



# SAFEGUARDING YOUR CHILD

A guide for parents/guardians whose  
child was or may have been sexually abused



CANADIAN CENTRE *for* CHILD PROTECTION®

*Helping families. Protecting children.*

This booklet builds on *Child Sexual Abuse: Picking up the Pieces* and helps parents/guardians continue on the healing journey, addressing issues that may present as their child gets older. This includes rebuilding personal boundaries, addressing concerns surrounding supervision, considering their child's digital presence as they grow up, and providing a basic understanding of child development to help parents/guardians determine if sexualized behaviours are problematic or age appropriate.

- 1 SAFEGUARDING YOUR CHILD
- 2 AS YOUR CHILD DEVELOPS
- 3 THE ROLE OF PERSONAL BOUNDARIES
- 9 SUPERVISION AND SAFEGUARDING
- 12 SAFEGUARDING YOUR CHILD WHEN OUTSIDE YOUR CARE
- 16 SAFETY WITH INTERNET-ENABLED DEVICES
- 22 TYPICAL CHILD SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR (4-12 YEARS OF AGE)
- 26 TEACH YOUR CHILD ABOUT PERSONAL SAFETY
- 28 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

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## SAFEGUARDING YOUR CHILD

When a child experiences child sexual abuse, it impacts the entire family. Discovering that your child has experienced abuse is devastating. It can leave you feeling lost about what to do now and how to help your child.

The information provided in this guide is intended to support you in your parenting journey and to promote healing for your family. There are some areas that require closer consideration when your child has experienced sexual abuse. As such, topics covered in this guide include personal boundaries, adult supervision, children's use of internet-enabled devices, and child sexual behaviours. Establishing healthy personal boundaries and providing age-appropriate supervision are pivotal to helping your child restore a sense of security.

## TRUTHS

Parents sometimes worry that their child will never be the same and will forever be identified solely as a survivor of abuse. **It is an experience they have had, but it does not define who they are or will be. They are, and will be, so much more than their abuse experience.**

### Remember:

- Healing is possible.
- Healing is a process that takes time.
- During the healing process, it is common for children to have good days and bad days. Children may feel like they are spinning in circles one day, feeling good the next day, and then feeling back to where they started the following day.

# As Your Child Develops

When a child experiences sexual abuse they may develop coping behaviours in order to manage from day to day. As a parent/caregiver, it can be difficult to know what is typical for your child's development and what is a result of their abuse experience. Constantly wondering whether your child's behaviour is typical or abuse-related not only adds a great deal of stress, but can actually interfere with your ability to respond appropriately to the behaviour.

As emotional, psychological, and/or physical effects can show up at new stages in a child's development, it is important to consult with your primary care provider and/or counsellor at each new developmental stage. As your child grows up, you (and your child) may need help understanding and managing new information. Your primary care provider and/or counsellor can provide both support and recommendations to help your child move through each stage successfully.





# The Role of Personal Boundaries

A child's experience of sexual abuse can impair their understanding of personal boundaries. As a result, children who have been abused may find it difficult to set their own personal boundaries and to respect the boundaries of others. When sexual abuse occurs, inappropriate behaviour is distorted and normalized. If boundaries have been impaired, you may notice that your child:

- Is overly quick to trust, builds intense relationships with new people, and is accepting of whatever information is shared
- Is mistrusting, which prevents them from engaging with others
- Does not demonstrate separate boundaries from others, which can be expressed as being excessively accommodating to whatever others want to do without consideration for their own limits or comfort level
- Does not show respect for privacy for themselves or others
- Does not respond to limits placed on behaviour or when others attempt to re-direct behaviour

## DISCUSSING BOUNDARIES WITH CHILDREN

### Provide Guidance

When a child has difficulty with boundaries there is no quick fix. To begin to repair their sense of personal boundaries, children need to learn and practice self-protection skills. Helping them build their confidence and sense of self takes a lot of patience and practice. It requires on-going, consistent and gentle behavioural redirection, modelling, and praise. Point out to your child when others are appropriate with personal boundaries, as well as when they demonstrate appropriate social, emotional, or physical boundaries with others.

### Practice What You Preach

Healthy boundaries are the key to a child's sense of safety and security. Children rely upon the guidance and judgment of adults to keep them safe. If you are uncomfortable with the way an adult is interacting with your child or another child, **do something about it.**

Adults who respect children's personal boundaries help reinforce how children should expect to be treated. When adults demonstrate unhealthy boundaries with children, it compromises their sense of safety and security.

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#### **Healthy adult behaviour with children includes:**

- Being friendly, not friends
- Respecting a child's limits
- Modelling healthy personal boundaries (e.g., changing, sleeping, bathing, possessions, thoughts, and emotions)
- Re-establishing boundaries when kids push the limits



## Explaining Boundaries

Personal boundaries are broken into **four** areas that include:

### 1 **Physical boundaries:**

Respecting our bodies and our personal belongings, and those of others.

#### **Examples of adults crossing physical boundaries:**

- ◆ Insisting children hug or kiss others
- ◆ Being excessively affectionate and ignoring a child's signs of discomfort
- ◆ Exposing a child to violence and aggression

## 2 Emotional boundaries:

Respecting our private thoughts and feelings, and those of others.

### Examples of adults crossing emotional boundaries:

- ♦ Using shame (e.g., “I can’t believe you would do that! What kind of a person are you?”)
- ♦ Using sarcasm (e.g., “Way to go Einstein. A 2-year-old knows how to do that.”)
- ♦ Using guilt (e.g., “I do so much for you. Can’t you do this one thing for me?”)
- ♦ Demeaning someone (e.g., “You may as well quit. You have no talent anyway.”)
- ♦ Placing a child in a role as an adult’s confidant/best friend (e.g., confiding about financial problems or relationship problems)
- ♦ Body shaming (e.g., “You’re fat.” “Look at that stomach.”)

### 3 Sexual boundaries:

Understanding sexual consent (including in relation to the age of protection/consent), and the harm of exposure to sexually explicit content.

#### Examples of adults crossing sexual boundaries:

- ◆ Telling a child sexual jokes
- ◆ Showing a child sexually graphic pictures
- ◆ Sharing adult-level sexual information with or around a child
- ◆ Engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child
- ◆ Watching pornography in the presence of a child
- ◆ Sending sexual pictures, texts, or emails to a child
- ◆ Engaging in sexual activity with a child

### 4 Social boundaries:

Adjusting our interactions with others depending on the type of relationship or roles we have with them.

#### Examples of adults crossing social boundaries:

- ◆ Repeatedly using poor judgment when interacting with children
- ◆ Asking personal questions to people they do not know well
- ◆ Embarrassing, humiliating, or shaming a child in front of others
- ◆ Walking in on someone changing
- ◆ Sending or posting personal pictures of others
- ◆ Distorting a child's views of other adults in their life

**Note:** Be respectful and follow your child's lead as they begin to seek privacy and start to feel embarrassed being naked or bathing in front of you.

## Responding to Concerns when a Boundary is Broken

If you, or your child, feel uncomfortable because of an interaction with an adult (e.g., an adult makes an inappropriate sexualized remark to the child), let the adult know you are not comfortable with what transpired and re-establish boundaries between them and your child.

People often question themselves or are reluctant to talk about situations or relationships they question between an adult and a child. They want to avoid interfering or meddling. There may be an element of discomfort in raising your concerns; however, by doing so you are showing your child they have the right to establish their own boundaries and be treated with respect.





# Supervision and Safeguarding

Supervision is a key element in the personal safety of all children, but is **even more necessary for children who have experienced sexual abuse**. Children who have experienced sexual abuse have an increased vulnerability for re-victimization because their boundaries and development have been disrupted. Because such disruptions can impair their capacity to self-protect, parents and caregivers need to establish a more protective environment for their children. This means direct adult supervision and support from many parties is needed.

During the healing process:

- 1** Establish a team of people to be a part of the child's safety circle. This may include family members, school personnel, friends, a therapist, your health care provider, victim services workers, law enforcement, etc.
- 2** Pay attention to internet use and mobile devices. With technology so seamlessly woven into the lives of children, adult supervision is critical. It is important to understand the capabilities of the technology your child is using, and the associated safety considerations.
- 3** Provide a safe and supportive environment for the child. This is essential for helping to restore their personal boundaries and strengthen their self-protection skills.



## Supervision and Stages of Development

Parental supervision is fundamental to protecting children because it provides safety, support, predictability, and structure in children's lives. Balancing children's needs for independence and safety is difficult. While you want to avoid being over protective, you also do not want to be under protective. This balance needs to be revisited and adjusted often. While required levels of supervision will vary based on the age and needs of individual children, what follows are general supervision guidelines.

### 4 to 6 years old:

Direct supervision is required, and children should always be in view when playing in the backyard, on the street, at the playground, in the house, etc.

### 7 to 10 years old:

Direct and indirect supervision is required. As children begin to have playdates at friends' houses and are under the supervision of others, build in check-in times to connect with them while they are away. This will allow for indirect supervision and monitoring.

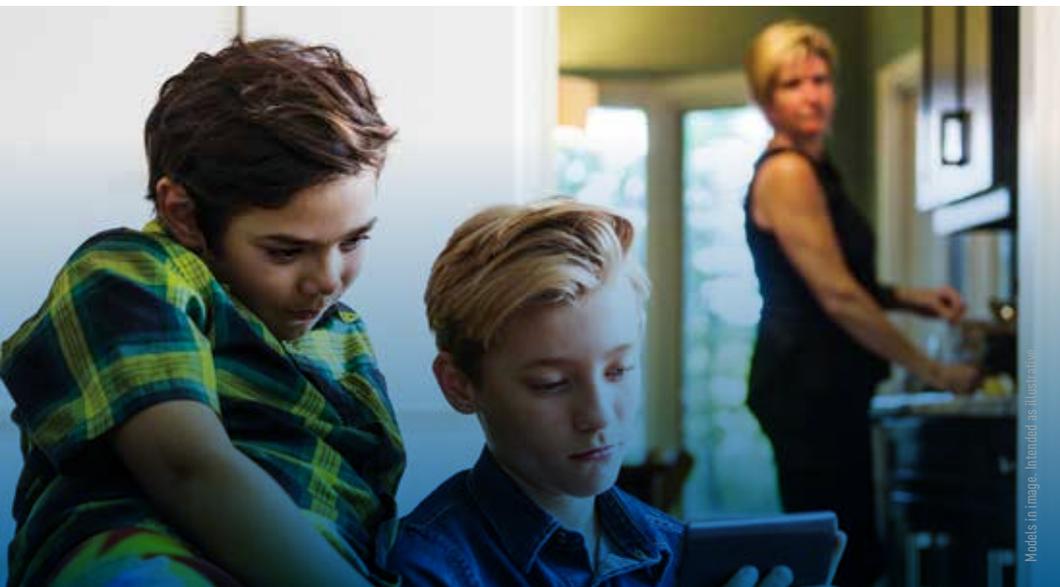
### 11 to 12 years old:

Children start seeking more independence. Parental supervision and making yourself visible is important, but will often be less direct. Know where they are, what they are doing, who they are with, and build in regular check-in times. Make yourself visible when children have friends over and keep an ear open to what is going on.

### 13 to 16 years old:

As youth begin to separate from parents and peers have increased influence, parental supervision, monitoring, and making yourself visible continue to be important. Adolescence is a time of increased vulnerability for sexual harassment and abuse from peers and others. For youth, this can include sexting or sextortion.<sup>1</sup> Keep tabs on where they are, who they are with, and build in check-in times. Be present when they have friends over so you can check in on them. Supervision helps keep behaviour in check and reduces the likelihood of children making unsafe choices that might result in an unsafe or harmful situation.

1 Phippen, A. (2012). *Sexting: An exploration of practices, attitudes and influences*. London, UK: NSPCC; Bush, M. & Russell, L. (2016). *Resilience for the Digital World*. London, UK: YoungMinds and Ecorys.





# Safeguarding Your Child When Outside Your Care

There are important considerations for ways to safeguard your child when they are not in your care. These include being aware of the protective practices and appropriate behaviour guidelines within programs and services in which your child is participating.

## Selecting Babysitters

Important considerations:

- Avoid posting ads or searching for babysitters online.
- Inquire about babysitters known within the neighbourhood.
- Speak to other people who have hired the babysitter.
- If possible, meet with the babysitter and their parents.
- Have the babysitter over a few times to play with your child when you are home.
- Consider setting parameters (e.g., the babysitter does not bathe or change your child into their pajamas; you do that before you leave, the babysitter does not take pictures or videos of the child with personal devices).
- Call and speak to your child before bed. If you are not able to call, arrange for someone else to do so (such as a grandparent). Your child needs a built in check-in while you are out.



## Selecting Programs and Activities

Important considerations:

- What steps does the organization take to screen employees/volunteers?
- What strategies, policies, and safety plans does the organization have in place for:
  - ♦ Transportation of children?
  - ♦ One-on-one time with children?
  - ♦ Changing and showering needs?
  - ♦ Overnight trips?
  - ♦ Communication with children/family outside program activities (including texting, emailing, using social networking sites)?
  - ♦ Picture taking?
  - ♦ Any extended contact staff may have with children outside of their role?
- How does the organization communicate issues or concerns to parents when an incident or situation takes place?

*For more information, visit [commit2kids.ca](http://commit2kids.ca).*



## Arranging Playdates and Sleepovers

Important considerations:

- Who is supervising the kids? Will anyone else be there (e.g., houseguests)?
- Establish check-in times where you call to speak with your child.
- Establish a signal for your child to communicate to you if they want to come home. Signals might include your child phoning you to tell you they have a headache or stomach pain, or an agreed upon text message.
- Make arrangements so they can be picked up at any time.
- Let your child know it is okay if they decide they want to come home.

As your child increases time away from home playing at friends' houses establish check-in times where you can call to speak with them.



Models in image. Intended as illustrative.

## Helping Your Teen Safely Seek Babysitting Jobs

Important considerations:

- Avoid posting online or responding to online ads.
- Inquire about babysitting jobs connected to people known by others within the neighbourhood.
- Collect information about where they are babysitting, the address, and have a way to contact them while they are there. Meet the parent if you can.
- Be available for your teen to contact you or someone in their safety circle in case they have questions and need support while babysitting.



# Safety with Internet-enabled Devices

How your child develops their online presence and uses the internet requires parental involvement. If your child's abuse was recorded and shared online, safeguarding them from overexposure online is necessary. While most experiences children have on the internet are positive, it is still necessary for parents to be aware of the risks and what to teach children about encountering unsafe situations online.

Your child's online presence needs careful monitoring and access to online apps needs to be controlled to reduce their risk of re-victimization. Consider the following:

- Be selective about the information shared about your child on social media and how recognizable your child is in order to reduce the risk of the information being misused by others.
- Some social media platforms have sections where you can post a bio, all of which may be public, even if the account itself is set to private. Many youth use that section to post usernames for other social media where they can be contacted (or age, location, name of school, or phone number), so check this as well.



**Tip: Pay attention to excessive time spent in the bathroom. Reports processed by Cybertip.ca indicate many nude selfies of teens are taken in the bathroom mirror.**



Model in image. Intended as illustrative.

## Communication with Others

To increase your child's safety online and reduce opportunities for victimization:

- Reassure your child that they can come to you for help or to discuss any situation they encounter.
- Discuss ways to get out of uncomfortable conversations or situations online.
- Review and try out any apps your child is using to ensure they are age appropriate.
- Ensure that you understand how the safety controls of the apps work and how they can be enabled/disabled.
- Avoid apps that do not have privacy/safety controls.
- Limit your child's access to social media and do not allow them to create their own accounts without your oversight.
- Ensure you are involved in setting up the controls for each of your child's social accounts.

- Restrict all of your child’s social accounts to friends they know in person to reduce access to the account from others they do not know.
- Regularly review apps to ensure you are implementing any new privacy/safety controls available.
- Supervise online activity.
- Have regular conversations about safety risks and strategies.
- Discuss the risks of having sexually explicit conversations with people online or meeting up with someone in person who they first meet online (ages 10 and up).\*
- Discuss that pornography they may come across online is not realistic, nor a reflection of a healthy sexual relationship (ages 10 and up).\*



Models in image. Intended as illustrative.

Sign up for [Cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca) **ALERTS**  to stay on top of the concerning online trends impacting the personal safety of children and youth.

\* Age 10 is an approximate age only, and it is expected caregivers will exercise discretion based on their child’s level of maturity.

## Online Games

Other areas to monitor are online games and gaming consoles that are internet-enabled. Consider the following:

- Take interest in what your child is doing online instead of just saying “no.”
- For consoles, set up parental controls and create passwords for the parental control features. You can control online access by using the block and/or restrict features available on most video game consoles.
- Know your child’s passwords, screen names, and the friends they are playing against and chatting with.
- Review games to ensure they are age appropriate.
- Review the game’s guidelines and see if there is an option to report inappropriate activity.
- Consider differences in features between the desktop and app versions of the game.
- Seek games that offer the ability to block or restrict individuals who can play with your child and allow you to mute other individuals from chatting with them.
- Consider the additional risks if the game has a chat feature and whether it’s open chat or users send private messages.
- Discuss the risks of meeting people online. Others can easily misrepresent themselves even if the game is intended for a specific age group.



## Exposure to Sexually Explicit Material

Some children who have experienced sexual abuse may have been exposed to sexually explicit material as part of the abuse process. For some children this material has been normalized and as such they may continue to seek it out online. Some children whose abuse has been recorded may be particularly sensitive and upset by exposure to pornography or by others looking at pornography.

Keep in mind that pornography is readily available and unregulated online. About one in three children is exposed to pornography by the age of 10.<sup>2</sup> This can be confusing and distressing for children as they are not developmentally ready to process such explicit material. Stay calm and let your child know you understand how this can happen while online and that they can come to you if this happens to them. Let them know that they will not be in trouble. Sometimes children are too embarrassed to talk to their caregivers about sensitive topics, and this is where a circle of safe adults is helpful.

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2 Skau, B. (2007). Who Has Seen What When? Pornography's Contribution to the Social Construction of Sexuality During Childhood and Adolescence. *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*. 1044.



Model in image. Intended as illustrative.

## Conduct Online

As children and youth begin to seek intimacy and closer relationships, technology is often incorporated to bridge the communication between peers. Behaviour is generally less restricted online, which can lead to sexual experimentation, including sending sexual pictures or sexual video chatting. Once images/videos are shared with others, control is lost and the media can easily be sent to others without consent.

Children and teens who have experienced childhood sexual abuse may be more vulnerable to being coerced and manipulated to send sexually explicit content. Children may worry about others recognizing them online or be triggered by being asked for “sexy” pics. Sexually explicit pictures or recordings of children under 18 are typically illegal, and any device or online program that enables communicating, recording, or sharing photos requires supervision.

Safety suggestions include:

- Supervise and monitor all internet-enabled devices.
- Discuss the risk of losing control of material that is shared online and how easily it can be misused.



**Tip:** Disable Wi-Fi at a specified time each evening so all devices are restricted. This fosters a healthy balance with internet use, promotes healthy sleeping routines, and reinforces parental supervision and monitoring.

**Note:** It is important not to blame children for being responsive to attention and affection as this is understandable. No child has the capacity to realize the full scope of what they are getting into when they are engaging with an adult who is attempting to manipulate them.



# Typical Child Sexual Behaviour (4-12 years of age)

While some children who have experienced sexual abuse may not exhibit any behavioural changes, some may begin to act out problematic sexual behaviour. A basic understanding of typical child sexual development will help you recognize when certain behaviour may be concerning.

## Children 4–5 Years of Age

The sexual development of preschool children is typically based on learning and curiosity, including exploring their own bodies and other preschool children's bodies (e.g., looking at private parts, pulling pants down). This type of activity is typically brief, with young children being easily redirected if the other child shows little interest. This behaviour is generally not about sexual pleasure since sexual pleasure is beyond their level of development.

If, however, preschool children have knowledge or information about sexual activity (i.e., what it feels, sounds, tastes, smells, or looks like), it is more likely that they have learned this information through exposure or experience. Gently establish boundaries so they are not overexposing other children to that level of information.

**Note:** *While children do not understand it, they may experience sexual pleasure. Carefully consider how you talk to children about sexual behaviour to avoid inciting shame.*

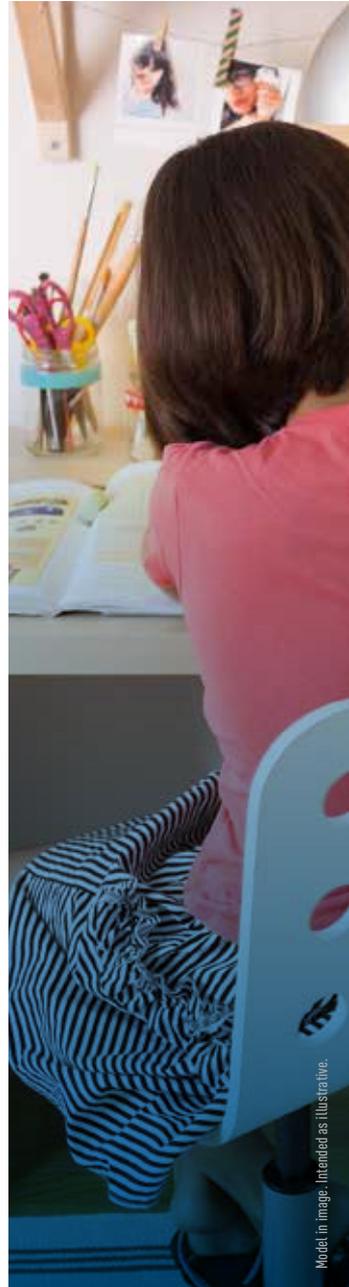
Additional concerning behaviour includes forcing other children to take their clothes off and/or engage in sexual games (for example, one child threatens to hit another child if they don't pull their pants down). This behaviour happens when children have somehow linked aggression with sexual behaviour in their minds. This is usually a learned behaviour.

Keep in mind that it's typical to see coercive behaviour in all areas of preschool development (e.g., social development, language development) and it's important to correct such behaviour early on. When coercive behaviour is combined with sexual behaviour, the situation should be addressed promptly.

## Children 6–12 Years of Age

- From 6 to 8 years of age, it is typical for children to seek privacy.
- Beyond the age of 8, children gradually move into a time of exploration. While sexual curiosity is present, children become very self-conscious about their behaviour.
- Children between 10 and 12 begin having crushes and become more concerned about body image. They can also develop an intense admiration for adults of the same sex.

At this stage, sexual exploration is typically about a mutual curiosity that involves hugging, kissing, and/or games such as, "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours." Typical behaviour for this stage does not include engaging in adult sexual behaviours, such as penetration or using the mouth on someone else's genitals.





Similar to preschool children, coercive-based sexual behaviour in school-aged children is also a cause for concern. If two school-aged children are engaging in sexual behaviour it is important to determine the details surrounding exactly what occurred and the dynamics between the children.



**Tip:** If children are engaging in sexually inappropriate behaviour, don't overreact. Stay calm, gently teach them it is not appropriate behaviour, and redirect them. This can be done through supervision of play with other children where adults set boundaries in a friendly and simple way. When adults yell or get angry with children for socially inappropriate behaviour, they can inadvertently reinforce the exact behaviour they are trying to change.

**Note:** While it is far more common to have older children engage younger children in inappropriate sexual behaviour, it is possible to have the reverse.

## Self-Stimulation versus Masturbation

Self-stimulation is a normal behaviour for children. It is important to understand that for prepubescent children, self-stimulation is a self-soothing behaviour—the motivation being self-comfort/regulation and not sexual arousal. A child may have a variety of worries that result in self-soothing (e.g., the child generally has anxiety, the child isn't feeling well, a significant person in the child's life is ill).

There would be concern around self-stimulating behaviour if the action appears to be persistent and is interfering with a child's daily activities. If a child is engaging in self-soothing behaviour, usually they can be easily redirected. If, on the other hand, it is difficult to redirect a child, then outside help may be needed.

It makes sense to consult with your health care provider and/or counsellor to manage the behaviour if it is interfering in your child's daily activities.

To help your child establish their own personal boundaries and learn about their own privacy and the privacy of others consider the following:

- Does your child sleep in their own bed?
- Does your child have their own bedroom or a space for their personal items?
- Does your child have privacy when using the bathroom?
- Is your child exposed to adult sexuality (in person or through the media)?
- Is your child exposed to violence (in person or through the media)?
- Does your child play with older children who are at a different stage of development?



# Teach Your Child About Personal Safety

Teach your child to:

## **Take ownership of their body.**

Once your child is able, teach them to dress, bathe, wash, and use the toilet on their own. This will teach your child the boundaries around privacy. As they become more independent, respect their privacy.

## **Get out of uncomfortable situations.**

Brainstorm different ways to get out of uncomfortable situations (e.g., I have to get home, I am feeling sick, my mom is picking me up, I have to babysit).

## **Use the correct names for body parts.**

Teaching your child the correct names for body parts enhances communication between adults and children, and is especially important if your child needs to disclose an experience of sexual abuse or inappropriate contact.

## **Identify safe adults.**

Help your child identify safe adults in their life to whom they can go for help. It is important that your child knows exactly who they can turn to both during times of distress and when they want to share something that is important to them. It's a good idea to choose adults that you trust as well (aunt, grandma, best friend, etc.) who will be able to distinguish what needs to be shared with you and what does not.

### **Identify and label feelings.**

Encourage your child to identify and label feelings. This will promote self-monitoring and increase self-awareness.

### **Develop a positive self-identity.**

Help your child learn to talk about themselves in a positive way. Reinforce their strengths and unique qualities that make them the special person they are.

### **Have healthy boundaries and healthy relationships.**

Discuss and model the roles of adults versus children (e.g., an adult's job is to protect children and keep them safe). Teach your child to tell you if someone tries to cross their personal boundaries. Respect the limits and boundaries your child sets.

### **Be safe online.**

Supervise and carefully manage your child's online presence, public availability of accounts, communication, and information sharing.

### **Talk about secrets.**

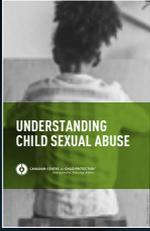
Explain the difference between secrets that are safe and can be kept (i.e., secrets that are fun, don't hurt anyone, and will eventually be told) and secrets that are unsafe and should be told to a safe adult (i.e., secrets about touching or picture taking that children are told never to tell).



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## OTHER RESOURCES IN THIS SERIES:



**UNDERSTANDING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:** This booklet has been created for protective parents/guardians where child sexual abuse has been discovered or is suspected. It outlines the scope of the child sexual abuse, what child sexual abuse is, how the grooming process works, impacts of the abuse, and tips for parents/guardians on how to handle disclosure.



**CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: PICKING UP THE PIECES:** This booklet addresses how parents/guardians may feel after abuse is discovered and what their child may be experiencing emotionally, as well as practical and tangible steps parents/guardians can take to support their child and get support for themselves as a parent/guardian. It addresses some common questions and concerns we hear from parents/guardians, such as how to deal with their child's feelings toward the abuser and how to manage their child's day-to-day healing process. It also includes information about the added layer of complexity when sexual abuse has been recorded and potentially shared online.



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