

7 Steps to Protecting our Children From Sexual Abuse

Introduction

What is child sexual abuse?

- Any sexual act between an adult and a minor or between two minors when one exerts power over the other.
- Forcing, coercing or persuading a child to engage in any type of sexual act.
- This, of course, includes sexual contact.
- It also includes non-contact acts such as exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, voyeurism and communicating in a sexual manner by phone or Internet.

Introduction

- An agonizing and traumatic experience for its victims.
- A crime punishable by law.

Introduction

- This presentation is only the beginning.
- Child sexual abuse is a very complex problem, and this presentation touches on only a small part of it.
- The information we provide is not a substitute for the advice of professionals.
- It is only to give you simple, proactive steps to help protect children.

Introduction

- "My child's school has a program to teach children about sexual abuse prevention- but what about adults?"
- Shouldn't we be responsible for the protection of children?"
- A child's safety is an adult's job.

Introduction

- Children are often taught how to keep themselves safe from sexual abuse - and that's important for them to learn - but it's no substitute for adult responsibility.
- We make sure children wear seat belts.
- We walk them across busy streets.
- We store toxic household cleaners out of reach.
- Why, then, would we leave the job of preventing child sexual abuse solely to children?

Introduction

- Imagine how difficult it is for a child to say "no" to a parent, a teacher, a coach, or clergy.

Introduction

- Even the adults we trust to protect children can't always be trusted.
- Coaches, teachers, clergy, and parents are authority figures children feel they can trust.
- Yet, a large percentage of those who sexually abuse children are from this group.

Introduction

- These are adults who have the opportunity to "groom" children with affection and attention, making it difficult for children to identify certain behaviors as abuse.
- And they know that children have been taught to "mind" them.
- This is why programs that focus on adult responsibility are essential.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- Learn the facts and understand the risks.
- Realities - not trust - should influence your decisions regarding children.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- "We live in a beautiful, safe neighborhood. None of these children could be victims of sexual abuse, right?"
- It is highly likely that you know a child who has been or is being abused.
- Experts estimate that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before their 18th birthdays.
- This means that in any classroom or neighborhood full of children, there are children who are silently bearing the burden of sexual abuse.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- 1 in 5 children are sexually solicited while on the Internet.
- Nearly 70% of all reported sexual assaults (including assaults on adults) occur to children ages 17 and under.
- The average age for reported sexual abuse is 9 years old.
- Approximately 20% of the victims of sexual abuse are under age eight.
- 50% of all victims of forcible sodomy, sexual assault with an object, and forcible fondling are under age twelve.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- Most child victims never report the abuse.
- Sexually abused children who keep it a secret or who "tell" and are not believed are at greater risk than the general population for psychological, emotional, social, and physical problems, often lasting into adulthood.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- It is also likely that you know an abuser.
- The greatest risk to children doesn't come from strangers but from friends and family.
- 30-40% of children are abused by family members.
- As many as 60% are abused by people the family trusts- abusers frequently try to form a trusting relationship with parents.
- Nearly 40% are abused by older or larger children.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- People who abuse children look and act just like every one else.
- In fact, they often go out of their way to appear trustworthy to gain access to children.
- Those who sexually abuse children are drawn to settings where they can gain easy access to children, such as sports leagues, faith centers, clubs, and schools.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- “It can't happen in my family. I could tell if someone I know is an abuser.”
- Yet in more than 90% of sexual abuse cases the child and the child's family know and trust the abuser.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- Consequences to children and to our society begin immediately.
- Child sexual abuse is a direct source of a number of problems facing us.
- Consequences to children and to our society begin immediately.
- Child sexual abuse is a direct source of a number of problems facing us.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- 70-80% of sexual abuse survivors report excessive drug and alcohol use.
- One study showed that among male survivors, 50% have suicidal thoughts and more than 20% attempt suicide.
- Young girls who are sexually abused are more likely to develop eating disorders as adolescents.
- More than 60% of teen first pregnancies are preceded by experiences of molestation, rape or attempted rape.
- The average age of the offenders is 27 years old.

Step 1: Learn the Facts

- Approximately 40% of sex offenders report sexual abuse as children.
- Both males and females who have been sexually abused are more likely to engage in prostitution.
- Approximately 70% of sexual offenders of children have between 1 and 9 victims; 20-25% have 10 to 40 victims.
- Serial child molesters may have as many as 400 victims in their lifetimes.

Step 2: Minimize Opportunity

- If you eliminate or reduce one-adult/one-child situations, you'll dramatically lower the risk of sexual abuse for children.

Step 2: Minimize Opportunity

- "An organization in my community has programs for children, but puts no limits on one-adult/one-child situations. Should I be concerned?"
- More than 80% of sexual abuse cases occur in one-adult/one-child situations.

Step 2: Minimize Opportunity

Reduce the risk. Protect children.

- Understand that abusers often become friendly with potential victims and their families, enjoying family activities, earning trust, and gaining time alone with children.
- Think carefully about the safety of any one-adult/one-child situations.
- Choose group situations when possible.

Step 2: Minimize Opportunity

- Think carefully about the safety of situations in which older youth have access to younger children.
- Make sure that multiple adults are present who can supervise.
- Set an example by personally avoiding one-adult/one-child situations with children other than your own.
- Monitor children's Internet use. Offenders use the Internet to lure children into physical contact.
- Reduce the risk. Insist on policy.

Step 2: Minimize Opportunity

- Create and lobby for policies reducing or eliminating one-adult/one-child situations in all youth-serving organizations, such as faith groups, sports teams, and school clubs.
- These policies should ensure that all activities can be interrupted and observed.
- Talk with program administrators about the supervision of older youth who have responsibility for the care of children.

Step 2: Minimize Opportunity

- Insist on screenings that include criminal background checks, personal interviews, and professional recommendations for all adults who serve children.
- Avoid programs that do not use ALL of these methods.
- Insist that youth-serving organizations train their staff and volunteers to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse.
- Ensure that youth-serving organizations have policies for dealing with suspicious situations and reports of abuse.

Step 2: Minimize Opportunity

- One-on-one time with a trusted adult is healthy and valuable for a child.
- It builds self-esteem and deepens relationships.
- There are things you can do to protect children when you want them to have time alone with another adult.
- Drop in unexpectedly when the child is alone with any adult, even trusted family members.
- Make sure outings are observable, if not by you, then by others.

Step 2: Minimize Opportunity

- Ask the adult about the specifics of the planned activities before the child leaves your care.
- Notice the adult's ability to be specific.
- Talk with the child when he or she returns.
- Notice the child's mood and whether the child can tell you with confidence how the time was spent.
- Find a way to tell the adults who care for children that you and the child are educated about child sexual abuse.
- **Be that direct.**

Step 3: Talk about it

- Children often keep abuse a secret, but barriers can be broken down by talking openly about it.

Step 3: Talk about it

“My daughter tells me everything. I know she would tell me if someone molested her.”

Understand why children are afraid to "tell."

- The abuser shames the child, points out that the child let it happen, or tells the child that his or her parents will be angry.
- The abuser is often manipulative and may try to confuse the child about what is right and wrong.
- The abuser sometimes threatens the child or a family member.

Step 3: Talk about it

- Some children who do not initially disclose abuse are ashamed to tell when it happens again.
- Children are afraid of disappointing their parents and disrupting the family.
- Some children are too young to understand.
- Many abusers tell children the abuse is "okay" or a "game."

Step 3: Talk about it

Know how children communicate.

- Children who disclose sexual abuse often tell a trusted adult other than a parent.
- For this reason, training for people who work with children is especially important.
- Children may tell "parts" of what happened or pretend it happened to someone else to gauge adult reaction.
- Children will often "shut down" and refuse to tell more if you respond emotionally or negatively.

Step 3: Talk about it

Talk openly with your child.

- Good communication may decrease a child's vulnerability to sexual abuse and increase the likelihood that the child will tell you if abuse has occurred.
- Teach your children about their bodies, about what abuse is, and, when age-appropriate, about sex.
- Teach them words that help them discuss sex comfortably with you.
- Model caring for your own body, and teach children how to care for theirs.

Step 3: Talk about it

- Teach children that it is "against the rules" for adults to act in a sexual way with them and use examples.
- Teach them what parts of their bodies others should not touch.
- Be sure to mention that the abuser might be an adult friend, family member, or older youth.
- Teach children not to give out their email addresses, home addresses, or phone numbers while using the Internet.

Step 3: Talk about it

- Start early and talk often.
- Use everyday opportunities to talk about sexual abuse.
- Be proactive. If a child seems uncomfortable, or resistant to being with a particular adult, ask why.
- One survey showed that fewer than 30% of parents ever discussed sexual abuse with their children.
- And even then, most failed to mention that the abuser might be an adult friend or family member.

Step 3: Talk about it

- Talk to other adults about child sexual abuse.
- Support and mutual learning occur when you share with another adult.
- You raise the consciousness of your community and influence their choices about child safety.
- You may be offering support and information to an adult whose child is experiencing abuse, and may not know what to do.
- You put potential abusers on notice that you are paying attention.

Step 4: Stay Alert

- Don't expect obvious signs when a child is being sexually abused.
- Signs are often there but you've got to spot them.
- "Is my son's withdrawal due to preteen angst or is he being sexually abused?"

Step 4: Stay Alert

Learn the signs.

- Physical signs of sexual abuse are not common, although redness, rashes or swelling in the genital area, urinary tract infections, or other such symptoms should be carefully investigated.
- Also, physical problems associated with anxiety, such as chronic stomach pain or headaches, may occur.
- Emotional or behavioral signals are more common.
- These can run from "too perfect" behavior, to withdrawal and depression, to unexplained anger and rebellion.

Step 4: Stay Alert

- Sexual behavior and language that are not age-appropriate can be a red flag.
- Be aware that in some children there are no signs whatsoever.
- If you find physical signs that you suspect are sexual abuse, have the child physically examined immediately by a professional who specializes in child sexual abuse

Step 5: Make a Plan

- Learn where to go, whom to call, and how to react.
- "My 11-year-old daughter said her step-father sneaks into her room at night.
- Then she said she made it up.
- Now she won't say anything. I don't know what to do."

Step 5: Make a Plan

Don't overreact.

- If a child breaks an arm or runs a high fever, you know to stay calm and where to seek help because you've mentally prepared yourself.
- Reacting to child sexual abuse is the same.
- Your reactions have a powerful influence on vulnerable children.

Step 5: Make a Plan

When you react to disclosure with anger or disbelief, the response is often:

- The child shuts down.
- The child changes his or her story in the face of your anger and disbelief, when, in fact, abuse is actually occurring.
- The child changes the account around your questions so future tellings appear to be "coached." This can be very harmful if the case goes to court.
- The child feels even guiltier.

Step 5: Make a Plan

Very few reported incidents are false.

Offer support.

- Think through your response before you suspect abuse. You'll be able to respond in a more supportive manner.
- Believe the child and make sure the child knows it.
- Thank the child for telling you and praise the child's courage.

Step 5: Make a Plan

- Encourage the child to talk but don't ask leading questions about details.
- Asking about details can alter the child's memory of events.
- If you must ask questions to keep the child talking, ask open-ended ones like "what happened next?"
- Seek the help of a professional who is trained to interview the child about sexual abuse.
- Professional guidance could be critical to the child's healing and to any criminal prosecution.

Step 5: Make a Plan

- Assure the child that it's your responsibility to protect him or her and that you'll do all you can.
- Report or take action in all cases of suspected abuse, both inside and outside the immediate family.
- **Don't panic.**
- Sexually abused children who receive support and psychological help can and do heal.

Step 5: Make a Plan

Child sexual abuse is a crime.

- Know the legal requirements for reporting.
- Alberta requires that professionals who work with children report reasonable suspicions of child abuse.
- If you are a professional who works with children, (e.g., a teacher, a nurse) there are special procedures and reporting requirements you must follow.
- Your employer should provide mandated reporting training.

Step 5: Make a Plan

Know the agencies that handle reports of abuse.

North Central Alberta Child and Family Services Authority

2nd Floor, Administration Building

5143-50 Street

Box 4742

Barrhead, Alberta T7N 1A6

Phone: 780-305-2440

Fax: 780-305-2444

Step 6: Act on Suspicions

The future well being of a child is at stake.

- By acting on suspicions of child sexual abuse, you will save not only one child, but perhaps countless others.
- Many of those who sexually abuse children have multiple victims.
- You may be faced with a situation where you suspect abuse but don't have any proof.
- Suspicions are scary, but trust your instincts. Have the courage to report the suspected abuse.

Step 6: Act on Suspicions

What if I'm not sure? Where do I go?

- If you're unsure about whether to make an official report or just need support, contact:

North Central Alberta Child and Family Services Authority

2nd Floor, Administration Building

5143-50 Street

Box 4742

Barrhead, Alberta T7N 1A6

Phone: 780-305-2440 / Fax: 780-305-2444

Step 7: Get Involved

- Volunteer and financially support organizations that fight the tragedy of child sexual abuse.
- “What can I do to help children in my community?”

Step 7: Get Involved

Get involved by donating your time and resources to support organizations such as:

- Prevention programs
- Children's advocacy centers
- Crisis information and referral services
- Rape crisis centers

Step 7: Get Involved

- Use your voice and your vote to make your community a safer place for children.
- Ask that schools and organizations in your community have child sexual abuse prevention policies, and help with their creation. Ask other adults to do the same.
- Support legislation that protects children.

Step 7: Get Involved

- Demand that the government put more resources into protecting children from sexual abuse and into responding to reports of sexual abuse.
- Call and write your MLA.
- Write letters to your newspaper.

**BREAK THE
CYCLE OF SILENCE**

- If child sexual abuse is part of your history, do not keep silent.
- By breaking the cycle of silence, you will break free from the trauma you carry within you and begin an important healing process.
- And you will help protect other children from suffering the way you did.

There are 39 million survivors of child sexual abuse in North America today.

Let the healing and the prevention begin today.