

# How to Protect Yourself and Your Family

One of the major reasons why it is important to be informed about sexual assault is so that you can take steps to prevent it. And, there are indeed steps you can take to reduce your risk of sexual assault, your child's risk, or the risk facing others.

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## For Parents:

- Inform children that it is wrong for adults to engage children in sexual activity.
- Stress to your child that he or she should feel comfortable telling you anything, especially if it involves another adult. If your child does not feel comfortable being completely honest with you, then together you should find another trusted adult your child can talk to in confidence.
- Make an effort to know the people with whom your child is spending time.
- Knowledge is power. This is especially true for protecting children from sexual assault. Teach your children about their bodies, give them the correct language to use when describing their private parts. Emphasize that those parts are private.
- Make sure you know where each of your children is at all times. Know your children's friends and be clear with your children about the places and homes they may visit. Make it a rule that your children check in with you when they arrive at or depart from a particular location and when there is a change in plans. You should also let them know when YOU are running late or if your plans have changed so that they can see the rule is for safety purposes and not being used to "check up" on them.
- Never leave children unattended in an automobile, whether it is running or not. Children should never be left unsupervised or allowed to spend time alone, or with others, in automobiles, as the potential dangers to their safety outweigh any perceived convenience or "fun." Remind children NEVER to hitchhike, approach a car or engage in a conversation with anyone in a car who they do not know or trust, or go anywhere with anyone without getting your permission first.
- Be involved in your children's activities. As an active participant, you will have a better opportunity to observe how the adults in charge interact with your children. If you are concerned about anyone's behavior, take it up with the sponsoring organization.
- Listen to your children. Pay attention if they tell you that they do not want to be with someone or go somewhere. This may be an indication of more than a personality conflict or lack of interest in the activity or event.
- Notice when someone shows one or all of your children a great deal of attention or begins giving them gifts. Take the time to talk to your children about this person and find out why the person is acting in this way.

- Teach your children that they have the right to say NO to any unwelcome, uncomfortable, or confusing touch or actions by others. Teach them to tell you immediately if this happens. Reassure them that you are there to help and it is okay to tell you anything.
- Be sensitive to any changes in your children's behavior or attitude. Encourage open communication and learn how to be an active listener. Look and listen to small cues and clues that something may be troubling your children, because children are not always comfortable disclosing disturbing events or feelings. This may be because they are concerned about your reaction to their problems. If your children do confide problems to you, strive to remain calm, non-critical, and nonjudgmental. Listen compassionately to their concern and work with them to get the help they need to resolve the problem.
- Be sure to screen babysitters and caregivers. Many states now have public registries that allow parents to screen individuals for prior criminal records and sex offenses. Check references with other families who have used the caregiver or babysitter. Once you have chosen the caregiver, drop in unexpectedly to see how your children are doing. Ask your children how the experience with the caregiver was, and listen carefully to their responses.
- Practice basic safety skills with your children. Make an outing to a mall or a park a "teachable" experience in which your children can practice checking with you, using pay phones, going to the restroom with a friend, and locating the adults who can help if they need assistance. Remember that allowing your children to wear clothing or carry items in public on which their name is displayed can bring about unwelcome attention from inappropriate people who may be looking for a way to start a conversation with your children.
- Remember that there is no substitute for your attention and supervision. Being available and taking time to really know and listen to your children helps build feelings of safety and security.
- Also remember that in the vast majority of cases (up to 90%), children are molested by someone they know. Your efforts at keeping your child safe must be informed by this fact and not focused exclusively on the danger that strangers may present.

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### **For Teenagers**

Adolescence is a scary time for children, and one in which they are most at risk for sexual assault. Prepare for the possibility that as adolescents, they may engage in some risk-taking behavior and try to minimize that risk by educating them about the danger of sexual assault by friends, acquaintances, or others. This danger is enhanced when teenagers are abusing drugs or alcohol.

- Encourage your teenager to trust her or his instincts and if a situation makes him or her uneasy, to get out of it.

- Stress to them that they can always talk to you if they have been hurt or scared (regardless of the circumstances surrounding the incident).
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### **For You**

Trust your instincts when you are with someone about whom you feel uncomfortable (e.g., in an elevator, in a car, in your home). This can be especially difficult for both children and adults who have been socialized to be polite.

Do not talk yourself out of feeling uncomfortable being alone with someone simply because he or she is an acquaintance or a friend of a friend—most sexual abusers are someone the victim knows. Be wary of friends or dates who test your boundaries by making unwanted physical advances to you and then ignore or minimize your protests and other signs that you do not like their behavior.

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### **To Enhance Community Safety, Community Members Can:**

- Talk openly about the sexual assault of adults and children, men, women, boys, and girls.
- Understand the issues involved in sexual assault. Know the statistics.
- Assume preventing sexual assault is everyone's responsibility.
- Talk to your children about personal safety issues as they relate to child sexual abuse. Do this when you talk to your children about bike safety, crossing the street, or talking to strangers. It is, in many ways, just another personal safety rule about which children need to be aware.
- Increase your knowledge about risk reduction measures you can take to protect yourself.
- Invite your local law enforcement, probation/ parole department, rape crisis center, or child abuse prevention organization to a neighborhood discussion group to learn about the issue and to process people's emotions.
- Get to know your neighbors.
- Organize neighborhood block watches, if desired by your neighbors.
- Do not wait until you are informed that a sex offender is living nearby to begin educating yourself and family on issues of sexual assault.

- Find out what the statistics on child sexual abuse, adult sexual assault, offender arrest, and incarceration are in your community.
  - Beware of the media's ability to sensationalize the most horrific of stories concerning the sexual assault of children or adults. These stories, while real and very frightening, are not the norm.
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