

## Seven Steps to Preventing Child Sexual Abuse

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Experts estimate that **1 in 4 girls** and **1 in 6 boys** are sexually abused before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays. **1 in 5** children are sexually solicited while on the Internet. The median age for reported sexual abuse is **9 years old**. Nearly 20% of the victims of sexual abuse are **under age eight**. This means that in any classroom, Sunday school class, day care, or neighborhood, there are children who are silently bearing the burden of sexual abuse. We want to believe that an act as devastating and horrendous as child sexual abuse could not possibly happen in our communities, our schools, our churches, our sports leagues, and our families. Yet research indicates that at least 85% of children who are sexually abused are abused by someone they know, trust, and sometimes love. Current data collected by our state agencies indicate that Jasper and Newton Counties rank well above the state and national averages in substantiated cases of child abuse. The problem is real, and it has devastating and often lifelong consequences for its victims.

While programs that focus on interventions after the abuse has occurred are valuable, it is time for our communities to begin to focus efforts on **prevention**. A child's safety is an adult's job. Children are often taught how to keep themselves safe from sexual predators, and it is important for them to learn these skills, but they are not enough. It is the responsibility of all conscientious and caring adults to keep children safe. We make sure children wear seat belts. We keep toxins and household cleaners out of their reach. We teach them bicycle and skate board safety. Why, then, do we leave the responsibility of preventing child sexual abuse solely to children instead of where it belongs – squarely on the shoulders of adults?

There are seven basic steps any adult can take to help prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. These steps were initially compiled by Darkness to Light, a national child abuse prevention organization headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina. Darkness to Light includes these seven steps in their child abuse prevention training program, Stewards of Children.

## **Step 1: Learn the facts and understand the risks.**

Educate yourself about the statistics and effects of child sexual abuse. The realities need to influence our decisions regarding our children's safety. Understand that the risk of child sexual abuse rarely comes from strangers but from family and friends. Accept that the problem is real and that it exists right here, right now.

Here are some additional facts about child sexual abuse:

- **35 – 40%** of children who are sexually abused are abused by family members.
- As many as **60%** are abused by someone the family trusts.
- Nearly **40%** are abused by older or larger children, often siblings or babysitters.
- Approximately **70%** of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) occur to children ages 17 and under.
- Most child victims **never report the abuse.**
- Sexually abused children who keep it a secret or who “tell” and are not believed are at greater risk than the general population for psychological, social, emotional, and physical problems, often lasting into adulthood.
- **70-80%** of sexual abuse survivors report excessive drug and alcohol use.
- People who abuse children look and act just like everyone else. In fact, they often go out of their way to appear trustworthy and helpful in order to gain access to children.
- **70%** of sexual offenders of children have between **1 and 9 victims.**
- Serial child molesters may have as many as **400 victims.**

## **Step 2: Minimize opportunity.**

More than **80%** of child sexual abuse cases occur in one-adult/one-child situations. If you eliminate or reduce one-adult/one-child situations, you will dramatically lower the risk of sexual abuse for children. Think carefully about the safety of any one-adult/one-child situation. Choose group situations when possible.

One-on-one time with a trusted adult is healthy and valuable for a child. It builds self-esteem and relationship skills. However, there are things you can do to protect children when you want them to have time alone with another adult, such as:

- Drop in unexpectedly when the child is alone with any adult, even trusted family members.
- Make sure outings are observable (in public places, or at least out in the open).
- Ask the adult about planned activity specifics before the child leaves your care. Take note of the adult's ability to be specific.

- Talk with the child when she or he returns. Notice the child's mood and whether the child can confidently relate how the time was spent.
- Find a way to tell the adults who care for or spend time with children that you and the child are educated about child sexual abuse. Yes, **be that direct**.

Think carefully about the safety of situations in which older youth have access to and/or responsibility for younger children. Talk to both the older and the younger children about child safety, especially about avoiding one-on-one situations. Let the older youth know, in the presence of the younger children, that you will be talking to your child about their activities. If possible, make sure that one or more adults who can supervise are present, even among family members.

Reduce the risk of your child's participation in youth-serving organizations by insisting on child protective policies. Create and lobby for policies that reduce or eliminate one-adult/one-child situations in the organizations in which your child participates, such as faith groups, sports teams, and school clubs. These policies should ensure that all activities can be observed and interrupted. Talk with program administrators about the supervision of older youth who have responsibility for the care of children. Insist that this becomes a part of the program's policy.

Insist upon screening all personnel, youth, and adults who will be interacting with the children. These screenings should include personal interviews, professional recommendations, and criminal background checks. Don't assume that people who care for children "must be o.k." Avoid programs that do not use all of these methods.

Insist that youth-serving organizations train their staff and volunteers to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. Make sure that such organizations have policies for dealing with suspicious situations and reports of abuse.

### **Step 3: Talk about it!**

Talk openly with children. Children often keep abuse a secret, but good communication can decrease a child's vulnerability to sexual abuse and increase the likelihood that the child will tell you if abuse has occurred.

Understand why children are afraid to "tell":

- The abuser shames the child, blames the child for the occurrence, or tells the child that his or her parents will be angry if they find out.
- The abuser is often manipulative and will usually try to confuse the child about what is right and wrong.
- The abuser sometimes threatens the child, a family member, or a beloved pet.

- Children are afraid of disappointing their parents and disrupting the family.
- Some children are too young to understand or feel ashamed.
- Many abusers tell children the abuse is “okay” or a “special game.”

Talking with children is important:

- Teach your children about their bodies, about what abuse is, and, when age-appropriate, about sex. Teach them words that will help them discuss these things comfortably with you.
- Teach children that it is “against the rules” for adults to act in a sexual way with them and use examples when talking with them. Teach them what parts of their bodies others should not touch. There is a reason they are called “private parts”!
- Be sure to tell them that the abuser might be an adult friend, family member, or older youth, and that **no matter who it is**, it is important for them to say “NO” and then tell you about it.
- Start early and talk often. One talk about abuse simply isn’t enough. Use everyday opportunities to talk about sexual abuse.
- Be proactive. If a child is uncomfortable or resistant to being with a particular adult or older youth, ask why. Do not make them spend time with that adult, even if it is a family member.

Knowing how to listen is important, too. Children will often “shut down” and refuse to tell more if you respond emotionally or negatively. Stay calm and gently encourage the child to keep talking.

#### **STEP 4: Stay alert.**

While having regular talks with your child about sexual abuse is an important key to prevention, it is equally as important to monitor for signs of sexual abuse. Don’t expect obvious or overt signs when a child is being sexually abused. Signs may be there, but you’ve got to look for them. Learn the signs!

Emotional and behavioral signs are more common in children. Some signs and signals are:

- Withdrawal or depression
- Unexplained anxiety or fear
- Unexplained anger or outbursts
- Sudden rebellion
- Behavior that is “too good”
- Fear of a particular person or an unwillingness to be around that person

- Change in school performance or drop in grades
- Refusal to participate in activities
- Arriving early at school, church, or other activities and staying late to avoid going home
- Sexual language and/or behaviors that are not age-appropriate
- Radical changes in behavior

Physical signs of sexual abuse are not as common as emotional and behavioral signs. However, some physical signs to look for include:

- Frequent or recurring urinary tract infections
- Genital or anal redness, rashes or swelling
- Chronic headaches
- Recurring stomach pains
- Sudden change in hygiene habits. This is especially true for pre-teens and adolescents. Also, if your child suddenly stops caring about how she or he looks or changes to a less attractive appearance, be alert.

Also be aware that some children exhibit **no signs** whatsoever.

If you observe signs that you suspect are related to sexual abuse, consult the experts. Immediately have the child physically examined by a professional who specializes in child sexual abuse. A children's advocacy center can offer guidance. Locally, you can contact The Children's Center at 417-623-2292. You can also call the National Children's Alliance at 1-800-239-9950. The opportunity to convict a child molester often depends on evidence from an examination.

### **Step 5: Make A Plan.**

It is always important to know what to do **before** you are confronted with a crisis. You must be prepared. Learn where to go, whom to call, and how to react.

First and foremost, **don't overreact**. Stay calm and maintain your composure. Your reactions have a powerful influence on vulnerable children. When you react to a disclosure or signs of child sexual abuse with anger or disbelief, the child will shut down, verbally and emotionally, or change his/her story in the face of your disbelief or anger.

It is important to be loving and supportive of the child. Contemplate your response **before** you are faced with the abuse. You will be able to respond in a more supportive manner. There are several things you need to do if a child discloses abuse:

- Believe the child and make sure the child knows it.
- Thank the child for telling you and praise his/her courage.

- Encourage the child to talk but don't ask leading questions about details. Asking details can alter the child's memory of events. Instead, ask open-ended questions like, "what happened next?" or use statements like "tell me more about that." Do so in a calm manner.
- Seek the help of a professional trained to interview the child about sexual abuse. Professional guidance is critical to the child's healing and to any criminal prosecution that may occur.
- Assure the child that it was not his/her fault.
- Assure the child that it is your responsibility to protect him or her and that you will do all that you can. Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Report or take action in all cases of suspected abuse, whether occurring within or outside of the child's family.
- Don't panic. Sexually abused children who receive support and psychological help can and do heal.

#### **Step 6: Act on suspicions.**

The current and future well-being of a child is at stake. You must be prepared to act. By acting on suspicions of child sexual abuse, you will save not only one child, but undoubtedly countless others. Many, if not most, child predators have multiple victims.

You may be faced with a situation where you suspect abuse but cannot provide any proof. Suspicions may be scary, but trust your instincts. If you are not sure if your suspicions warrant a report, call the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800 4-A-CHILD. They have staff specially trained to deal with questions about suspected child sexual abuse. You can also call The Children's Center at 417-623-2292, if you are unsure about whether to make an official report or just need support. These resources can help you if you suspect abuse, but they do not substitute for making an official report. Have the courage to report suspected abuse. Remember, you may be the only source of protection for the child.

There are two agencies that handle most reports of child abuse: Department of Family Services' Children's Division and your local law enforcement agency. In Missouri, the state hotline number to report abuse is **800-392-3738**.

## **Step 7: Break the cycle of silence. Get involved!**

Volunteer at and financially support organizations and programs that fight the tragedy of child sexual abuse. Get involved by donating your time and resources to support these organizations. Locally and statewide, some of these agencies and programs are:

- The Alliance of Southwest Missouri's Project CARE (417-782-9899 or [www.theallianceofswmo.org](http://www.theallianceofswmo.org))
- The Children's Center (417-623-2292 or [www.childrens-center.org](http://www.childrens-center.org))
- Children's Trust Fund (573-751-5147 or [www.ctf4kids.org](http://www.ctf4kids.org))
- Missouri Kids First (573-632-4600 or [www.mokidsfirst.org](http://www.mokidsfirst.org) )

Get more information and training about child sexual abuse prevention. In Jasper and Newton Counties, The Alliance of Southwest Missouri offers Stewards of Children Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Training, a training program developed by Darkness to Light to help adults prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. You can contact The Alliance at the telephone number listed above to request training for yourself, your family, your church, your school, your child's sports' leagues, or any other organization in which your child is involved. By participating in prevention training and advocating that others be trained, you are taking on the responsibility of protecting our children.

Use your voice and your vote to make your community a safer place for children.

- Insist that schools and youth-serving organizations in your community have child sexual abuse prevention policies in place. Help create these policies if needed, and ask other adults to do the same.
- Participate in prevention training and ask other adults to do the same.
- Discuss the frequency and effects of child sexual abuse. Remember, the effects are lifelong and devastating, if untreated.
- Support legislation that protects children. Call and write your members of Congress to educate them on this serious problem and to demand that government put more resources into protecting children from sexual abuse and into responding to reports of abuse.

**Break the silence!** There are 39 million survivors of child sexual abuse in America today. Sadly, that number is growing daily. Healing and prevention must begin today, and prevention begins with **you**.