



Protecting Our Children: A Parent's Guide to Child Abuse Prevention

As a parent or caregiver, your role in protecting your child(ren) from harm is powerful and essential. Preventing child abuse isn't just about recognizing the signs. It's about building trust, educating children, and creating a family culture of open communication and safety.

HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION:

Abuse Prevention Basics for Families

Build Trust & Open Dialogue Early

Children who feel heard are more likely to come to you if something is wrong.

Make space for everyday conversations about feelings, comfort, and boundaries.

Use moments like getting ready for bed or driving together to ask open-ended questions to encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings:

- ▶ "What was your favorite part of the day?"
- ▶ "Was there anything you wish you could have changed about today?"

- ▶ "What makes you feel happy/sad/angry?"
- ▶ "What's been on your mind lately?"
- ▶ "Do you have any questions about your body?"
- ▶ "I noticed that you have a bruise/scratch/injury. How did that happen?"
- ▶ "How are your friends? Is everything going well with you and your friends?"



Teach Safe Boundaries

While body safety is one component of abuse prevention, it's most effective when paired with conversations about respect, autonomy, and consent:

- ▶ Reinforce that they are in charge of their body (age-appropriate).
- ▶ Help them understand that private parts stay private with both adults and other children. Identify adults who may be appropriate to see or touch body parts in certain circumstances, such as parents, doctors, etc.
- ▶ Use the correct names for body parts to help reduce confusion and empower children to speak clearly about their experiences.

Address Unsafe or Secretive Behavior

Encourage your child(ren) to tell a trusted adult if something doesn't feel right, no matter what. Teach your child(ren) to recognize "unsafe secrets" and manipulative behavior:

- ▶ "This is our special secret"
- ▶ "You'll get in trouble/something bad will happen if you tell" are red flags.

Help Children Identify Safe Adults

Create a family safety circle. Together with your child(ren), name at least three (3) trusted adults they can go to if they feel unsafe, including those who live inside and outside the home.

▶ Trusted adults living inside the home:

▶ Trusted adults living outside the home:



Know the Warning Signs of Abuse

You know your child(ren) best and they rely on you to be their #1 advocate to support and help them navigate the many stressors in life.

Here are some warning signs of abuse you should be mindful of:

- ▶ **Changes in behavior.** While behavior is influenced by many factors, children who are abused often exhibit some change to their behavior.
- ▶ **Fearfulness.** Particularly fear around specific people or events.
- ▶ **Being withdrawn.** Self-isolation and avoiding social situations and interactions
- ▶ **Physical injuries.** Especially those that are unexplained or repeated.
- ▶ **Complaining of pain.** Particularly in their private areas.
- ▶ **Acting out aggressively or sexually.** Aggressive acts or behavior towards other adults and/or children.
- ▶ **Advanced knowledge of sexuality.** Knowing more than they should for their age about sexuality.

Trust your gut if you feel something is off and do what you can to keep your child(ren) out of situations you do not feel are safe.

IMPORTANT STEPS TO TAKE:

What You Can Do As a Parent

Listen and believe.

When a child says that something made them uncomfortable, do not dismiss it. Validate their feelings and investigate by asking open-ended questions such as “Can you tell me what happened?” or “Tell me more.”

Avoid asking “Why” or placing blame.

Try to stay away from asking “why” questions (such as “why did they do that?”) because this can cause a child to shut down, especially if they were told by the perpetrator that the abuse was their fault. It is very important to not only believe your child, but to also choose your words carefully to avoid blaming or cause the child(ren) to shut down for what may have happened.

Create a home of respect and voice.

Give your child(ren) permission to express discomfort, question rules, and make choices about their own body (that are age appropriate).

Model healthy boundaries.

Children learn from what they see. When you respect their choices (within reason) you teach them that their voice matters and that consent is a normal part of every relationship.

Set digital safety rules.

Abuse can happen online.

Know who your child(ren) is interacting with and talk about digital boundaries and red flags regularly. Be aware and involved to know which digital platforms your child(ren) are using.

Stay connected.

Know your child(ren)’s environment and interactions, such as friends, mentors, activities. Be involved in their world and engage in their interests.

Report Suspected Abuse.

If you suspect abuse of your child or another child, report it immediately to ChildLine by calling 1-800-932-0313.

Your Role Is Powerful!

Child abuse prevention starts at home with trust, education, and connection. Every conversation and every moment of listening helps create a safer world for your child(ren). You don’t need all the answers, you just need to stay present and stay informed.





HELPFUL CONTACTS:

Additional Resources and Partners

ChildLine – 1-800-932-0313

ChildLine is available 24/7 to take calls about suspected child abuse in Pennsylvania.

Children's Advocacy Centers of Pennsylvania

Visit penncac.org to find a local Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) in your area.

PCAR – Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect

Visit pcar.org/help-pa/locations to find a local crisis center for help with resources for sexual violence/assault.

Local County Children and Youth Agencies

To find contact information for your local County Children and Youth Agency (CCYA), visit: pcya.org/contact-your-agency.

United Way of Pennsylvania 211 (PA 211)

If you need to connect with resources in your community, but don't know where to look, PA 211 is a great place to start. Dial 211, or visit pa211.org.



Reach out to PFSA.

PHONE: 1-800-448-4906

ONLINE: www.pafsa.org

EMAIL: info@pafsa.org