

How to Talk to Your Child About the Risk of Sexual Assault

Talking about the risk of sexual assault with your child often means first talking about the opposite: healthy relationships. No matter the age of your child, be sure to regularly express to them that you want them to have healthy, safe relationships. [This post](#) talks more about how to do this.

Unfortunately, conversations with your children cannot end at healthy, safe relationships. Parents need to teach children how to identify when someone in their community is not acting appropriately and what they can do about it. Read on for how.

Talking with Younger Children

Describe the feeling when something is wrong. For younger children, begin by talking about how to know when something is not right. Explain the feeling that something may be wrong as “that grumbly feeling you get in your tummy” or when “your heart goes really loud” or “when your skin feels hot and wet like a fish.”

Talk about what to do with unsafe secrets and places. Talk about secrets and distinguish between safe secrets to keep and ones that aren't safe. Give examples of each. A safe secret may be “when Dad allows an extra serving of dessert.” An unsafe secret might be one that “makes you feel worried or could hurt someone.” Tell your child that if they hear an unsafe secret, it is OK to tell you. The same applies to safe and unsafe places. Explain that there are some places that are safe and some that are not safe. A safe place might be described as a place where a child feels happy. An unsafe place, a place the child feels sad or scared.

Establish bodily autonomy. Incorporate reminders that the child's body is their own into daily routines like bath time, bathroom breaks, and getting dressed in the morning. Introduce the concept of inappropriate touch and talk about parts of the body it is not OK for others to touch, look at, or take pictures of. If someone does try to do these things, ask them to tell you right away.

Practice saying “no.” Remind children that they are always allowed to say no when something doesn't feel right with their body. This applies to when they don't want to hug or kiss a relative as much as it does if they were to be hugged by a stranger. Practice yelling “no” and “stop” and model for the child how to hold up their hands like a stop sign.

Talking with Older Children

Emphasize bodily autonomy. Remind older children that they have the right to have a say in what happens with their body. I Have The Right To's Consent Conversation Cards are a perfect way to initiate this conversation! Explain that if something is to happen that they do not like, they should first say no, get out of the situation, and tell a trusted adult.

Talk about asking for consent. It is always important to talk to teenagers about giving consent and to remind them that their yes means yes and their no means no. It is also important to talk with your child about how to *ask* for consent. Offer phrases like "Is it OK if I touch your hair?" Or, "is it OK if I kiss you?" for them to use when they are with a partner.

Establish more than one form of listening. When a teenager is learning to ask for consent, they also need to learn how to listen for it. Remind your teenager that there are many ways we as humans can listen: with our ears of course, but also with our eyes and our hearts. Explain to your teen that if they hear silence, see someone withdraw, or feel like something isn't quite right, they should stop what they are doing immediately and make sure the other person is OK.

Emphasize examples of healthy relationships. When watching TV shows or movies with your teens, ask them for examples of healthy, respectful relationships and unhealthy ones. Start a conversation about what respect feels like to them, and what they think respect feels like to their friends or partner.

Extend a lifeline. Set a pact with your teenager that no matter the time, place or circumstance, they can tell you anything without judgment or blame. Consider setting a code with your teen that, should they find themselves somewhere unsafe, they can share with you to immediately be picked up, no questions asked. By doing so, you are establishing an open channel of loving and honest communication. Sometimes, that channel turns out to be a lifeline.