Protecting children: helpful rules to keep young people safe

Most parents, caregivers and early childhood educators want to educate children about abuse, but are not sure how to go about it. These guidelines will help them teach children how to be safe. Remember, you risk doing more harm to the child by avoiding the subject than by saying too much. Adults who talk openly will be seen by children as approachable, and children will feel free to bring their worries and concerns to them.



Tips for families

As a family, there are many ways that you can work together to ensure the safety of your children. Here are some suggestions:

An unattended child is a child at risk. A parent should arrange with their child an alternative place to wait if they are delayed. A child care provider should never leave a child unattended, even if this means waiting for a parent who is late.

- **Whenever possible, have children walk in pairs or groups.** Children should always travel the same way home.
- **Parents should know the adults who work with the children at school, in child care and in recreational programs.** Conversely, those adults who work with children should try to know the parents.
- **Some families use a secret code.** Their children are never to go with anyone, not even close family friends, unless such friends are able to give the child this code. Once the code has been used, it should be changed. The person who is providing child care should never allow the child to leave with an unfamiliar adult, unless the parent has authorized it.
- **Never allow young children to go to a public washroom unattended.**
- **Parents should check a child care situation thoroughly.** Latchkey children should be taught never to admit visitors into their homes and never to let telephone callers know they are alone.
- **There are many educational resources for families and child care workers.** As adults responsible for the care of young children, parents, caregivers and early childhood educators should become knowledgeable about child abuse detection and reporting.

What to tell a child

Aside from your family rules, there are additional tips that you will want to share with your children regarding their interaction with adults.

- Explain to children the difference between "good touches" and "bad touches," and encourage them to listen to their feelings.
- Give children the self-confidence to assert themselves if they get a “no” feeling because someone either touched them or asked them to do something they felt was not right.
- Give children permission to say, "No, don't touch me," to that person, and reassure them that it’s not rude to do so.
- Impress upon children that they must tell an adult they trust, if anyone—even someone they love—threatens or touches them in a way that doesn't feel right. Explain to them that this is not something that they should keep secret, even if that person told them not to tell.

If a child tells you that he or she has been approached or assaulted, here are some suggested steps that you—as the adult—should take:

- Listen to the child's story and let him or her tell you in his or her own words, or with drawings or dolls if that is easier, but don't suggest words or modify what is being said. Your ideas might confuse the truth.
- Young children seldom lie about sexual abuse. Reassure the child that you believe what he or she has said, and that you are glad to have been told about it.
- Do not blame the child, show horror or anger, or encourage any belief in the child that this was his or her fault.
- Support the child and recognize the child's feelings—whether they are anger, fear, sadness or anxiety—and assure the child that you will protect him or her from any further abuse.
- Let the child know that you are going to take steps to make this stop, but don't burden the child with details about what happens next. Professionals can help you guide the child through this process.
- If you suspect that a child has been abused, you must by law call the police or child protection officials at once.
- If a child is to be interviewed by a social worker or police officer, ensure that someone close to the child is also present.

Without proper awareness, children may be uneducated about assault, their rights and how to say "No." Ensure that you—as the child's educator, caregiver or parent—discuss possible dangers with children and how they can remain safe. Reinforce that the children can come to you with any additional questions that they have, or if they are ever unsure about any inappropriate behaviours toward them.