

TALKING TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual assault is not an easy topic to bring up with your children and no one wants to believe that their child might be vulnerable to assault. Yet, young people need information to help them reduce their risk to assault and parents can be one of the best resources for providing guidance.

WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Sexual assault is any unwanted or forced sexual contact including touching or fondling. Rape is forced intercourse. For adolescents, force often involves emotional manipulation. Any sexual activity without someone's consent is sexual assault.

HOW VULNERABLE ARE YOUNG PEOPLE?

As many as one in three girls and one in five boys may experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16. In addition, about one in four high school and college age women will experience rape or attempted rape. Most sexual assaults happen to people under the age of 18, and both young women and young men are vulnerable.

WHEN SHOULD I TALK TO MY KIDS?

It is never too early to begin to give young people information that can help them to stay safe. Important points that you can reinforce throughout your child's development are:

- Your body is your own and you can set limits about who touches you.
- You deserve to be respected. It is okay to leave and tell someone to stop if they make you feel disrespected, unsafe, or uncomfortable.
- You can always come to me with problems and concerns of any kind.
- Older children and especially teens will need more specific information about sexual assault.

HOW DO I BRING IT UP?

Talking to your older child or teen about rape doesn't have to be a one-time conversation, and you don't have to say everything at once. Instead, open up an on-going dialog about safety over time. You can:

- Use natural moments to bring up sexual assault, such as a new item about a rape, attempted abduction, or a television program containing a reference to sexual abuse. Ask your child what they have heard and what they know. Give them the opportunity to ask questions.
- Let your child know that you have read this article and want to check in with them about safety. Again, ask for their thoughts as you share your own.
- Link a discussion of safety with other safety conversations that you have such as biking, friends, or strangers.
- Be open and available for your children to come to you. Reinforce the idea that they can talk to you any time about the tough things on their minds.

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW?

Teens need to know that sexual assault is forced, unwanted sexual touching or intercourse, and that no one has the right to try to trick, force, or coerce them into doing something they do not want to do.

Young people need to know that sexual assault can happen even with people they know and trust and that regardless, an assault is NEVER a victim's fault.

Young people need to know specific behaviors that are inappropriate, or that they could be warning signs that someone might try to take advantage of them. It is important for them to be able to identify early warning signs of disrespect, such as:

- Someone who tries to isolate them from friends and family, or get them alone to a deserted place.
- Someone who tries to give them presents, food, and/or drugs.
- Someone who doesn't respect their opinions or limits. Someone who ignores or pushes past the boundaries that your child sets.

Young people need to know they can be assertive if they feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or disrespected. Encourage them to trust their instincts and to immediately tell someone who is distressing to stop. Encourage them to leave unsafe situations right away, and to tell an adult about what occurred.

Make talking to youth about sexual assault a plan in your household, for safety's sake.