

# **Catholic Mutual...CARES for Kids**

## **Age-Appropriate Ways to Discuss Abuse Prevention with Children**

Talking to children about abuse prevention is a vital but delicate task. It's essential to approach the subject with sensitivity, providing understandable and empowering information for children at different developmental stages. Educating your child on appropriate body safety, including the topic of physical and sexual abuse, does not have to be a scary conversation.

### **Understanding Developmental Stages**

As a parent, you have multiple types of educational talks with your children as they grow. These could range from learning to look both ways before they cross the street, to how to do their laundry to the harder topics of abuse awareness. Tailoring these conversations to their cognitive and emotional development ensures they can understand and apply the information. It is important to build a strong relationship with your child that centers on them feeling comfortable disclosing any information with you, even later in life.

#### *Preschoolers (Ages 3-5)*

At this age, children are learning basic concepts about their bodies and personal boundaries. Teach them the proper names for body parts, emphasizing that some parts are private and should not be seen or touched by other individuals. Use simple, clear language to explain that their body belongs to them and that they have the right to say "no" if someone touches them in a way that makes them uncomfortable. Use stories, role-playing, or age-appropriate books to make these lessons relatable and engaging.

#### *School-Age Children (Ages 6-12)*

School-age children can understand more complex concepts, such as the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch. When teaching about touch, it would be better to use safe/unsafe touch instead of good/bad touch. This is because a child could be receiving a hug, which is good, but from a person who makes them feel unsafe. This is why it is important to tell your child that they can say "no" to any touch that makes them feel unsafe. Learning how to safely leave an uncomfortable environment is a valuable skill set that is potentially lifesaving. It is

also important to help children label and understand their feelings. This way, they can begin to identify how they are feeling with others and find support with a trusted adult. Introduce the idea of trusted adults and the importance of reporting uncomfortable situations. Discuss scenarios where boundaries might be crossed and role-play how they can respond assertively. Reinforce the idea that abuse is never their fault and emphasize the importance of speaking up.

### *Teenagers (Ages 13-18)*

With teenagers, conversations can be more detailed, including discussions about consent, healthy relationships, and digital safety. Discuss boundaries in relationships and the importance of respecting others' limits, well as asserting their own. Encourage open dialogue about uncomfortable experiences without judgment. During this time, many children will be going through puberty, so it is important to discuss proper boundaries and how to express thoughts and feelings. As your child ages, it is important to look for other signs that could coincide with abuse. Anxiety or depression could show as feelings of sadness, excessive sleep/inability to sleep, weight loss/gain, withdrawal from friends, or misuse of drugs/alcohol. If these signs are present, you should voice your concerns and seek out professional help, if necessary. The discussion of abuse could flow easily with your discussion about the misuse of drugs/alcohol. The use of drugs and alcohol would negatively impact their ability to keep themselves safe. One-third of child sexual abuse occurs between people who are under the age of 18. Educating your children on appropriate boundaries is important to protect them from becoming the victim or the perpetrator.

## **Strategies for Discussing Abuse Prevention**

Regardless of a child's age, certain strategies can make these discussions more effective:

- *Create a Safe Space*: Establish a trusting and nonjudgmental environment where children feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. Be approachable and calm, avoiding reactions that might make them hesitant to share.
- *Use Everyday Moments*: Incorporate discussions into routine moments, like bath time for younger children or car rides for older ones. This normalizes the topic and reduces anxiety.
- *Teach the "No, Go, Tell" Rule*
  - **No**: Teach children they can say "no" to unwanted touch.
  - **Go**: Help them understand they should leave the situation, if possible.
  - **Tell**: Encourage them to tell a trusted adult immediately.

- *Discuss Online Safety:* In today's digital age, include lessons about protecting personal information and avoiding inappropriate online interactions. Use age-appropriate examples to explain the risks.
- *Reinforce Boundaries:* Regularly remind children that they are in control of their bodies and feelings. Practice scenarios where they can assert themselves, such as saying, "I don't like that. Please stop."

For any age child, abuse is a multifaceted issue that can impact how or if they decide to tell an adult. However, discussing the topic of abuse openly and often with your child will allow them to feel comfortable to come forward in the future. When a child decides to disclose trusted information to you, it is important for you to listen to them with your undivided attention and take their concerns seriously. The goal is to empower children with knowledge and tools to protect themselves while fostering confidence, not fear. Avoid graphic descriptions or overwhelming details, focusing instead on practical, positive actions they can take. By approaching abuse prevention in an age-appropriate, ongoing dialogue, caregivers can help children build the awareness and confidence they need to navigate the world safely and securely. These conversations are not one-time events, but a continuous effort to keep children informed and empowered throughout their development.

## References

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