

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

A Parent and Caregiver Guide to Prevention

Protecting Kids Starts with Informed, Connected Caregivers

You don't have to be an expert to prevent child sexual abuse. By staying informed, talking openly with your child, and creating a supportive relationship, you can make a real difference. Below are four tips to get started.

TIP 1

Learn About Abuse: Who Commits It & Where It Happens

What caregivers should know:

- About 1 in 10 children experience sexual abuse before age 18.¹
- There is no "typical" offender, and abuse can happen anywhere children spend time - homes, schools, activities, faith spaces, and online.
- About 90% of children are abused by someone they know and trust, and about 30% are abused by a family member.²
- Abuse often begins with grooming, a process where an adult builds trust with a child and the adults around them to lower boundaries. Concerning behaviors in adults may include being more focused on building relationships with children rather than with adults, often singling out specific children for special attention, gifts, or preferential treatment.

Peer-to-peer sexual harm also happens:

- 35-71% of sexual abuse of children is committed by other children or teens.³
- While age-appropriate curiosity is normal, coercive, aggressive, or adult-like sexual behavior is highly concerning.
- Both the child who was harmed and the child who caused harm deserve support and counseling. Treatment can help prevent children from displaying future harmful or problematic sexual behavior.

1. Townsend, C., Rheingold, A., Haviland, M.L. (2016). Estimating a child sexual abuse prevalence rate for practitioners: An updated review of child sexual abuse prevalence studies. Charleston SC: Darkness to Light.
2. Finkelhor, D., & Shattuck, A. (2012). Characteristics of crimes against juveniles. Durham, NH: Crimes Against Children Research Center.
3. Finkelhor, D., Ormrod, R., and Chaffin, M. (2009, December). Juveniles Who Commit Sex Offenses Against Minors. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Bulletin.; Gewirtz-Meydan, A. and Finkelhor, D. (2019). Sexual abuse and assault in a large national sample of children and adolescents. Child Maltreatment, 1(12).

Learn more at [ChildrensTrustMA.org](https://www.ChildrensTrustMA.org) and [SafeKidsThrive.org](https://www.SafeKidsThrive.org).

TIP 2

Teach Body Safety & Autonomy

Use Correct Names for ALL Body Parts

- Teaching proper terms for genitalia (penis, vulva, vagina, anus, etc.) helps reduce shame, supports healthy conversations, and allows children to clearly communicate concerns or disclose abuse.

Set Clear, Simple Body Safety Rules

- Private parts are private.
- No one should look at or touch a child's private parts except to keep them clean and healthy (like a parent or medical provider). Children should not be asked to look at or touch anyone else's private parts.
- When genital care is needed (e.g. bathing, dressing, medical visits), explain what you're doing and why the action is appropriate. Check in with your child if they show signs of discomfort. This is how an adult can model consent.

Promote Bodily Consent and Autonomy

- Teach children they can say NO to touches that make them uncomfortable on their private parts or anywhere else on their body.
- Reinforce that these boundaries apply with adults and with other children.
- Teach mutual respect: children must also respect others' body boundaries.

Empower Disclosure

Remind children to tell their trusted adult if someone crosses their body boundaries or tries to harm them.

Regularly say:

- Abuse is never their fault
- They will be believed
- They will not be in trouble for telling

TIP 3

Talk Openly and Often

Start Talking Early

- Begin body safety conversations as soon as children can understand simple rules about their bodies and boundaries.
- Teach basic concepts first like private parts, safe vs. unsafe touches, and asking a trusted adult for help.
- Keep messages short, simple, and positive, building on them as your child grows.
- Remember: starting early helps make body safety a normal topic, not a scary one.

Learn more at ChildrensTrustMA.org and SafeKidsThrive.org.

Make Prevention an Ongoing Conversation

- Practice safety skills through role-play, including how to say “no” and get help.
- Remember: prevention conversations need repetition. One talk isn’t enough.
- Include body safety reminders into everyday moments like bath time, daily routines, and conversations about things you see or hear in the world.
- On occasion, calmly ask children directly if anyone has ever crossed their body boundaries or tried to harm them.
- Create a safe space for questions without shame or punishment. Provide them with simple and age-appropriate answers.
- Move beyond “stranger danger” messaging as most harm comes from known and trusted people. Remind your child to focus on behaviors from the people around them, not just strangers.

TIP 4

Build Your Confidence with Trusted Resources

You don’t have to do this alone. Build knowledge and confidence with free and evidence-informed resources:

- **Keeping Kids Safe Parent Workshop**
The Children’s Trust offers free in-person and virtual interactive workshops that help Massachusetts caregivers learn practical strategies to prevent child sexual abuse and support children’s safety.
- **The Mama Bear Effect**
A parent-led movement offering tools, education, and conversation starters to help families talk openly about body safety and sexual abuse prevention.
- **Committee for Children’s Hot Chocolate Talks**
Short, guided conversations designed to help families talk with children about body safety, boundaries, and consent in age-appropriate ways.
- **National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth**
If you’re wondering if a child’s sexual behaviors are healthy, concerning, or problematic, visit the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth website for more information.

Need Help Now?

- **Emergency:** Call 911
- **DCF Child-At-Risk Hotline:** 800-792-5200
- **MACA:** 617-573-9800 to find the nearest Child Advocacy Center
- Talk with your child’s pediatrician about local referrals and resources

This resource was developed by the Children’s Trust of Massachusetts, a statewide public-private organization dedicated to preventing child abuse and neglect by addressing its root causes and strengthening the systems that support families.



Learn more at ChildrensTrustMA.org and SafeKidsThrive.org.