

# Families Are Talking

Volume 3  
Number 3

## Keeping Kids Sexually Safe

Before children can crawl, they learn that giving and receiving affection—like kissing, hugging, and being close to another person—can feel good. Adults know that while touch is a basic need and part of being human, some touch can be inappropriate. As parents and caregivers it's crucial that you help your children learn the difference between "good" and "bad" touch, and how to set boundaries related to their own bodies.

### What to Say to Your Children

In an effort to protect very young children from harm, discussions about sexual abuse prevention need to be simple, and the messages need to be clear. Essentially children need to know which body parts are considered "private," and taught to say "NO" if someone touches them in a way that makes them uncomfortable, asks them to touch their own or someone else's "private parts," or asks them to show their "private parts" to someone else. They also need to be assured that no matter what happens, sexual abuse is not their fault and they should tell a trusted adult even if they are told to keep it a secret. These messages can be shared through an initiated conversation or as "teachable moments" occur.

As children enter the pre-teen and teen years, they begin to separate from parents and caregivers and have more experiences without adult supervision. For this reason, it's important to help young people establish boundaries, identify respectful and disrespectful interactions, develop assertiveness skills, and talk about what to do if they ever experience sexual abuse, assault, or harassment. The definitions below can be a starting point for these important conversations.

**Sexual abuse** refers to any unwanted or uncomfortable situation that can include touching "private parts," or exposing young people to pornographic materials, taking videos or other recordings, or being forced to watch a sexual act.

**Sexual assault** occurs when a person forces another person to have any type of intimate contact. It can involve physical or psychological force. When assault involves penetration, it is defined as rape.

**Sexual harassment** is any repetitive, unwanted, and uninvited sexual attention such as teasing, touching, or taunting.

### For additional information, referrals, or counseling, call:

#### Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline

This 24-hour, anonymous hotline is dedicated to the prevention of both sexual and nonsexual child abuse. It provides counseling, referrals, and information.

15757 N. 78th Street  
Scottsdale, AZ 85260  
Phone: 800/4-A-CHILD or 480/922-8212  
Website: [www.childhelpusa.org](http://www.childhelpusa.org)

#### Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)

This organization operates a 24-hour, confidential national hotline for survivors of sexual assault.

635-B Pennsylvania Avenue, S.E.  
Washington, DC 20003  
Phone: 800/656-HOPE  
Website: [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

# TIPS

## to Help Parents and Caregivers Talk with Their Children

- Do not wait until your children ask questions.
- Know and practice the messages that you want to share.
- Seek “teachable moments”—daily opportunities that occur when you are with your children—that make it easy to share your messages and values.
- Let your children know that you are open to talking with them about these important issues.
- Listen.
- Try to understand your children’s point of view.
- Provide pamphlets, books, and other age-appropriate, medically accurate materials.
- If you don’t know how to answer your children’s questions, offer to find the answers or look them up together.
- Find out what your children’s schools are teaching about these topics.
- Stay actively involved in your children’s lives.

# Sharing Messages about Sexual Abuse, Harassment, and Assault with Your Children During “Teachable Moments”

Sexual abuse, harassment, and assault are important topics to talk about with your children. Having these conversations can help your children protect themselves if they are ever in situations that make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Before talking with your children, it’s helpful to consider the messages you want to share. Perhaps you want to share the following using clear, age-appropriate language.

5–8

### Messages for Young People Ages Five through Eight:

- One’s body belongs to oneself.
- There are parts of one’s body that are considered to be private, including one’s mouth, nipples, breasts, chest, penis, scrotum, vagina, vulva, and buttocks.
- No one should touch the “private parts” of a child’s body except for health reasons or to clean them.
- Children should not touch the “private parts” of other people’s bodies.
- Child sexual abuse is when someone touches the “private parts” of a child’s body without a health or hygiene reason.
- Sexual abuse can also occur when someone asks a child to touch the “private parts” of his/her body.
- Both boys/men and girls/women can be sexually abused.
- Everyone, including children, has the right to tell others not to touch their body when they do not want to be touched.
- If a child experiences unwanted or uncomfortable touching, he/she should tell a trusted adult, even if he/she was told to keep it a secret.
- Children can be sexually abused by a stranger or by someone they know.
- A child is never at fault if a person—even a family member—touches him/her in a way that is wrong or uncomfortable.
- If a stranger tries to get a child to go with him/her, the child should run and tell a parent, teacher, neighbor, or other adult.
- Most people would never abuse children.

9–12

### Messages for Young People Ages Nine through 12:

- Sexual abuse is very common, even though many people do not want to talk about it.
- Sexual abuse is most often committed by someone the child knows.
- An abuser can be an adult, a teenager, or child, and can be male or female.
- Most sexual abuse involves some kind of secrecy, bribery, trickery, threat, or force.
- If a child experiences unwanted or uncomfortable touching, he/she should tell a trusted adult; if that adult doesn’t believe or help him/her, the child should tell another adult, and keep telling until someone helps.
- Sexual abuse may or may not involve touch.
- When people are sexually abused they can have many conflicting emotions including feeling confused, angry, scared, guilty, ashamed, alone, worthless, depressed, and helpless, or feeling special, wanted, loved, needed, and cared for.
- There are many people who can help young people who have been abused, including school counselors, teachers, doctors, religious leaders, and police.
- Although chatting or meeting people online can be fun, individuals should be cautious because it can be unsafe.
- Some people use the Internet to trick young people into sexually abusive situations.
- Sexual harassment is unwanted and uninvited sexual attention such as teasing, touching, or taunting.
- Sexual harassment is against the law.
- Your school’s sexual harassment policy is \_\_\_\_\_.

## Messages for Young People Ages 12 through 15:

- Sexual abuse involving touch can include kissing, an abuser touching “private parts,” touching the abuser’s “private parts,” being asked to touch one’s own “private parts,” or engaging in vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse.
- Sexual abuse not involving touch can include being shown pornographic movies, magazines, websites, or other materials; taking photos, videos, or other recordings; or watching sexual acts.
- Sexual coercion is when a person uses threats or force in order to engage in sexual behavior with another person.
- No one should coerce another person into engaging in any type of sexual behavior.
- Sexual assault is a person forcing another person to have any type of intimate sexual contact.
- Sexual assault can occur with physical or psychological force.
- When sexual assault involves penetration of the vagina or anus it is called rape.
- Both boys/men and girls/women can be sexually assaulted, although it is more commonly reported by girls/women.
- People who are sexually assaulted are never at fault.
- Sexual assault by an acquaintance, a friend, or a date is often called acquaintance rape or date rape.
- One should never force another person to engage in any type of sexual behavior.
- Sexual assault is a crime.
- A person who is sexually assaulted can report the assault to the police who may start an investigation.
- Tools that can help protect individuals in potential sexual assault situations include learning self-defense techniques, assessing whether a situation may be dangerous, avoiding alcohol and other drugs, and developing assertiveness skills.
- Not all sexual abuse, assault, violence, and harassment can be prevented.
- Domestic violence is psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse between people in an intimate relationship who are dating, living together, or married.
- Psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse between people who are dating is also known as dating violence.
- Many people who commit sexual abuse, assault, or domestic violence experienced abuse at some point in their lives.
- Many community resources can help individuals who have survived sexual harassment, assault, or other forms of violence, including counselors, teachers, doctors, religious leaders, rape crisis centers, domestic violence organizations, and the police.
- Sexual harassment can occur in a variety of settings including schools, the workplace, and extracurricular programs.
- In this community, you can call \_\_\_\_\_ for information on sexual abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, or sexual harassment.

## Messages for Young People Ages 15 through 18:

- People who have been sexually abused or assaulted may benefit from support, counseling, and medical care.
- Whether or not to report sexual abuse, assault, violence, or harassment, is a personal decision that can be difficult for survivors to make.
- The investigation and/or trial resulting from reported sexual abuse, assault, violence, or harassment can be a difficult experience for survivors.

The messages listed above are from the Third Edition of the *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten—12th Grade*. For messages about other sexuality-related topics, download the *Guidelines* at [www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf](http://www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf)

## Are Young People Flirting or Hurting?

We often think of sexual harassment as something that happens among adults in the workplace, but it can also happen to young people in school or other settings. There is a difference between mutual flirting and teasing that is meant to intentionally harm, intimidate, humiliate, and scare the target. Sexual harassment is also often one-sided and can include:

- Sexual advances
- Touching of a sexual nature
- Graffiti of a sexual nature (like comments written on the bathroom wall)
- Displaying or distributing sexually explicit drawings, pictures, and written materials
- Sexual gestures
- Sexual jokes or rumors
- Pressure for sexual favors
- Touching oneself sexually or talking about one’s sexual activity in front of others

Sexual harassment is against the law, and your child’s school is required to have a policy in place to help keep students safe. If your child is being harassed, he/she can report the violation to the school social worker or counselor, school security or resource officer, or principal, who can advocate for his/her safety. If the school isn’t doing anything to stop the harassment, contact the Department of Education’s Safe and Drug-free office at 202/260-3954 to find out the name of the coordinator to contact in your state.

For more information, download the publication *Sexual Harassment: It’s Not Academic*, available on the U.S. Department of Education website at [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocrshpam.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocrshpam.html)

## FAMILIES ARE TALKING

Volume 3, Number 3  
2004

**Amy Levine, M.A.**

Family Project Coordinator

**Monica Rodriguez**

Vice President for  
Education and Training

**Martha Kempner, M.A.**

Director of Public Information

**Joseph DiNorcio, Jr.**

President and CEO

**Anna Raff**

Design and Layout

*Families Are Talking* is a quarterly newsletter published by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1964. SIECUS affirms that sexuality is a fundamental part of being human, one that is worthy of dignity and respect. We advocate for the right of all people to accurate information, comprehensive education about sexuality and sexual health services. SIECUS works to create a world that ensures social justice and sexual rights. To find out more information about SIECUS, visit [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org).

### SIECUS

#### Family Project

130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350  
New York, NY 10036-7802  
Phone: 212/819-9770  
Fax: 212/819-9776

#### Policy Office

1706 R Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20009  
Phone: 202/265-2405  
Fax: 202/462-2340

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This newsletter is supported by a grant from The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

# Activities for Parents and Caregivers to Communicate with Young People

The following resources and follow-up questions can help parents and caregivers create “teachable moments” to have conversations about sexual abuse with children ages three through eight.

## A Better Safe than Sorry Book: A Family Guide for Sexual Assault Prevention

Sol and Judith Gordon

Illustrated by Vivien Cohen

This book provides essential information about sexual abuse, and helps young people understand that their parents and caregivers are concerned about their safety.

1984; \$12; ISBN 0-87975-768-X; Prometheus Books; Phone: 800/421-0351; Website: [www.prometheusbooks.com](http://www.prometheusbooks.com)

## My Body Is Mine, My Feelings Are Mine

Susan Hoke, LCSW, ACSW

Illustrated by Bruce Van Patter

This storybook introduces the basic concepts of body safety. It includes a “Body Rules Safety Quiz” as well as an adult guidebook.

1995; \$20.95; ISBN 1-882732-24-3; Childsworld/Childsplay; 800/962-1141; Website: [www.guidancechannel.com](http://www.guidancechannel.com)

After reading the stories together, you can address these and other questions with your children:

- What is this book about?
- What parts of your body are considered “private?”
- What should you say when someone touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable or asks you to touch their “private parts?”
- What should you do if this happens?
- What should you do if someone doesn’t help you?

For pre-teens and teens, you can find teachable moments to talk about sexual abuse, assault, or harassment by reading an article in a newspaper or magazine; watching the news on television; or responding to a situation that either you or your children have heard about or witnessed.

Sexual harassment is often not clear cut and may be challenging to identify. The following scenarios can help families talk about this important issue. For each scenario below, decide whether or not the situation can be considered sexual harassment, and have a discussion about why or why not. If you decide the situation could be considered sexual harassment, discuss what the “target” should do about it.

1. In gym class, Mark’s classmates snuck up behind him and pulled his shorts down to his knees. While his classmates thought it would be funny, Mark was embarrassed.

2. There are a group of girls at school that stand in the hallway between classes and make fun of people’s appearance. When Karen walks by, they tease her for having a flat chest and for wearing clothes that are out of style. Karen doesn’t take it personally and ignores them.

3. Before soccer practice, a few teammates were looking at a pornographic magazine in the locker room. They called Jamie over to look, but he told

them he didn’t want to look at it. His teammates made fun of him by calling him names. Jamie was upset.

4. Stephanie has a crush on Jeremy. When she saw him in the cafeteria she walked up behind him, covered his eyes and asked him to guess who he thought it was. Jeremy wasn’t sure, so Stephanie took her hands off his eyes. Jeremy was glad that it was Stephanie and gave her a hug. Stephanie was glad that Jeremy hugged her.

5. John really likes Katie. Whenever he says hello to her, she always replies back with a smile and says hi to him. One day John decided to ask her out on a date and Katie politely told him that she’s not interested. Every day for the next week John tries to convince Katie that she should go out with him. Katie wants John to leave her alone.

It is important to realize that often whether a situation is determined to be sexual harassment, depends on how the target feels as a result of the incident(s). Other factors to consider include: what is said, how it is said, and the body language of all people involved. With this in mind, review your responses and then compare them with the possible answers below.

(1) Can be considered to be sexual harassment. (2) Is likely not to be considered to be sexual harassment. (3) Can be considered to be sexual harassment. (4) Is likely not to be considered to be sexual harassment. (5) Can be considered to be sexual harassment.