

Children's Center

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Safety Check List Concerning Child Sexual Abuse

The following safety points are suggestions only and will need to be adapted to fit your child/teen and individual family situation. Your local library, school counselor, mental health counselor, teacher, or doctor are other sources of information as you plan how to have safety talks with your child.

Supervising children's play in the neighborhood:

Children should be supervised at all times by someone old enough to understand safety risks. Children should particularly be supervised around older kids. Close to 50% of offenders are other children or teens. Children should not walk anywhere alone, should not wait for the school bus alone, or even play in the yard alone if it borders a street or area where an offender could have access.

Allowing contact when you've heard rumors of someone sexually abusing another child:

If you hear rumors or concerns about a person, do not allow unsupervised contact between your child and that person. This includes family members. Do not assume if someone possibly offended years ago they will no longer offend. Some offenders sexually abuse several generations of children over a period of time, all because family members did not take the "rumors" seriously.

Babysitters:

If possible, get recommendations from friends, family, and neighbors. Ask for references. Plan ahead. Interview several prospective sitters personally and observe their interaction with your children. Ask your children whether or not they like and trust the babysitter and what activities took place during your time away.

Contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at www.missingkids.com or 1-800-843-5678 for their flyer entitled *Just in case...Guidelines in case you need a babysitter*. They also have a lot of other free publications.

Childcare Programs:

To help you make the safest choice for your child, researchers have identified 13 guidelines to consider when choosing a child care program. *A Parent's Guide to Choosing Safe and Healthy Child Care* outlines all 13 guidelines and a checklist to assist caregivers. Web sites: <http://nrc.uchsc.edu> and <http://mchb.hrsa.gov>. You can also check with Child Care Resource and Referral for Clackamas County at 503-675-4100. It is important to be aware of extended family members and friends of in-home child care providers who may have access to your child.

Sending children alone into public bathrooms:

Do not send your child into public bathrooms alone until s/he is old enough to call out for help if needed. If your son is getting too old to go into the women's bathroom with you, stand near the men's bathroom doorway so you can hear your child. This gives the clear message to potential offenders: The child inside is being closely supervised and is not a good target.

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Who you choose as a roommate:

If you are considering a roommate and you have children, check online at <http://sexoffenders.oregon.gov> and/or call the Oregon State Police at 503-378-3725 x 40179 to determine whether the person may be a registered sex offender. Remember, however, that s/he may not be registered. An offender must be convicted in order to be registered. Do not assume that you will always be able to provide supervision between your roommate and your children. S/he could have access when you use the bathroom, shower, run out to your car to get items, etc.

Drug use and exposure to people who use illegal drugs:

Do not use drugs or allow known drug users into your home or around your children. The more people your children are exposed to, the more likely they will be abused. Many offenders count on a parent's unavailability due to drug use in order to gain access to children.

Pornography:

If there is pornography in your home, your child(ren) may eventually find it because children are very curious. Pornography is easily accessible through the Internet, so supervision of children's Internet access is critical. There may be a connection between children/teen's exposure to pornography and the touching of younger kids. Known pornography use/viewing by an adult is a red-flag behavior. Child pornography is against the law.

Internet safety:

Monitor your children's Internet access carefully. It is best to have the computer in a high-traffic area and for parents to check children's online history regularly. Online, youth may encounter explicit material, child pornography and sexual predators, graphic images of violence, information about offensive or illegal activities, etc. Inform yourself of the risks by reading materials and attending any available trainings. Develop family rules around Internet use.

Recognizing grooming techniques:

Remember that sex offenders trick families and communities as well as kids. Learn to recognize red-flag behaviors and to confront any questionable behavior. Pay attention to any uneasy feelings you may have about a person. Some folks call it their "sixth sense" or "intuition." Many caregivers of child abuse victims report that they had an uneasy feeling about a person but decided that they were over-reacting. Later, they learned that the person had offended their child. Remember that kids cannot protect themselves against offenders; they depend on their caregivers to keep them safe.

Registered sex offenders:

Know who the registered sex offenders are in your neighborhood by checking online at <http://sexoffenders.oregon.gov> and/or call the Oregon State Police at 503-378-3725 x 44429 to get a list of offenders in your zip code. Remember, however, that sex offenders only have a 3% chance of getting caught, and they commit an average of 120 separate crimes before they are apprehended. In addition, fewer than 5% of child victims tell anyone. Therefore, not all offenders will be registered. Careful supervision is paramount.

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Prevention education:

Get comfortable doing regular safety/prevention talks with your children. There is a balance between scaring kids by overdoing it and appropriate safety education. Go to the library. Read a sampling of prevention books and decide on one you like best. Have a safety talk at least once every 2-3 months that includes personal safety/touching rules. As kids get older, include safety about Internet use, drug awareness, choking games (which are becoming more common), cutting behavior, and dating safety/domestic violence. School counselors are good resource people for ideas on how to talk to your kids and what the current safety issues are in your area. Attend any parent workshops the school may offer on safety. Be present at any prevention education talks the school gives to classrooms so you can use the same language and do follow-up education.

Asking kids safety questions/screening for abuse:

Children keep the secret of child sexual abuse for many reasons. To the child, the reasons are good ones. Some children do not tell because they are not asked. Besides having regular safety talks, make it a habit to check in with your kids after any overnight visits with friends, any camp outs, or other events. Know where your child will be going and who they will be with. Check in on them while they are away. When they return, ask if anything different or unusual happened. Provide opportunities for children to tell and plan to stay calm if your child reports something.

Talk to your older children:

It is extremely important to talk to your preteens and teens about the risks of sexually touching someone younger. Generally, authorities consider the touching of another child that is three or more years younger in age, abuse. Advise your teens about the significance of age difference when choosing a girlfriend or boyfriend. Given the popularity of the Internet and easy access to pornography, youth (and boys in particular) sometimes reenact what they have seen online by sexually touching younger children. Educate your children about the fact that they could be arrested through the Juvenile Court System for such a choice. Consider carefully before you give permission for your preteen or teen son to provide childcare for younger children.

Recognizing the signs of abuse:

Sometimes there are no clues that a child is being or has been abused. But some children let us know by their behaviors that they are not okay. There is no set of behaviors that is diagnostic of child sexual abuse, and behavior difficulties can be a clue to other problems besides abuse. The best way for us to know if abuse has happened is if children tell us. However, changes in behaviors, particularly if they are sudden, should be a red flag and a signal for parents to inquire and check in with kids. Some examples of red-flag behaviors include unusual sexual knowledge and/or interest in sexual acts, fear of someone or some place, sleep disturbance, withdrawal, school difficulties, anxiety, and particularly self-harm and risk-taking choices.

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How to respond if your child makes statements of abuse:

It is important for caregivers to plan ahead how they might respond if their child discloses abuse. Disclosure is usually a process, particularly for young children, not a one-time event. Therefore, children may “test the waters” to see if you can handle what they might say. Children might begin with a vague statement such as “I don’t like our neighbor.” It is up to you to let your child know that you want to hear more and that you can handle hearing anything your child wants to tell you. Remember that your job is to be an approachable, calm and supportive parent. You are not a trained investigator. If your child makes a disclosure, it is okay to ask a few clarifying questions, but refrain from asking too many questions because then the child may not want to talk when s/he is interviewed by a professional. It is also imperative that you report the concerns to the child abuse hotline at 971-673-7112 or call your local law enforcement agency right away. You need to report if you have concerns about child abuse. You do not need to know for sure that the abuse happened in order to report. It is the job of specially trained professionals to determine what may have happened.

Other On-Line Resources: www.darkness2light.org which includes seven steps to protecting children and www.missingkids.com for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. They have free educational materials for caregivers.