

Keeping Kids Safe from Sexual Abuse – Child Abuse Awareness Month

On the news, we often hear stories of child victims of sexual abuse. We see the most tragic and cruel examples splashed across our screens. While many of these stories are from other places, it is crucial to understand that **children are victims of sexual abuse everywhere: even in Jackson Hole**. In honor of Child Abuse Awareness Month, there are a few simple things you can do to educate yourself and help keep the children in your life safe.

An image popularized by the media, we often think of a rapist as a shadowy figure lurking in an alleyway or driving a windowless van, pleading children at the park to help him find a lost puppy. While those predators exist, they are a miniscule fraction of those who prey on children. Though it is a difficult to consider, **90% of abusers are not strangers to their victims**. The vast majority of the time, the abuser is someone who is close to a child, and has the opportunity to cultivate a relationship. This relationship allows the abuser to slowly normalize abusive behavior, such as inappropriate touching, discussing inappropriate topics or viewing pornographic images.

How do we make sure that the children that we love do not fall victim to this kind of abuse? There are lots of things you can do to help empower and protect the children you care about. From a very early age, it is important to discuss bodies in an open and age-appropriate manner. It is also **crucial to distinguish between good touches and bad touches**. For example, a goodnight hug and kiss from mom, dad or a sibling is good touch! A babysitter, coach, teacher or other grownup touching private parts or hugging or kissing in secret is bad touch. Equally important, let your children know that it is *always* okay to say “no” to any touch that makes them uncomfortable, regardless of who it is coming from.

On a related note, **listen to your child when he or she expresses unease about someone**. Don’t dismiss their feelings by telling them such things are impolite. Ask them why they feel this way. Perhaps they feel awkward around someone with a disability or different accent, and that’s something you can discuss together. Or perhaps they feel uneasy because someone is trying to do things that the child knows is not right or appropriate. Let them know that it is *always* okay to tell you about these feelings. **Decide on a “safe word”** that your child can say to you to let you know that he or she is feeling uncomfortable without having to say it openly and feeling embarrassed. Try something simple like, “I forgot my teddy in the car.”

Additionally, it’s important to let your children know that it’s not okay to have secrets that they can’t tell a parent. Of course it’s alright to have small secrets like a holiday gift, or a surprise party, but those are all things that can be shared with a parent. Your child should know that if another adult wants to keep something between the two of them, that’s not okay.

Finally, if you believe that someone is hurting your child or treating your child in an inappropriate manner, trust your instinct. **Do not ignore your gut feeling**. Address it! There are many more things you can do with your child to make sure that they stay safe.

If you have concerns that a child in your life is not safe, there are lots of wonderful resources in our community to help. Even if you just have questions, don’t hesitate to reach

out to one of these organizations. Victim Services is available Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and can be reached at (307) 732-8482 in English or Spanish. The Hirschfield Center for Families is also available at (307) 733-7946. For more great ideas on how to keep your kids safe, and important conversations to have with children of all ages, please visit www.themamabeareffect.org.