Keeping our children safe from sexual abuse

How to prevent, recognize and act upon grooming and sexual abuse

Mid April 2023 my husband Rob and I did a workshop called Parenting Safe Children by Feather Berkower to learn about child sex abuse prevention. After that I did a thorough research online and created this workshop because the number 1 thing to do when you want to learn something is to teach it to others. I also wanted to create awareness about this big issue that affects too many families and especially children as they depend on us to keep them safe. The more we spread the word the more we can keep kids from being sexually abused. So please feel free to share this material with people in your environment.

Also don't hesitate to email me if you have questions, feedback or other comments to share: info@aplacetobe.me
Sylvia

INTRODUCTION

Youtube video of workshop Part 1: https://youtu.be/bGwVM2Opw_c

Facts and numbers:

- 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 6 boys get sexually abused
- most don't tell (or at least not immediately but years later)
- 70% of all sexual abuse cases (including rape of adults) happen to children under 17
- sibling abuse and other older children (2-3 year gap) is high (one third of all cases)
- Most sexual abuse of children occurs in a residence, typically that of the victim or perpetrator (85-90% of the abusers are known to the child)
- 96% of the abusers are men
- 95% of predators were abused as children

Source (among others): https://cachouston.org/prevention/child-sexual-abuse-facts/

What abusers look out for: vulnerability

- not educated (they don't know the actual names of their genitals, sexuality and body safety)
- lack confidence
- keep secrets
- physical disability
- expect to obey ('listen to me/ your teacher/older sibling/grandpa' etc)
- Perpetrators report that they look for passive, quiet, troubled, lonely children from single parent or broken homes that easily trust people

Anybody could be a predator and a victim (but we can reduce the risk!)

Grooming (Friendship - Reward - Secrets - Touch)

- becoming parent's friends by gaining loyalty (if they're not already part of the family)
- subtle touches on shoulder, head, back, knee, stroking
- saying things like 'You're so cool' 'you're my (special) friend' 'you're such an amazing young woman' to become friends
- separating kids from adults
    - offer the victims special attention
    - understanding and a sympathetic ear
    - give them rides
    - they may play games with victims
    - provide them with gifts and/or special treats that their parents don't give to the child or on random occasions
    - start with seemingly innocent secrets

- some might show child porn videos or images (creating bigger secret)
- controlling the relationship

PREVENTION

Youtube video of workshop Part 2: https://youtu.be/V5Npj0vIo5c

Keeping children from being abused is the PARENTS' responsibility

1. educating yourself
2. educating your children
3. building a prevention team
4. stepping in when you see concerning behavior

1. Educate yourself

- you're doing it right now by doing this workshop
- read books/articles
- follow experts on CSA prevention on social media
- do workshops/seminars
- listen to podcasts

2. Educating your children

Fear doesn't keep a child safe, training does, so focus on treating your child right, education, self confidence, having a strong relationship with your child, treating your children with respect and as an equal.

Children know the difference between an appropriate and an inappropriate touch, what they like/want or don't, have good instincts, they just need to know that they're allowed to express themselves and usually this natural reaction of saying NO has been punished out of them.

1. **A sense of appropriate and inappropriate touch**

Children gradually learn what kind of touch to expect from different groups of people. It may be customary for mom or dad to check their teeth after brushing, but it would be unusual to have a store clerk ask to check their teeth. Children readily accept hugs and kisses from some people they know and then may respond differently to the same affection with someone else. This natural preference should be supported.

2. **A clear idea about what they like and don't like**

Children know very early in life what they like and don't like, and they fully explore their ability to express those feelings during the preschool period. At the same time, children are learning to be polite and not to say "no" to adults. Enabling children to protect themselves includes teaching them that it is sometimes okay to say "no."

3. **Recognizing and learning to respect their instinct**

Children often "sense" that something is wrong before abuse actually occurs. When children learn to listen to their "inner voice," and to speak up, they have a chance to stop abuse before it begins. Teaching children to trust and listen to their "inner alarm system" is one of the most important aspects of prevention.

Building upon a child's natural protective skills is different from trying to monitor touching for children. We don't need to jeopardize the spontaneity of affection — which enriches all our lives — in order to prevent child abuse. Rather, we need to give children the ability to communicate effectively about unwanted touch.

Source: https://safechild.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Introductory-and-Resource-Manual.pdf

Modeling is key!!! Set and respect boundaries.

Then educate and set rules:

1. Educate your child about sexuality and their body parts (www.amaze.org)

2. Your body, your choice! You're the boss of your body! You have the right to say who touches it or not.

3. You have permission to say NO to anybody, regardless of their age, position, authority when you feel uncomfortable
- always respect when your child says No to you (your behavior and reactions say more than 1000 words)

4. 'I'm going to tell'
- Your child needs to know that he or she can tell you anything and that he or she can say this phrase at anytime when another person is not listening to them saying No
- for this to actually work (your child believing that he can tell you anything) you musn't get angry when he does something wrong or makes a mistake

5. No secrets
- Surprises, confidentiality and privacy are ok, secrets not. Explain the difference to your children and stop keeping secrets from them, too.
- no more little secret games like 'let's not tell mummy I bought you an ice cream' etc
- 'If someone asks you to keep a secret, reply 'No, I'm going to tell''

6. 'You are not responsible for other people's feelings or mistakes'

- explain what bribery, threats and manipulation means (teach critical thinking and talk about psychology)
- modeling is key (work on your manipulative behaviors towards your child or spouse)
- stop saying things like 'you're making me angry' or 'I get sad when you…' and explain to your child that you were wrong in saying these things, apologize. Let them know you will always love them, no matter what.

7. Body language, words and eye contact need to match when setting boundaries



Play the 'What if…' game (critical thinking)

Practicing saying No to touch or behavior that a child doesn't like
Role-playing is acting out each scenario so children learn the skill, not just the concept

Program with videos to teach children of different age groups the above mentioned when dealing with **people they know**:
https://safechild.org/prevention-of-child-sexual-abuse/

Program with videos to teach children of different age groups the above mentioned when dealing with **strangers**:
https://safechild.org/safety-around-strangers-children-in-self-care/

Listen and pay attention to your child so that you can hear hidden messages as well

'Last night daddy ate my cookie' (3 yo being sexually abused by her father)
'I don't want to play those games with grandpa anymore' (grandfather abusing grandchild)
'I don't want to sleep on the sofa' (brother abusing sister)

Ask open questions:

'I don't want to go to my ballet class today' (how come?)
'My friend asked me to have a sleepover but I don't' want to' (You usually like having a sleepover at hers. What happened?)
'When is the babysitter coming back?' (I don't know. Why do you ask?)

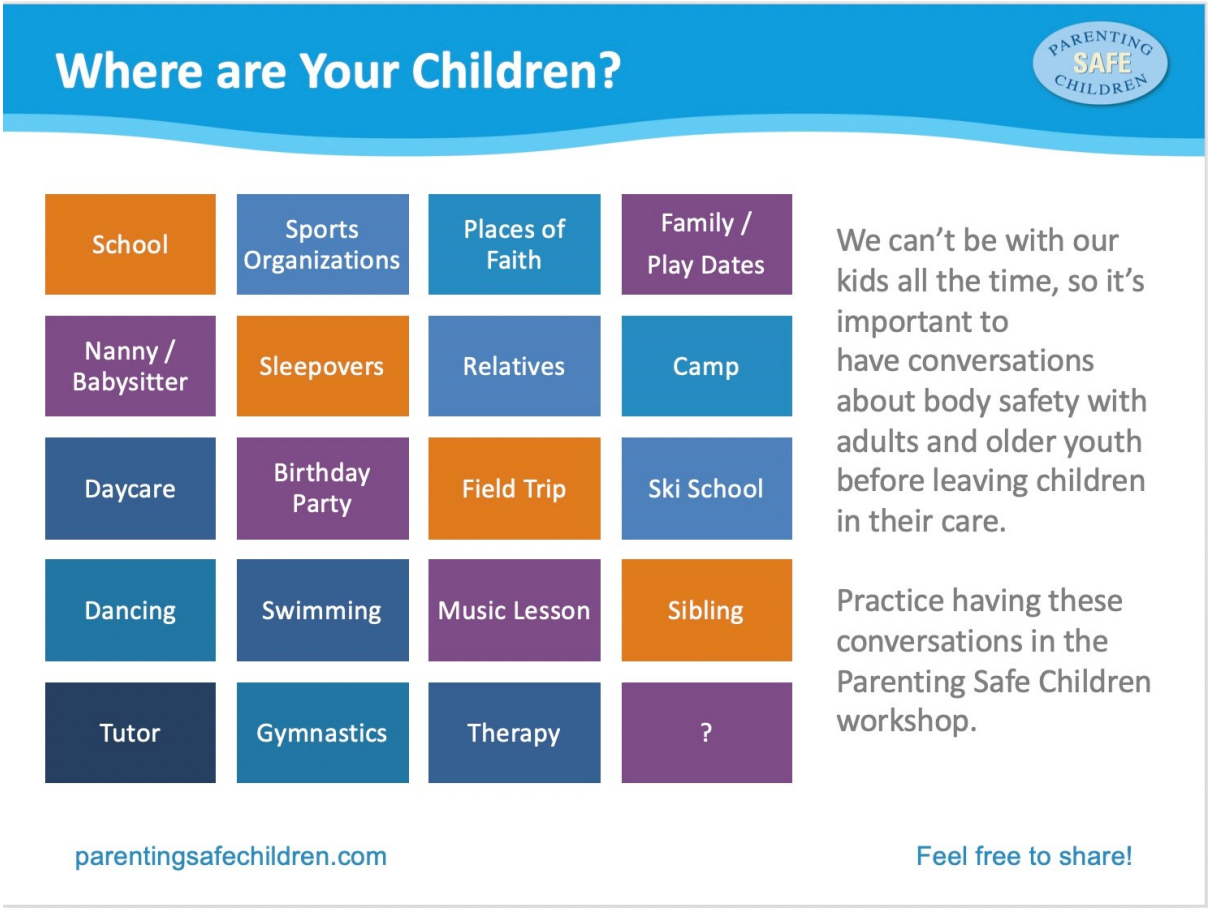
Always believe your child! Kids don't make abuse up

3. Building your prevention team

Youtube video of workshop Part 3: https://youtu.be/srYPe1HNuw8
Talk to as many people as possible in your environment about your child's body safety rules

- family and extended family
- teachers
- nannies
- coaches
- friends (especially playdates and sleepovers)

perpetrators will be put off by your rules and won't try it on with your child, they won't take the risk and go for an 'easy victim' instead ('I would run the other way!')



The places listed in the first line are the most common locations where abuse happens.



- make the conversation impersonal ('I talk about this with every caregiver')
- start by asking about other safety concerns like allergies or helmets
- mention that you did a workshop where you learned a lot new things and since then you're implementing rules that you'd like to share with everyone around your child
- ask specific questions:

TO OTHER PARENTS:

- keeping doors open?
- who else is in the house?
- older siblings watching the kids?
- clothes on?
- intervening in children's sexual behavior?
- screen time?
- explain your body safety rules

TO SCHOOLS/SPORTS CLUBS ETC:

- one on one time
- photos
- toilets, nappies, nudity
- lap sitting and tickling
- etc

4. Stepping in when you see concerning behavior

Grooming vs grooming-like behavior

Many people touch my daughter Bo (3 years old) on the street or on the bus. They find her cute and either stroke her hair, touch her head or cheek or shoulder or want to help her up or down the seat/bus by taking her hand or arm or even by lifting her.

While I know that this is probably 99% of the time just sympathy and helpfulness, it can still lead Bo to believe that it's ok for strangers to do all these things to her and if one day a person with bad intentions comes along and does it, she might not feel that she can say No.

Therefore it's important that we address any touch and explain why it's against our body safety rules.

Adults or children usually don't walk around touching other adult's bodies and faces or lift them up so people will understand when you tell them not to touch your child.

It teaches your child to stand up for herself and it shows predators that she's educated about body safety and not easy prey.

Confronting without accusing

Confronting children/teens
More than ⅓ of child sexual abuse is committed by an older child. When we see this happening it can mean that the older child has been or is being abused themselves or is watching sexual or pornographic material that is not age appropriate and/or hasn't been talked about with his parents.

In this case talk about their harmful behavior in contrast to 'abusive' behavior because they can be helped. Explain body safety rules and ask open questions like 'Where did you learn this?' or talk to an expert. If you talk to the parent, they might not react the right way (punish the boy, get angry with you for accusing him, not do anything about it etc) OR one of them might even be the one abusing the child. Therefore, talking to an expert might be the best thing to do.

Confronting adults

It can be scary to think about telling someone to stop touching your child because we're afraid of offending someone, creating a hostile environment, destroying a friendship etc but we must remember two things:

a) Abusers count on us feeling uncomfortable, confused and being in denial, that's why they do it right in front of our eyes (because we tell us 'This is strange but he wouldn't possibly be doing this in front of me if he was a predator')
b) Our child's safety is more important than offending someone.

When you find an adult with a suspicious behavior say something immediately:

‘We practice body safety in our family and stroking my daughters back like that is something that a predator would do to groom a child. While I’m not saying that this is what you’re doing I’d like to ask you to not do it again because I don’t want my daughter to think that this is normal. One day a person with the wrong intentions could do it and then she would think it’s ok.’

‘Saying *You’re such an amazing young woma*n to my 6 year old daughter could be mistaken for grooming and even though I’m not accusing you of being a pedophile I don’t want this behavior around my daughter, please.’

If you see an innocent touch happening but you (who knows your child best) notice your child being uncomfortable, step in and say ‘He doesn't seem to like this so please stop. We teach our children that they’re the boss of their bodies and they decide who touches them or not’ (and a little wink)

Other phrases to say:

The boundaries about acting around my families are these: no touching, tickling, whispering, telling secrets etc (describe what behavior your saw)

I’m really uncomfortable with the way you touch my child

We’re teaching our daughter about body safety and I’d like you to not touch my child right now/like that

—----------

What to do next?

I recommend doing Feather’s workshop Parenting Safe Children because she’s been doing this for over 35 years, has interviewed many perpetrators to find out how they work and use this information to prevent child abuse. During her workshop you’ll be able to ask questions and practice role plays to feel empowered and confident about speaking up for your child.

Resources to teach kids about bodies, sexuality and safety on amaze.org

The optimal thing to do now is to talk to as many people in your environment about this, share the info and maybe even take matters into your own hands by speaking to school directors, after-school-activity organizations, churches etc - apart from your friends and family - to try and help implement policies that will keep children safe.

What do you think? How could YOU make Madeira and your community a safer place for children?
Our children are the most precious creatures in the world for us and sometimes we have to step out of our comfort zone to ensure their safety and wellbeing.
Best wishes, Sylvia! info@aplacetobe.me