




# Protecting Your Child from Sexual Abuse

*Together We Can  
Prevent the Sexual  
Abuse of Children*





Efforts to prevent child sexual abuse over the past decade are showing results and confirmed cases are down. Yet still too many children are at risk of being sexually abused or exploited. As a parent, you can be your child's best protection. This tip card aims to teach you how.

Child sexual abuse is a "silent epidemic" according to the American Medical Association.<sup>1</sup> It is so widespread that each of us probably knows someone who has been victimized or who has abused. One in four adult women and one in six adult men report having been sexually abused before 18 years of age.<sup>2</sup> The average age for reported sexual abuse today is nine years of age; 20 percent of its victims are even younger.<sup>3</sup> Children with physical or developmental disabilities are at higher risk for sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse happens in rural and urban areas, and in all economic, educational, racial, and cultural groups.<sup>4</sup>

## What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse includes any sexual contact between an adult and a child or a teen. It can also include sexual contact between children when one child is more powerful than the other because of age (usually 3 years older or more), size, or intellectual development.

Child sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching acts. Both are damaging to children and teens and are against the law.

**Abusive touching** behaviors include:

- ▶ Fondling or rubbing up against a child's genitals, buttocks, or breasts
- ▶ Penetration of the child's mouth, anus, or vagina by the abuser or with an object

- ▶ Coercing a child to fondle him/herself, the abuser, or another child

Abusive non-touching behaviors include:

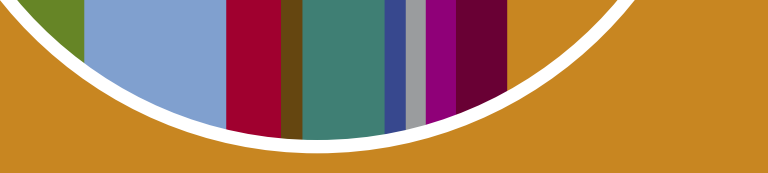
- ▶ Exposing oneself to a child in a lewd way
- ▶ Inappropriately viewing or violating private behaviors of a child or teen (e.g., undressing, bathing)
- ▶ Taking sexually explicit or provocative photographs of a child
- ▶ Showing pornography or sexually suggestive images to children
- ▶ Talking in sexually explicit or suggestive ways to children in person, by phone, by Internet, or via text messages

## Who Sexually Abuses Children?

In an estimated 90 percent or more of cases, the child knows and trusts the person who commits the abuse.<sup>5</sup> Most are either family members or other trusted adults who seek easy access to children through their work in schools, youth groups, sports teams, religious organizations, and other settings where children live and play.

Abusers work diligently to earn the trust of children. They typically build up to the abuse slowly beginning with “accidental touching,” then to cuddling, horseplay, wrestling, backrubs, massages, and sometimes presenting sex play as a game.<sup>6</sup> Most children do not fully understand what’s happening, and when they do, many are led by their abusers to believe they are to blame for what has happened.





Because those who sexually abuse children often appear friendly, trustworthy, and look and act like everyone else, it's important to be aware of signs that might indicate an adult poses a risk to a child. Do you know someone who:

- ▶ Doesn't appear to have adult friends and prefers to spend free time interacting with children and teens who are not his own?
- ▶ Finds opportunities to be alone with a child or teen when adults are not likely to interrupt (e.g., car rides, special trips, babysitting)?
- ▶ Ignores a child's verbal or physical cues that he or she doesn't want to be hugged, kissed, or tickled?
- ▶ Seems to have a different "special" child or teen friend of a particular age or appearance from year to year?
- ▶ Doesn't respect a child's or teen's privacy in the bathroom or bedroom?
- ▶ Gives a child or teen money or gifts for no particular occasion?
- ▶ Discusses or asks a child or teen to discuss sexual experiences or feelings?
- ▶ Views child pornography through videos, photos, or the Internet? The majority of men convicted for possessing child porn also admit to having committed "hands on" offenses.<sup>7</sup> Viewing, possessing, or producing child pornography is illegal.

# Do Children Abuse Other Children?

While exploring sexuality is a developmentally normal and expected part of growing up, sometimes children are involved in activities with one another that can be inappropriate, coercive, or abusive. You can learn to assess situations by asking yourself:

- ▶ Is this behavior causing a problem for the child or other children?
- ▶ Is one child larger in size and/or is more than three years older in age?
- ▶ Does one child have greater mental, emotional, or physical ability?
- ▶ Does one child appear to have been coerced into the activity through threats, bribes, or physical force?

## Tips to Help Protect Your Child

Since an estimated 80 percent of sexual abuse occurs when a child or teen and an adult are alone, one of the easiest ways you can significantly increase your child's safety is to increase supervision and eliminate "one child/one adult" situations whenever possible.

Talking with your child is another essential way you can protect them. Good communication and trust will give them the confidence to talk to you about any type of touching that might be confusing.





Remember, begin these conversations when children are young and reinforce prevention messages often. Here are five prevention messages to share with your child:

- 1 “All parts of our bodies are good and we can speak about them respectfully.” (It’s OK to use the right names for private body parts: penis, vagina, breasts, and buttocks. If adults are embarrassed to use those names, children often follow their parents’ lead and also become too embarrassed to tell if someone is being sexually inappropriate or abusing them.)
- 2 “Grown-ups and older children have no business ‘playing’ with your private body parts. Sometimes grown-ups need to help young children with washing or wiping these private parts, but that’s not the same as playing with them. Sometimes doctors need to examine you. But it’s never without a nurse or parent present and it’s never a secret.”
- 3 “Grown-ups and older children never, ever need help from children with their private parts. If someone asks you for this kind of help, tell me right away, even if it’s someone in our family or someone we know. If anyone shows you their private parts, pictures of private parts, or asks to take pictures of your private parts, you can tell me. I promise I will listen and not be angry. If you ever feel ‘mixed up’ about secrets, feelings, or private body parts, tell me and I promise to help you.”


- 4 “Never touch other children’s private body parts. It will be upsetting to them, their parents, teachers, and friends. If you are curious about this, come tell me and we can talk about it.”
- 5 “Surprises are good for children but secrets are not. Surprises are secrets meant to be told, like a surprise party. But secrets can be dangerous because they don’t let me know if you’re safe. If a friend is playing with matches, someone offers you drugs, or someone asks you to help them with their private body parts, I won’t be able to keep you safe unless you tell me about it.”

## How Can I Tell If My Child Has Been Sexually Abused?

Physical signs of sexual abuse are not common but these are signs you can look for:

- ▶ Trouble walking or sitting
- ▶ Complaints of pain upon urination
- ▶ Irritation, abrasions, swelling, skin tears, bleeding or infection of genitals or anus
- ▶ Unexplained injuries around the mouth
- ▶ Roughened or calloused area between buttocks
- ▶ Sexually transmitted disease
- ▶ Teenage pregnancy





Remember that children often show changes in behavior when they are under stress for many reasons, so don't assume that sexual abuse has occurred. If you see these signs, ask your child what is bothering or hurting them, no matter what you think is the cause.

- ▶ Headaches, stomach pain, or chronic pain
- ▶ Change in appetite
- ▶ Significant weight gain or loss
- ▶ Bathroom accidents
- ▶ Sleeping problems or nightmares
- ▶ New words for private body parts that were not learned at home
- ▶ Sexual activity with toys, dolls, or other children
- ▶ Asking not to be left alone with a certain adult, child, or babysitter. Ask your child what it is about that person or what they do that makes your child not want to be around them. Sometimes a child may not be ready to provide details. Nonetheless, a parent would be wise to grant the child's request.
- ▶ Mood changes when left with a certain person (e.g., going from talkative and cheerful to quiet and withdrawn)
- ▶ Cutting or self-mutilation
- ▶ Suicidal behavior




# What Can I Do If I Think Sexual Abuse Has Occurred?

Say to your child: “You seem upset. I’d really like for you to tell me why, so I can help you. No matter what you tell me, I love you and I won’t get angry.” Some children may not be ready to tell, but just knowing that a caring adult is there when they are ready may give them the confidence to eventually disclose.

If your child tells you that someone is abusing them:

- ▶ Remain calm. Responding in an upset way may make the child feel badly that he or she told and could make them stop sharing information.
- ▶ Tell your child: “I believe you. You’re not to blame. You’re brave to tell me. I will protect you.”
- ▶ Ask open-ended questions that require more than a yes or no answer. This allows you to gain more information and avoids planting ideas in your child’s mind that may not reflect what actually happened. Avoid having your child repeat what they have said. This will assist specially trained investigators later when they interview your child.<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ Contact the local Department of Children and Families, your child’s pediatrician, or the police, who will arrange for the child to be interviewed by a professional skilled in this area.



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- ▶ Make a plan for safety so the child will not be left vulnerable to the alleged abuser's actions if they learn or suspect the child has disclosed.
  - ▶ Get support for yourself. Being involved in a disclosure of sexual abuse can be upsetting and you may want to seek confidential support from a trusted family member, friend, or professional.

## ***Treatment:***

For healing to begin, the child first needs to be kept safe from further abuse. Physical symptoms resulting from sexual abuse usually heal quickly and completely. Children who have been abused are not “damaged” physically. However, the emotional trauma many children experience may be much more long-lasting and usually requires mental health therapy. Fortunately in Massachusetts, there are many professionals qualified to help children deal with the abuse and the conflicted feelings they have because someone violated their trust.

## **Reporting, Prevention, and Treatment Resources**

**Remember, reporting suspected child sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility — whether you are a mandated reporter or a private citizen.**

- ▶ **Contact the Department of Children and Families at (617) 748-2444 or visit [www.mass.gov/dcf](http://www.mass.gov/dcf) to locate the nearest office.**
- ▶ **After hours, call the Child-At-Risk Hotline at (800) 792-5200.**

To learn how you can prevent child sexual abuse:

- ▶ Visit the **Enough Abuse Campaign** at [www.enoughabuse.org](http://www.enoughabuse.org). “Join the Movement” and receive the free “10 Conversations,” an email educational series.

For treatment resources:

- ▶ **Massachusetts Children’s Alliance:** (617) 573-9800 or visit [www.machildrensalliance.org](http://www.machildrensalliance.org) to find your nearest Children’s Advocacy Center
- ▶ **Massachusetts Adolescent Sex Offender Coalition:** (413) 540-0712 or visit [www.masoc.net](http://www.masoc.net)
- ▶ **Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children:** (617) 587-1500 or visit [www.mspcc.org](http://www.mspcc.org)
- ▶ **Massachusetts Rape Crisis Center:** (800) 841-8371 or visit [www.barcc.org](http://www.barcc.org)
- ▶ **Massachusetts Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers:** (413) 427-6903 or visit [www.matsa.org](http://www.matsa.org)

For anonymous and confidential advice about a concerning situation:

- ▶ **STOP IT NOW!:** 1-888-PREVENT or visit [www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)

Citations and references for this tip card are available upon request.

The information contained in this publication does not constitute legal advice and should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician or other doctor. Indicators and recommendations may vary based on individual facts and circumstances.



For additional copies:

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[www.massmed.org/violence](http://www.massmed.org/violence)

(800) 322-2303, x7373

[dph@mms.org](mailto:dph@mms.org)



## CAMPAIGN AGAINST VIOLENCE

MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY  
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