

Child Sexual Abuse: The Adults Role in Prevention

Last year over 26,000 children were sexually abused in Texas. In light of the ongoing media coverage of various child sex abuse cases, it's understandable that many parents may be feeling especially concerned about the safety of their children and may be wondering how they can protect their child from being sexually abused.

Wendell Teltow, Executive Director of Prevent Child Texas, a non-profit organization whose mission is to prevent child abuse in all its forms, explains that parents should know that there is no single psychological profile of a sexual offender. Myths suggest that only dirty old men are sexual abusers, but the reality is that anyone in a position of authority and with access to children can abuse a child, he said. The majority of sexual abuse perpetrators are people the child knows and trusts. Be particularly cautious about people who are close to your child who do any of the following:

- Treat children as property by grabbing them, forcing attentions and affection, tickling excessively, and generally showing disrespect for children's requests and privacy
- Relate to children in a sexual or seductive manner, for example, by commenting "She's a sexy little thing".
- Use gifts and favors as the main way of relating to children
- Entice children into their homes or into activities with them, or show excessive friendliness

Many sex offenders will not display any signs that indicate they are a danger to children. While the general public tends to pay a lot of attention to identified sex offenders in the community, it is important to realize that the majority of sex offenders that are living in communities have not been identified. Teltow explained that "we need to take steps to insure the safety of children in all aspects of their lives, realizing that the unidentified threat is greater than the small percentage of people who have been identified as sex offenders."

According to Teltow, while we can, and should, teach our children personal safety skills, we adults need to take primary responsibility for keeping children safe. The best strategy for prevention is for adults to supervise children and their relationships with others. Parents can't control everything having to do with their child, but they can be alert to potentially dangerous situations. The following are some of the things you can do to help prevent child sexual abuse.

Teach your children about sexual abuse prevention just as you teach other safety guidelines. You can bring the subject of sexual abuse into daily life and make it part of ongoing talks with your children about safety, rather than presenting it as a one-time-only lecture which will scare them rather than educate and empower them.

Encourage children to talk. Children should feel that they can come to you to discuss anything no matter how big or small. Children must be free to ask

about adult behavior that confuses them, even when it is behavior not related to sexual abuse.

Pay attention when children act different around certain people. You can use what you observe to start a conversation with children, such as: I notice you get very quiet when Uncle John is around. Are you feeling uncomfortable around him? I want you to know that you can tell me any time you feel uncomfortable around someone and I will listen and try to help. Listen to children when they talk about babysitters or other people, paying attention to words as well as body language that may indicate a problem.

Teach children the First Rule of Safety, which is that before they can go anywhere they need to tell you *where* they are going, *who* they will be with and *when* they will be back.

Supervise children's use of the internet. The internet can be used by offenders to form relationships with children who they then meet up with later.

Make it clear to children how they can reach you or someone they trust at all times. Help each child identify a safety network of people they could talk to about feelings, especially feelings of being unsafe.

Teach your children that there are things they can do if they feel unsafe. It may be helpful to play a "what if" game with children to clarify their feelings and practice ways to deal with a situation. For example, you can say "What if someone put his hand on your bottom?" Children can talk about what they could do about it (for example, say I don't like that! and run away and tell someone.)

Trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right, pay attention to your feelings and check into any situation that makes you feel uncomfortable.

For more information or to join our efforts, contact Prevent Child Abuse Texas by calling 1-800-CHILDREN or visit www.preventchildabusetexas.org

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