

HE TOLD ME NOT TO TELL



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King County Sexual Assault Resource Center

A PARENTS' GUIDE FOR TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

My 7-year-old daughter was watching TV with her 25-year-old Uncle Pete. He was babysitting her while we were at the movies. Mary is an active child who really likes her uncle because he wrestles with her. That night, Mary and Pete had a good time wrestling together during the commercials, but things got out of hand. Pete asked Mary to take her clothes off while they wrestled. He told her that she could watch TV until 11 if she did. Mary thought of all those late programs she doesn't usually get to watch – then she thought about the request, got a "funny feeling," as she put it, and told him she didn't want to, and went to bed. The next morning she said to me: "Mom, Uncle Pete asked me to do those funny things you told me about." When I asked her what she mean, she said, "Oh, you know – he wanted me to take my clothes off, but I didn't do it. Are you going to talk to him?" "Yes, I am," I told her, "I'm sure glad you told me." She gave me a hug and said: "Well you know, Mom, he told me not to tell."

Mary was able to prevent a potential sexual assault. She was able to react before she was trapped by uncertainty, shame, or confusion. She knew that her mother would want to hear about what happened, and would believe her. Mary was not taken totally by surprise because her parents had provided her with information about sexual assault.

Most parents have warned their children about strangers:

- Don't take candy from a stranger
- Don't accept a ride from someone you don't know
- Don't let a stranger into the house and so on.

There are some problems with these traditional warnings. First, children often can't tell us just who is a stranger and who isn't. And they often don't know why they are warned about strangers in the first place (They may imagine the worst, a violent attack by a murderer or robber). But, more importantly, the traditional warnings may leave them unprepared for what usually happens.

Most children who are sexually assaulted are taken advantage of by someone they know. Eighty-five percent of sexual assaults on children are by people known to them – often a relative, neighbor or friend of the family who takes advantage of a position of trust over a period of time. Telling our children only about strangers leaves them much more vulnerable than they need to be.

This booklet is a collection of ideas gathered from parents for dealing with the difficult subject of talking to children about sexual assault. We hope this booklet will help parents incorporate information about sexual assault into their general teachings about personal safety.

IT'S HARD TO TALK ABOUT

Perhaps it's hard to talk about sexual assault because our own feelings play such an important part in how we tell our children about it. Many of us have had personal experience with sexual assault. For some, that makes it easier to talk about.

It's important to me to talk about sexual assault with my kids because it happened to me. I want to help them learn to help themselves – so they don't feel helpless like I did.

Other parents must deal with painful feelings about their own victimization before talking to their children about sexual assault. We worry about giving our children more than the "Don't take candy from a stranger" warning, thinking they may become overly suspicious of everyone and lose their ability to trust and share affection spontaneously. Another concern is that talking about sexual assault with young children will cause them to form inaccurate or warped ideas about sex – that it's brutal and scary. Or, they will be confused by information that they are simply too young to understand. For some parents, fears about saying one thing and communicating something entirely different get in the way.

If I ask my son to a sit-down talk, a family meeting, he will know immediately that we're going to talk about something I'm nervous or anxious about.

Sexual abuse is not something most of us talk about.

As a result, children aren't getting much information. But they are being victimized – every day. Chances are that we all know someone who has been a victim even though we may not know that about them. According to researcher John Briere, in the United States, at least one in three females and one in five males is assaulted before reaching age 18. Males are most often the abusers, though we know that women abuse as well. A 2000 study by the U.S. Department of Justice indicates that in more than 90 percent of cases involving sexual abuse against children, the offender is male.

Having information about sexual assault can influence a child's response to the initial approach of a sexual offender. Some assaults will be prevented, because a child who has some awareness of sexual assault is better able to protect him or herself. Even if a child is unable to avoid a first assault, s/he will have the words to tell someone before becoming trapped in years of exploitation and abuse.

WHAT IS THE SEXUAL ASSAULT OF A CHILD

Sexual assault means the forcing of sexual contact. When children are victimized, the sexual contact may involve handling of the child's genitals or requests for sexual handling by an older child or adult. Sometimes the contact is oral sex. Sexual contact includes attempts at penetration of the vagina or anus, but actual penetration is rare. Some kinds of assaults involve no physical contact. A child may be forced to look at the genitals of an older child or adult, or the child may be requested to undress or otherwise expose her/himself.

WHAT WE FEAR

- A dangerous, weird stranger
- Isolated incident
- Out of the blue
- Rare and extreme
- A violent attack

WHAT IS MORE LIKELY TO HAPPEN

- A person they know, often a relative or friend of the family, is more likely the offender
- Over and over again
- A situation that develops gradually, over a period of time
- Frequent incidents. There are many forms of sexual assault
- Subtle, rather than extreme force

The force used by an offender may involve:

- Taking advantage of someone who is younger. When the victim is a child, it is assumed that the age advantage represents force.
- Bribery – "I'll let you watch TV until midnight if you..."
- Threats of harm to the child – "You're really going to get it."
- Harm to the offender – "If you tell, I'll go to jail."
- Withdrawal of affection – "I won't like you any more."
- Break-up of the family – "This would really hurt your mom."
- Taking advantage of the child's lack of knowledge and dependency on adults – "It's OK, everybody does it."
- "I'm just checking you out, now that you're getting older."
- "What's the matter, don't you like me?"
- Breaking down the self-esteem of the child – "If you and your brother were better kids your mother wouldn't be so tired all the time. Then I wouldn't have to do this to you."
- Placing blame on the child – "I won't tell your mother that you did this."
- Taking advantage of the child's need for love and affection – "You're very special and because I like you so much I'm going to share a special secret with you."

From an adult's point of view, these coercive statements might not seem forceful. To a child, they are...

It is often difficult to estimate the damage done to a child by an assault. Often an incident will not come to an adult's attention until sometime after the assault. We haven't in the past known much about how to help an assaulted child talk about her/his feelings. The temptation has been to assume that there is no lasting damage caused by sexual assault. Since it happens so often, some people think it is just part of growing up. However, we have learned from adults who were assaulted as children that the experience can be a major trauma, creating personal difficulties, which might not have existed otherwise. For this reason, it is especially important for parents to talk to their children about sexual assault.

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

Where do I start?

Most people talk to their children about sexual assault *AFTER* it has already happened. It's one of the dangers kids don't hear about *BEFORE* it happens.

Information about sexual assault should be part of every child's basic safety information. Just as rules and information about safety change as a child gets older (from a toddler not allowed near the street to a first grader looking both ways), your child's understanding of sexual assault will change as they mature.

Just as all parents or caretakers teach general safety, this information, in particular, should be shared among the entire family.

When do I start?

You don't need to wait until your kids ask questions about sexual assault – they are unlikely to ask. You can begin discussions at home as early as you think your child might understand. Some of the following suggestions can be used even with a 2-year-old.

How do I start?

Children need a basic working vocabulary for all the body parts. We teach children names for elbows, knees and all the other parts of the body but frequently don't provide names for the genital, anal and breast areas. Lack of acceptable names indicates to children that it's not OK to talk about those parts of the body. Without names it is impossible to talk about sexual assault in the specific terms necessary to provide useful information. Developing a mutual vocabulary can be a beginning task for talking about sexual assault.

When I was growing up there was, for some reason, an aura of embarrassment about one's "personal body parts." Now that I have a daughter, I enjoy sharing accurate information with her about body parts and functions. I don't want her to feel embarrassed about her body like I did when I was a child.

Our hesitation about starting the discussion often has more to do with our own discomfort than with the child's readiness. Sexual issues are awkward for many of us and the topic of sexual assault compounds the difficulty. Most of us also realize that children will know if we're uncomfortable about a subject.

My son and I sit down to talk about lots of things my parents and I never talked about when I was growing up. Even though I can't help but get a little sweaty, I try really hard not to pass along the message that it is not OK to talk about certain parts of his body. I think it's really important for Dads to talk with their kids about this stuff.

Practicing and starting slowly are ways to reduce the discomfort.

I practice in front of a mirror before I talk about hard subjects with my children. Then I get used to hearing the words. It helps me get started.

Finding out what they already understand is another way of starting slowly. No one automatically knows what's going on with children. Find out. Ask questions. You might include questions about sexual assault with questions about other risks your child encounters (crossing busy streets, or petting animals that are not their own pets).

Listen carefully to what your child says. Finding out what level of understanding s/he has can help you decide what information s/he is ready to hear. Then you will know what confusions you may need to clear up before starting with new information.

What do I say?

The idea of explaining what sexual assault is to a child, particularly a young one, may seem strange. But your preschooler is probably already aware of something like it. Most little kids have known the unfairness of someone using their size or their age to get their own way. They probably know what it is like to be bullied into giving up their favorite toy by an older child. You can start in those terms.

Someone might try to touch your crotch... or,

Someone might try to make you touch his penis...

With a school-age child you can begin by clearing up misinformation. You can talk about people who they know instead of strangers. You can talk about subtle kinds of force and manipulation instead of extreme violence. The older your child is, the more likely s/he is to have her/his own notions of what sexual assault is. They have probably taken to heart scary stories about strangers. Most kids, when asked to define the word rape, equate it with murder, torture, or bizarre things done by crazy people.

"A rapist is someone who steals you from your house and takes you away and cuts you into tiny pieces."

It is far less frightening for your child to know what is more likely to happen (having their genitals handled, having someone else expose his genitals) compared to what they imagine.

I find it most useful to develop a definition for myself to work from and then break it into pieces as I talk to the kids. The definition I use is that sexual assault is any adult (or older child) touching my child's genitals, anus or breasts or requesting that my child touch or look at the adult's genitals. I don't use the words sexual assault, but incorporate my value judgments: "It's not fair for someone to ask you to undress for them when you don't know why."

Explaining that the "someone" may be known, liked and trusted is important.

Opportunities to talk come up frequently. Sometimes TV shows or newspaper articles provide openings, or sometimes the things children say may provide a chance to comment. If you are concerned that your child may confuse sex with sexual assault, you can relate the topic to other areas of their lives instead.

On the topic of rape, we explained to our daughter about the violation of her body by another without her permission. We have used the following example:

"If a door is closed, like your bedroom door, then another person should not enter without your permission. This example worked well in talking to her about what constitutes rape. In our discussions, we have talked about uncles, brothers, cousins and neighbors as well as strangers. We have discussed tickling, secrets, exposure of the genitals and petting."

The more specific you are and the more times you talk about it the easier it will be.

WHAT ARE CHILDREN UP AGAINST?

Children often have little control over who touches them, or how or when. Children's efforts to protect themselves are often ignored.

I remember tickling sessions with my mother and two brothers that moved from fun into what seemed like torture. Nobody in my family meant any harm, I'm sure, but my memories are vivid of that terrible feeling of saying "stop" and having everyone ignore it, and feeling as though I would be tickled to death.

They are taught not to argue or fight.

I remember being held by the wrist by a friend of my father's. He wouldn't let me go. I was struggling to get away and he was making it like a wrestling match. I bawled in the bathroom later – I really felt powerless and bullied.

Many sexual assaults take advantage of a child's dependency on adults for protection. Children may feel that parents and other adults are all-powerful, that they have eyes in the back of their heads and that they always know what's going on and think it's all right.

When I was 7 or 8, the man next door liked for me to sit on his lap when he and my parents were having coffee. He liked to hug me. I liked him too, but sometimes I felt awkward and wanted to get away. I remember looking around the room to check out other people's reactions and to see what my parents thought. I wondered why no one said anything. I didn't know what to do, it never occurred to me that my parents didn't know what was going on.

Adults make all the rules for children. They are always right. It is difficult for kids to keep control of their own bodies.

I was smaller than other boys my age. He would move me by shifting his weight, or moving in his chair, or crossing his legs. He would put me where he wanted me. I didn't know what erections were or what to call them then, but I could feel something warm. It felt strange to me, pleasant and scary at the same time. I knew there was something wrong, but I was afraid. Grown-ups told kids when they did something wrong. Kids didn't tell grown-ups.

HELPING CHILDREN PROTECT THEMSELVES

Children have learned to ignore their own feelings in uncomfortable situations, instead of recognizing them as warnings. You can help your child to know: "If you think it feels funny, you're right and it's OK to act on that feeling of discomfort." As an adult, you need to recognize and validate for the child that any unwanted touch is not right. You also need to keep in mind that not all unwanted touch is illegal, though it is inappropriate.

"Your body belongs to you, you can decide who touches it."

You can assure them that they can make decisions about their bodies, and mean business.

- If someone wants to pat your bottom, you can tell them not to.
- If someone pokes your penis, you can say, "Don't do that to me."
- If someone older wants to touch you with his penis, you can run away from him.
- If someone you know wants to rub your crotch, it's OK to say "no."

You can tell them they can depend on their own family rules for protection. They can use them to set limits. They can say, "I'm not allowed to do that," even if they don't know if they are or not. Or "My mom wouldn't like that." "Your mom wouldn't like that."

"It's a good idea to tell someone."

It's important that your child know that s/he can come to you or someone else (relatives, teachers, friends) with questions about sexual assault. "There may be things throughout your life that you may not want to tell me, but there are other people to ask for help."

You may want to talk about secrets versus surprises. Surprises are for birthdays or Christmas, when everybody wants to keep quiet for a little while about a present for someone. "It's fun to have secrets with kids your own age. Secrets are something it's not fair for an older child or an adult to make you keep. Surprises are fun, but sometimes keeping secrets means hiding things that shouldn't be hidden."

If your child knows that s/he will be believed, s/he might tell you early on about behavior leading up to an assault, and that may prevent a single assault from becoming an ongoing pattern of abuse.

"It's not your fault."

Let your children know it's not their fault if someone touches them in a way that confuses them, or is not OK with them. It is also not their fault even if they didn't know the touch was OK.

You can remind your children that even adults make mistakes. Parents can be wrong sometimes, too. Trusted people make mistakes, not just mean people.

Reassure your child that even if you're angry, you'll help.

All of the above can help influence those less frequent contacts with strangers, too.

I teach a class for kids that include the information about sexual assault and some practicing of body awareness exercises. I had a boy in that class who met up with a stranger in a car on the way to school. The man pulled up next to him and said in a very loud voice, "GET IN MY CAR." He said "NO" and ran to school as fast as he could. This young boy was so proud of himself that he told the principal and teacher, and together they called everybody – me, his parents, the police, the local sexual assault crisis center.

WHAT CAN I DO BESIDES TALK?

You can demonstrate to your child that you will provide some protection from an unwanted touch when you are around and that you will back up your child's request not to be touched.

It seems many people tend to regard children as objects. When a child cries because a stranger is picking her/him up (the grocery clerk, long lost Aunt Mabel, etc.) the child is labeled as cranky, fussy or unfriendly. Such situations have caused the protective side of me to come out and ask that the "toucher" please listen to my child for what she is truly telling us.

You can back up your child's right to say "no" to a request for touch that is not wanted.

We were leaving after a dinner with some old family friends. I noticed my youngest daughter was called over to Bob and he was whispering in her ear. I saw her take her shy, "No, I don't want to" pose. He was pointing to his cheek saying "Come on, right here." She said "No" again. I got up on my feet quietly and said, "Come here, let's get ready to go." I knew Bob meant no harm, but I didn't want my daughter to learn to kiss anyone she didn't want to, and I wanted her to know that I would provide her some protection.

You can also play games and tell stories, which demonstrate what children can do for themselves.

"WHAT IF" GAME

If you ask a child "What if you were walking down the street and someone asked you to come inside their house to see the new kittens? What would you do?" most children would answer, "I'd go see the kittens!"

Parents can use this opportunity to guide the child to the answer they would like, such as "I would say 'No thank you. I have to check with my Mom and Dad.'"

You can ask other questions:

“What if your baby sitter asked you to undress so that you could play a special game with her that would be a secret?”

“What if you were playing somewhere you weren’t supposed to be, and a man came along and asked you to look at pictures of people who didn’t have their clothes on? What would you do?”

This is also a good opportunity to make it clear that you want to know any time s/he is bothered by anything, no matter what the circumstances.

Our family looks forward to playing “What if…” games during dinner. My husband and I bring questions of sexuality and sexual assault intermittently into the conversation. For instance, I might ask, “What if we are separated in a department store?” followed by “What if someone is touching you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable?” The children delight in asking “what if” questions of us, too. They can express their concerns in a fun kind of way, and get satisfying answers in return.

“What if” games help encourage kids to rely on themselves and give them confidence in their ability to care for themselves. They are also an interesting way to find out what your child knows already and what s/he is curious about.

You can provide your child with physical experiences that can help counter the powerlessness kids often feel and help them to feel strong and confident about their bodies. They are in control; when they say stop, it’s heard.

PHYSICALLY ACTIVE PLAY

Children need to build and gain a sense of the strength of their own bodies. They need to learn that their bodies are their own and that they have boundaries, which it is their right to enforce. Encouraging running, jumping, climbing and other strength and endurance-building activities can give children confidence in running and their own ability to defend their boundaries. This kind of activity is noisy play. Shouting, screaming and yelling are natural partners of running and climbing. From this kind of play a child knows that, in some circumstances at least, her/his voice can be loud, her/his body can move quickly.

STORY TELLING

If you like telling your children stories, you could tell one that models a child avoiding a potential assault. The idea is to provide a positive example, not to try to scare them into acting a certain way.

Since our son was young, we have made up stories to tell him. He is always in the story. The ones he listens to best are about getting lost, being afraid of the dark, being abandoned, problems with strangers, etc.

When we moved, we told stories about moving. We’ve also told one about a boy who has a babysitter who keeps trying to get him to do things he doesn’t want to do. The boy is really confused, but works out some things to do and finally gets some help from his parents.

STORYTELLING and “WHAT IF” games will point out problems. To help your child work out solutions, you might give examples:

- If someone touches you in a way that makes you uncomfortable, you can tell him or her to stop.
- If people pretend to touch you by accident, it’s OK to say no.
- You can firmly lift someone’s hand off your body if you don’t want them to touch you.

Sometimes it feels funny just to say “No.” It helps to practice.

“SAYING NO” GAME

Take turns with someone; ask a favor of each other – just pretending. Let the answer always be “No.” Try saying “No” in different ways. Help each other to say it firmly, like you mean it.

“Thank you for asking me, but the answer is no.” “No, I don’t feel like it.”

WAYS KIDS TELL SOMEONE THEY NEED HELP

Most children don’t tell anybody about inappropriate touching, often because they think no one will believe them.

“I told my mom and she said she never wanted to hear talk like that again.”

Children may not have the vocabulary to talk about it, and don’t know how to tell. They may tell in vague terms.

“I don’t like Mr. Smith anymore.”

If they get an equally vague or corrective response they may not say anything more.

Sometimes children may think they have told, but have not been understood.

“Mr. Jones wears funny underwear,” or “Mr. Jones took silly pictures of us today.”

If they’ve been taught to always obey their elders because grown-ups know what’s best (and make all the rules) they may take to heart the abuser’s assurances that “it’s OK” or they may give promises not to tell, which they are afraid to break.

“He told me it was our special secret.”

Often the telling will not be in words, but by a change in behavior. Since children are not usually able to tell directly, it helps to be sensitive to their signals:

- A child may be reluctant to go to a particular place, or to be with a particular person.
- A child may show an unusual interest in the genitals of other people, or of animals. S/he may express affection in inappropriate ways, such as “French kissing” or fondling of a parent’s genitals.
- The child may be diagnosed as having a sexually transmitted disease. If they have an STD, they caught it from someone – either another child, or an adult.

The following, with the exception of sexually transmitted diseases, are general indicators that the child may be troubled – though not necessarily about a sexual assault. If you can recognize some of these signs early, you may be able to prevent future assaults.

General indicators can include:

- Sleep disturbances (nightmares, bed-wetting, fear of sleeping alone, needing a night-light)
- Loss of appetite, or a sudden increase in appetite
- Lots of new fears – needing more reassurance than in the past
- Returning to younger, more baby-ish behavior
- Suddenly turning against one parent

IF YOU LEARN YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN ASSAULTED

Finding out that your child has been victimized can be overwhelming. What needs to be done immediately is to reassure the child that you:

- Believe what s/he has told you
- Know it is not her/his fault
- Are glad s/he has told you about it
- Are sorry about what happened
- Will do your best to protect and support her/him

Because sexual assault is so disruptive, you also may need support. It is important to unburden yourself of feelings you may be having (guilt, anger, grief) both for your own sake, and so that you can better support your child. Your family, friends, and counselors at agencies such as sexual assault or rape crisis centers can all help.

You may also realize that the touching your child has experienced is not a legally defined offense. It is important, though, to let your child know that you believe that any unwanted touch is not right and that you will protect him/her.

You may be unsure of how to help your child. One important way is to quietly encourage your child to talk about the assault, without pressuring her/him to talk. If your child doesn’t talk about the experience, you may want to provide an opportunity, something like *“If you don’t feel like talking about this right now, I understand. But if it begins to trouble you, or you’re thinking about it a lot, it’s important that you tell me, because I want to help.”*

While making it clear that the fault lies with the offender, remember that often he is someone known to the child, trusted, or loved. Angry threats about what should happen to the offender (jail, etc.) might cause your child to feel guilty about telling. Your response should place the blame and responsibility with the offender in a realistic way: *“What Uncle John did was unfair. We’re going to get him some help so he doesn’t hurt you or anyone else again.”*

REPORTING?

Most states require that certain professionals report suspected child abuse to the police or Children’s Protective Services. As a parent it is important to know that any professional whose support you seek is mandated to report the sexual abuse of your child. The purpose of this reporting requirement is to protect your child from further harm. It is also possible for you to report directly to either resource.

Both Children’s Protective Services and law enforcement officials are trained to deal sensitively with you and your child. Very likely the parent or adult making the report will be interviewed prior to an interview of the child. At this time it is appropriate for you to ask what to expect next. Ideally, trained personnel will do the interviews. It is the goal of the criminal justice system to keep the interviews of your child to a minimum.

A MEDICAL EXAM?

A good medical check-up can be reassuring to both you and your child. The primary focus of the exam should be your child’s well being. The exam should take into account the child’s feelings at this time. The medical examination generally serves two main purposes. First, it is to check your child’s physical condition and to insure proper treatment if any injuries or health conditions exist. Secondly, it may be necessary to document the results of the exam for legal proceedings.

If it is not a legal or medical emergency, the child’s regular pediatrician is very likely the best person to do the examination. Most children benefit from the familiarity of their own physician. The exam, then, will feel more like a routine health care check-up than another personal intrusion. However, keep in mind that some general physicians feel uncomfortable or unprepared to do exams when child sexual abuse is suspected. If this is the case you may have to seek alternative physicians who can be sensitive to your child’s feelings and are experienced with this issue.

In some instances a forensic, or legal evidence-gathering exam will be requested for Children’s Protective Services or law enforcement. The purpose of this exam is to collect legal evidence that may be used in criminal proceedings. The exams are usually performed by trained specialists who are very concerned about your child’s emotional well being during the process of the examination. They are sensitive to your child’s needs and feelings. They will explain the exam in a way that will make sense to your child’s age and developmental stage. Although the primary purpose of the exam is legal, the physician is also concerned about your child’s general physical health and will tend to this as well.

If the assault occurred within 72 hours, CPS or law enforcement may request that the child be examined in a hospital emergency room. The purpose for this type of crisis response is two-fold. They are concerned that your child gets immediate health care treatment and also that evidence can be collected, preserved and documented. Most often, children at this time will benefit from the presence of a calm and supportive parent or person of significance to them. Inform your child of the events that are taking place, keeping in mind the child's comfort and level of understanding.

WHAT ABOUT THE LONG TERM?

Counseling may be recommended for a child who has been sexually abused. A therapist may be able to offer the child an opportunity to discuss what happened, what the child fears or what about that experience concerns the child. Parents or caretakers may learn skills to deal with any changes in the child's behavior during this difficult time. This can be a supportive and healing experience for both the child and family members.

Even though a child receives counseling when the abuse is disclosed, there may be other times in her/his life when the abuse again becomes an issue. These times are often defined by developmental stages. A child of 5 may not be concerned again about the abuse until s/he reaches adolescence, a period of developing sexual identity and learning about relationship. When these things come up, and it is perfectly natural that they do, it is a good time to check in with a therapist. This does not mean that the survivor of childhood sexual abuse is permanently damaged. It does mean that there are recurring concerns, as there might be for other people with different life experiences, but the survivor's revolve around the abuse.

OFFENDER INFORMATION

Sex offenders are not the dirty old men we picture. Many times they are upstanding members of the community. Even people with strong moral and religious beliefs can be offenders. Sometimes the offender is a teenager. Offenders are usually "normal" in most respects. Most offenders will strongly deny the assault. If pressured, they may admit some part but:

- "It wasn't serious, it was no big deal;" or
- "It didn't hurt the child;" or
- "It was the kid's fault."

Offenders are very convincing, so convincing that you may have serious doubts about whether to believe your child. Remember that children rarely lie about such a serious matter.

Even when the facts are beyond doubt, confronting the offender often finds them:

- Claiming to be sorry.
- Promising not to do it again.
- Blaming alcohol or other drugs.

Even if the offender claims to be remorseful, we know that they are likely to continue to repeat their behavior unless someone stops them. Most will not stop voluntarily, but need legal pressure. There are treatment programs for offenders in the community.

It's hard to associate sexual crimes with young people. When the victim and the offender are both young, parents may wonder if the activity is normal sexual exploration or exploitation.

It is exploitation if an older child is involved in sexual activity:

- With someone who is much younger.
- With force or bribery involved.
- By telling the younger child that if they tell, they'll get in trouble or be beaten up.
- Done while the older child had some kind of responsibility for the younger child.

Adolescents who may be at risk for offending (many may even have experienced abuse themselves) may include a child who:

- Is a loner
- Is picked on by other kids
- Is having school difficulties
- Spends a good deal of time with children who are much younger

Pay attention to behaviors that are of concern.

- Ask questions
- Use community resources
- Take action

A sexual offender may be anyone. It is important for us to pay attention to messages we get from our children and to believe what they tell us. Only when we can actively intervene, support our children and take responsibility for the protection of all children, will we reduce the risk of sexual abuse.

For additional copies contact:

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Business Line (Voice/TTY)

www.kcsarc.org

24-hour Sexual Assault Resource Line

888.99.VOICE

Toll-free in Western Washington only

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