

Catholic Mutual...CARES for Kids

Don't Wonder 'What If' – Talking about Abuse Prevention

Being able to have an open conversation with your child about difficult topics will allow you to help prepare them for potential dangers they might face. One of these is child abuse, which can be prevented through education. It is important to begin discussing these topics early to teach them what a healthy relationship looks like, however, it is key to ensure that it is age-appropriate material.

Starting the Conversation

This is a difficult topic that should be discussed openly and often with your child. It is important to remember that if you do not discuss these topics, you cannot protect them. These conversations should not make your child feel scared, but comfortable in coming to you in these situations. If you feel like you are unprepared, you can always practice with a friend, your spouse or yourself in the mirror before talking with your child. Below are a few key points that you should teach and review with your child when having these conversations.

- Teach technical names of body parts, not nicknames, and tell them others should not touch/look at those areas.
- Teach boundaries for themselves and others. They have the right to say 'no' to touches that make them uncomfortable, like getting a hug from someone.
- Teach the differences between healthy interactions and what could be considered inappropriate behavior from both adults and other children, including showing them explicit materials.
- Reassure them that sharing information with you is a safe place and they will not get into trouble. Many adults manipulate children into keeping secrets and saying they will get into trouble if they tell.
- If your child does ever come to you and shares, do not get mad about why they did not come forward sooner. Instead, reaffirm that you are proud of them and that you will get through this situation together.

Create Safety Rules

These are a baseline to help your child identify abuse and the next steps they can take to stay safe. Describing it as a 'rule' to children will help for two reasons. It allows you to avoid discussing aspects of abuse that younger children might not

understand. It also allows you to give instructions on what to do once that rule has been broken. These safety rules could be like the examples below, or rules that are particular to your own household to protect your child.

1. *Know What's Up:* Talk to your child about what a healthy relationship entails and how that would look different in an abusive relationship (physical, verbal, sexual).
2. *Spot Red Flags:* When you see unsafe behavior, in either words or actions, know to use the other safety rules to get help.
3. *Make a Move:* If you spot a red flag or feel unsafe, get away from the situation or individual(s).
4. *Tell Someone:* Reach out to a trusted adult that will listen and help if you are previously or currently in an unsafe situation.
5. *No Blame, No Shame:* Continually reassure your child that they will not get in trouble for sharing their experiences.

As a parent, you can also ask your child a series of 'What If' scenarios, to see how they would react if they encountered these experiences in real life. Their responses could determine how well your child understands the safety rules that were explained. Below are a few examples of 'What If' scenarios that could be used.

"What If"	Reaction
You're online and someone asks you about you or your family in a chat.	Don't provide any information, log out, tell a trusted adult
You're walking to school with a friend and a car pulls up and the driver asks for directions to the school.	Get away and tell a trusted adult
You're in the locker room and your coach/teacher asks you to undress in front of them.	Say no, get away, tell a trusted adult

Having these difficult conversations early and often creates the opportunity for your child to understand what appropriate and healthy relationships with adults or other children entail. These conversations will have to grow as your child does to make the material content appropriate. However, if your child does ever experience abuse, they will have the solid foundation of knowing they can come to you for support and be taken seriously.

References

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