

How to Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Your Children

How pervasive is child abuse? “According to current data from the U.S. Department of Justice, one in three girls and one in seven boys will be sexually molested — robbed of their innocence — before the age of eighteen.” Ruth Miller Fitzgibbons, *Redbook*, April, 1992. (See *Sins of the Fathers*, p. 222 footnotes.) A California State Mental Health professional has provided data showing that “persons coming from conservative or fundamentalists religious backgrounds are more likely to be offenders.” *Pacific Union Recorder*, April 3, 1989. Yes, the danger is real — sad but true.

“The act of sexually abusing a child is not usually an isolated incident brought about by an temporary lapse in the abuser’s judgment. It is a highly repetitive, compulsive behavior — an addiction as well as a criminal offense. Our society is suffused with addiction and the suffering that accompanies it. Addiction is both a moral sin and a physical disease.” Carol Cannon, *Sins of the Father*, p. 215. Children are sexual beings from birth. Their feelings need to be understood. The sexual actions that children initiate are not what we are talking about. The abuse we’re talking about is when children are forced into sexual responses — they have no choice.

Conversation with children about their bodies and their sexual feelings should start very young. Parents should talk calmly and relaxed about sexual things. If parents are embarrassed or uncomfortable when talking about sex, children will follow their example and have a distorted view of sexuality. Teach very young children the correct names of the sexual parts of their body. Sharon’s mother was bathing baby brother. Sharon asked, “Mommy, why am I different from baby brother?” “God made baby boys like Daddies and girls like Mommies.” Answer children’s questions about sexuality honestly. Their questions are good indicators as to what they are ready to learn. Sex education is an important part of prevention. If sex is a hush-hush subject in your home, chances are your children will not come to you for information. If the behavior of an older boy in your neighborhood is a problem to your child, you want the child to come to **you**.

Make sure your children memorize their home telephone number, address, and your work numbers. Have them check with you or the person in charge before they go anywhere. They are to tell where they are going, with whom, how he/she will get there and when they expect to return. No going off alone anywhere.

Children should know the difference between a healthy, appropriate touch and a depraving touch. The discussion of appropriate and inappropriate touching is safety education, not sex education. All children need lots of appropriate touching — the hand on the shoulder or arm or a tousling of a boy’s hair — that shows that we like them and we care. Teach them that certain parts of our bodies are private. Other parts are open or public. Our elbows need not be covered, but our private parts should be covered. Tell them that no one has the right to touch their private parts — whether they be relatives, friends, or a family member. Tell them to call for help. Explain to them that even if the person is an adult, they do not blindly obey them.

Do everything possible to build up their ego strength. Teach them that there are times when children should be assertive. Tell them that they have rights and that inappropriate touching is wrong and sinful — no matter who does it. If we treat our children with respect, they will know that they have rights and they should assert them. Respect their feelings, and they will expect respect from others. Allow them to exercise their individuality. They must learn to stand for their rights.

“In addition, tell your children explicitly what sexual abuse is. Show them how to protect themselves from sexual exploitation. Telling a child to avoid strangers is not enough. More than 80 percent of sexual crimes against children are committed by friends or relatives — people who are anything but strangers. . . . They should be taught that if anyone touches them in an area their underwear (or a bathing suit) covers, they are to *run, yell, and tell*. If anyone exposes himself or herself to them, or tries to force physical contact, they should go to an adult and report what happened. And they should keep telling until they are heard and protected!” Carol Cannon, *Ibid.*, p. 217.

What are the signs of sexual abuse? Abuse can range from a single episode to months or years. Results can be minor with no permanent damage, or personality disorders, or serious phobias. Look for subtle clues. If your child seems uneasy in someone’s presence, or doesn’t want to be alone with someone, this could be a red flag. Other symptoms could be hyperactivity, disturbed sleep, chronic bed wetting, or depression. Drug abuse and promiscuity are also clues.

Later in life signs may show up — as impotence or frigidity. Of course, a single symptom need not be a sign of childhood sexual abuse.

Sexuality is God’s masterpiece of creation. It must be protected.
