
A Guide for parents of children with special healthcare needs

PROTECTING YOUR CHILD FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

Children who have been identified as having a disability are at an increased risk for becoming victims of sexual abuse. It is estimated that children with disabilities are 2.9 times more likely than children without disabilities to be sexually abused. Within those disabilities, children with intellectual and mental health disabilities are at 4.6 times the risk of their non-disabled peers for sexual abuse. (Smith & Harrell, 2013)

Identifying signs and symptoms in children with disabilities can often be difficult due to the nature of the disability. It is important to know how to best protect your child, know when to become concerned, and understand what to do in situations that are cause for concern. This guide is intended to give parents tools and resources needed to protect their child(ren). Please remember that each child and situation is unique therefore each family may need to modify to fit their individual needs.

Sexual Abuse is defined as the utilization of a child for sexual gratification by an adult or older child in a position of power, or permitting another person to do so.

Planning and Prevention

A great deal of the time children are sexually abused by someone they know and trust. Abusers often gain trust from the family and child prior to any abuse occurring. Setting clear expectations and standards of care allows parents to recognize when there may be cause for concern.

- ❖ Address your child's specific vulnerabilities by creating "rules" for specific situations. These rules should be clear to the child as well as their caregiver. Have open conversations with your child's caregivers and set appropriate limits and expectations of care. For instance, if your child needs assistance toileting, be specific in the type of assistance they need and advise the caregiver that these same things have been discussed with the child as well. Be sure to tell the child's caregiver it is important to respect the child's personal space and privacy. Therefore the caregiver should only be providing the needed amount of support necessary.
- ❖ Making sure your child is never in a one on one situation with an adult is ideal but not always possible. If possible try to create circumstances where two people are always present. In instances where it is not possible, try coming up with strategies to keep your child safe. For instance, if they must go behind closed doors then there are options such as leaving the door propped open or installing a viewing window in the door. Video monitoring cameras may also be a good option whenever appropriate and possible.
- ❖ Make sure the caregiver has passed a comprehensive (state and federal) criminal background check. This may need to be revisited on a yearly basis.
- ❖ Ask the caregiver and agency providing care what their policies are if an allegation of abuse were to occur. It is mandated by law that allegations or suspicions of abuse be reported to the authorities.
- ❖ Know and understand about sexual development and appropriate behaviors. Be prepared to properly respond to sexual behaviors in children. Children with disabilities are the same as their peers in that they are sexual beings and have sexual feelings. Some aspects of sexual development may follow chronological age while other aspects may follow emotional or cognitive development. Don't be afraid to ask for input from your child's doctors, therapists, teachers, etc on what are appropriate behaviors.
- ❖ Often times the child will have feelings they don't understand or have the ability to communicate, therefore it is important to talk to your child in a language that is honest and that they can understand. Teaching your child about their body, what touches are appropriate, and whom may touch them should begin as early as infancy. For instance, if your child needs assistance pulling down their pants for toileting, the child should know that it is okay for specific caregivers to help them pull off their pants to go to the bathroom, but it is not okay for anyone to help them pull off their pants and ask them to sit on their lap.

- ❖ Identify “safe” people for your child to go to for help and support. These safe adults should be accessible to the child in different places so there may be a need for several “safe” adults. For example, if your child feels uncomfortable in a situation or needs help on the school bus/classroom/camp/etc, the child should know who they can go to immediately that will protect them. In instances where the child may not know anyone or have a “safe person” already identified, many advocates suggest encouraging the child to seek out a woman rather than a man.
- ❖ Creating a “safe word” is another strategy you could implement not just for sexual abuse but for any situation where your child does not feel safe. Only you and the child would know the safe word. If they are ever in a situation where they do not feel safe they call you and say that word. You know in an instant that you need to go pick up the child. When you have picked up the child you can then discuss why they didn’t feel safe and take the appropriate actions.

Always listen to what your child is trying to tell you and believe what they are saying.

How to talk to your child

Talking with your child about sexual health and appropriate behaviors can be difficult for any parent. It can be especially challenging for families who have children with disabilities and/or special health care needs for a variety of reasons. Instead of having “the talk”, make these ongoing conversations that happen throughout each stage of development and as circumstances change. Having every day conversations about personal space, boundaries, touching, and saying “no” helps protect your child from sexual abuse. ***It is important to remember that all human beings are sexual so it is perfectly natural for all children, despite any challenges they face, to have sexual feelings and questions that require your care and guidance.*** Giving your child clear and accurate information keeps the dialogue open and reinforces to the child that they can talk with you about questions they have. Having this open dialogue also ensures that your child is getting correct information and not getting information from other children, or worse, perpetrators. When in doubt about what is developmentally appropriate ask your child’s doctors and/or care teams or check out the resources given at the end of this guide.

- ❖ For healthier sexual development and safety, all children should know and use the correct names for all body parts. Using nicknames can be confusing and makes it more difficult for parents, caregivers, and law enforcement to get a clear understanding of what the child may be trying to communicate.
- ❖ Provide age appropriate and/or developmentally appropriate explanations about the differences between girls and boys as well as where babies come from.

- ❖ Puberty will happen with every child regardless of their ability. Have open conversations with your child about what is happening to their body and prepare them for the things that are going to happen.
- ❖ Teach your child about privacy and what types of things are only done in private. For instance, things like changing clothes or masturbation should be done in private behind a closed door. Model respect for your child's privacy by asking for permission or telling them beforehand what you are going to do or simply by knocking on the door before entering.
- ❖ Discussing appropriate touch can be difficult especially when the child is frequently touched by therapists, medical personnel, and caregivers in a way that they don't particularly like but is necessary. Describing touch as good or bad can be confusing and set up negative connotations for future healthy touches. Instead it may be more appropriate to discuss touch using concrete concepts like "red flag" or "green flag". For instance, explain to the child that while getting help to wipe his bottom is a green flag but someone rubbing his bottom when not using the toilet is a red flag. Using ones mouth to kiss or touch someone else's body parts should always be a "red flag". It may be necessary to use dolls, pictures, or role play to help children understand the differences. It is also important for children to understand that is not okay for anyone to give them red flag touches as well as its not okay for the child to give anyone a red flag touch at this time in their life.
- ❖ Saying "no" is an important safety skill. You can teach your child to say no in various ways. It can be through verbalizations, head shaking, fist waving, facial expressions, etc. Practice with your child using whatever skills your child has to communicate a firm no. Everyone, including parents, should also respect the no when asking the child to do things such as give a hug or kiss. By parents modeling that the no is respected the child learns that they have control over how a person touches their bodies. It also important to reinforce to the child that they too have to respect when another person tells them no.
- ❖ It is common for young children to explore their own bodies or engage in sexual behaviors with playmates. This is a time when parents need to react clearly and calmly to reinforce all the other techniques they have taught the child. For instance, if your child and a playmate are taking their clothes off and comparing their bodies you respond by reminding the child that they play with their clothes on.
- ❖ Children need to understand the range of behaviors that are sexual abuse. Be sure to include in your discussions that the rules apply to both the child getting touched and being touched by someone else. Also consider other types of outlets that a perpetrator may expose your child such as pornography on the television or internet and have safeguards in place.

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Signs & Symptoms

Identifying the signs and symptoms that your child with a disability may be a victim of sexual abuse can be complicated. Many of the traditional physical and behavioral signs can be a part of your everyday life. For instance, frequent urinary tract infections can be a sign of sexual abuse but it is also common among children with various types of disorders or incontinence. Therefore it is important that you discuss any concerns with your physician, therapist, or member of the child's care team.

- ❖ Some physical signs to look for are: any sexually transmitted disease or infection; bruised/dilated genitals or rectum; pregnancy; difficulty/pain in walking or sitting; foreign matter in bladder, rectum or urethra; pelvic inflammatory disease; torn, stained or bloody underclothing; recurrent urinary tract infections
- ❖ Potential behavioral signs to look for are: aggressive, overt sexual behavior; drawing pictures of people with genitals; cruelty to animals without physiological basis; Pre-mature knowledge of explicit sexual acts; sleep disorders; taking frequent baths; starting fires; self-inflicted injuries; expresses fear of a particular person or place; reports sexual abuse. **If the child reports sexual abuse believe them and remind the child that it is not their fault!**
- ❖ Behaviors to watch for from the adults providing care to the child are: refuses to let child set their own limits and doesn't respect the boundaries the child and parent have put in place; insists on spending time alone with child; encourages silence or secrets with children; is overly interested in the sexual development of the child; treats child more like a peer by sharing personal or private information that is inappropriate.

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What to do

Always listen to what your child is trying to tell you and believe what they are saying. Emphasize to the child that it is not their fault and that you will do everything you can to make them feel safe.

If you suspect that your child or another child has been sexually abuse it is your duty to report this to the authorities. This should be done first. **Indiana law requires every person to report suspected child abuse and neglect.** Callers can remain anonymous and are immune from all civil and criminal liability, provided they have made the report in good faith.

When you call Indiana Department of Child Services, it is important that you have all of the identifying information in front of you: name, age of each child, address, phone number. You may call without this information, but it helps Indiana Department of Child Services quickly investigate. When you are describing a situation, remain calm and maintain a “factual” manner with dates, eyewitness observations and direct conversations.

To report abuse in Indiana call 1-800-800-5556. The number is answered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Don't attempt to interview the child or ask the child repeated questions. This can frighten and confuse the child which may skew the investigation.

You may call the agency providing care if you wish to tell them of your concerns. You do not have to do this but you will need to at least contact them to advise them not to send out or allow your child near the accused perpetrator.

This may be a difficult time for you, your child, and your family. Remain calm and focus on protecting your child and providing your child with all the supports and treatments they need. Don't forget that there are resources, people and agencies who care and are there to help. Reach out to them.

Resources

We encourage to learn more about sexual abuse and how to protect your child.

-  Prevent Child Abuse America: www.preventchildabuse.org
-  Stop It Now! www.stopitnow.org
-  Darkness to Light: www.d2l.org
-  National Sexual Violence Resource Center: www.nsvrc.org

REFERENCES

Child Welfare Information Gateway (2012). *The risk and prevention of maltreatment of children with disabilities*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

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Smith, N., & Harrell, S. (2013, March). *Sexual Abuse of Children with Disabilities: A National Snapshot*. Retrieved from Vera Institute of Justice: www.vera.org/pubs/sexual-abuse-children-with-disabilities