

BEGIN THE CONVERSATION WITH CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

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As schedules change and children head back to school and sports programs, now is the time to talk with them about sexual-assault prevention, urges a local resource group.

"From my standpoint everyday is a good day to talk about safety," said Lindsay Palmer, director of education and prevention at the King County Sexual Assault Resource Center (KCSARC). "But I can also understand why it's not necessarily the topic at the dinner table that you want to bring up every day."

Some parents may find broaching the subject of sexual assault daunting or uncomfortable. But, the group has found there are ways to work the topic into conversations with youth in an appropriate way.

Taking cues from KCSARC, Kim, a Renton mother of two, has done just that with her elementary and high school-age children. A victim of sexual assault, she asked only to be known by her first name.

Kim started talking to her children about safety when they were toddlers. Just last year, when her daughter was 9 and her son 13, she revealed to them the abuse she suffered when she was a child.

"I was very young when a pedophile victimized our family," she said. "It has been very powerful for me and for our family to share an appropriate level of detail."

Kim started preparing her children by talking to them first about protecting the area of their body covered by their bathing suits. Then the conversation evolved as they got older to things like using the buddy system and never getting into a car with a stranger. She also looked to the media for ways to open the conversation with her children about inappropriate relationships and abuse.

Kim has sat down with her children and asked them what they thought of a particular news story, how they would have protected themselves and asked whether they would have told her about the incident.

Palmer agrees with Kim's tactics and said talking with children about sexual assault should be an on-going conversation.

The national statistics for child sexual abuse have gone down, Palmer said, and can be attributed to several factors.

The media and parents talking to other parents have raised awareness on the issue.

The "pretty horrific" situations brought in the news "raise the awareness for parents and also organizations that work with youth to say, 'Do we have policies in place, have I talked with my kids about safety'," Palmer said.

Parents encouraging their friends or other family members to talk with their kids about safety has helped too.

It is easier to converse with other parents on the issue when kids are younger, Kim said.

"When the children were more in the pre-school times, I think there were more opportunities for parents to have conversations and bring up these issues," she said. "But as your children age, parenting becomes more of an isolating thing."

This is where having an ongoing open dialogue with your children about their day and their life in general becomes key.

Having this sort of dynamic, Palmer said, will keep parents aware of who is new in their child's life or who is taking a different role in their life.

Sexual assault remains to be the biggest threat from people that the child or family knows.

"When we look at the statistics, we are looking at approximately two-thirds of people who offend youth are known to either that youth or the family in some way or another," said Palmer.

Parents need to keep in mind that trusting adults are needed in order for child to grow up strong, healthy and thriving, Kim said.

The conversation around safety and sexual abuse should not cause anxiety and keep children from feeling they can't rely on adults in their lives, she said.

"You can do it in a way that appropriately prepares them given their age and at the same time as a parent, you can learn signs to see if your child might have been abuse," said Kim.

Renton-based KCSARC is a community sexual-assault program that provides legal advocacy, therapists for children, teens and adults, and family advocates. It also offers education through community presentations. There is a 24-hour Sexual Assault Resource Line at 1-888-99-VOICE (86423) or view resources online.