not to **show affection, even to close family member**, and even when it creates momentary discomfort or embarrassment.

Predators analyze the family dynamic and look for signs that the parent(s) may easily dismiss a child's feelings or opinions. They also look for young people who are compliant and don't question authority.

If You See Something, Say Something.

Be the person who is willing to speak about this "unspeakable" issue. When your words and actions say: "I'm aware and educated about child sexual abuse," you are creating an environment that is unfriendly to potential predators.

If you are concerned about someone's behavior toward your child, say so; not with malice or accusation, but in order to avoid seeding mistrust and to set safe boundaries for what behaviors you feel comfortable with – or not – when it comes to your child. This is your right and your responsibility.

Grooming often begins with inappropriate behavior in the presence of another adult to normalize it with the child (If mom or dad isn't objecting, then this must be okay.)

Understand and Beware of the Grooming Process

In most cases abuse does not occur on the first encounter; there is a predictable grooming process used to gain the child's trust and ensure silence. Knowing these steps can help you equip your child and yourself to recognize and disrupt the cycle if your child becomes a target. The grooming process usually involves:

- (1) Special attention, recognition or rewards directed toward the targeted child
- (2) Special privileges and opportunities (e.g., invitations for lunch or outings)
- (3) Slowly increasing touching and sexual comments that test the targeted child's response and likelihood to resist
- (4) Progressive sexual behavior that desensitizes the target victim and further tests his/her resistance and likelihood to file a complaint
- (5) Acts of sexual exploitation/gratification which often recur
- (6) Emphasis on shared responsibility for the sexual activity and the need for secrecy

Educate your Child.

Make it a regular practice to talk with your child in calm tones and environments about the fact it is not okay for anyone— *not mommy, daddy, a brother, uncle, teacher, coach or family friend should talk with you about your body in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, touch you in private places or take photos of you without clothing.* It is a delicate balancing act to arm your child against a threat that may come from close to home without creating a mindset of fear and suspicion.

Handle your Business.

Your interactions with your children becomes the model against which they evaluate appropriate behavior in other adults. Children need to see and experience that, as the adult, you are responsible for your own feelings.

If your children feel like it is their responsibility to take care of you, they might avoid coming to you with information they don't think you can handle.

Another risk factor is parents who abuse substances. If you struggle with alcohol or other drugs, please explore treatment options via Alcoholics Anonymous (aa.org) and Narcotics Anonymous (na.org), or Al-Anon (al-anon.org) if your spouse is the one struggling.

Sources:

"5 Ways to Deter a Child Predator," The Mama Bear Effect, (The Mama Bear Effect blog)

"Victim Grooming: Protect Your Child from Sexual Predators" (Boystown.org)