



Chapter 13

Preventing child sexual abuse


It might seem strange to find information about sexual abuse in a book on helping children who cannot hear well. But, sadly, children who are deaf are even more at risk for sexual abuse than children who are not deaf. So it is very important for families with deaf children, and those who care for or teach deaf children, to know about it.

Keep our children safe

No one has the right to use a child for sex.

- Not a family member (child or adult)
- Not a family friend
- Not a neighbor
- Not a stranger
- Not a teacher
- Not a caregiver

Not anyone!




We parents need to talk about sexual abuse— with each other and with our children.

Talking about it is the first step in stopping it. Silence only protects abusers.

Yet it is hard to talk about sexual abuse. In many places:

- people do not know what sexual abuse is, how it happens, and the harm it causes.
- people are uncomfortable talking about sex.
- people do not want to believe that sexual abuse happens to very young children, so they do not think or talk about it.
- rules or customs limit who can talk to children about sex, what can be said, and when such conversations can happen.

**Every child should be safe from sexual abuse.
Keeping children safe from abuse is every adult's responsibility.**

Some facts about child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse means using a child for some kind of sexual activity. Sexual abuse can happen to any child. It happens in all communities, and in rich and poor families. It happens to both girls and boys. Most sexual abuse happens to children older than 5 years, but it happens to younger children too.

We do not know exactly how common sexual abuse is, since many children do not tell what happens to them. But it is possible that as many as 1 out of every 4 children in the world is sexually abused.

There are many ways children can be abused. Some are:

Abuse when a child is touched

- oral sex (when a man puts his penis in a child's mouth)
- kissing or hugging a child in a sexual way
- sexual intercourse or anal sex (when a man puts his penis in a child's vagina or anus)
- touching a child's genitals (sexual parts) or making a child touch an adult's or an older child's genitals
- forcing a child to become a prostitute (take money for doing sex)

Abuse when a child is not touched

- using sexual talk or pictures to shock a child, make her sexually excited, or make her familiar with sex
- making a child hear or watch sex between other people
- making a child pose for sex pictures (pornography)
- making a child look at pornography

Most sexual abusers are men. And most abused children are abused by someone they know, like a relative, a family friend, or a neighbor. Abuse is rarely done by a stranger. Sometimes the abuse goes on for a long time, even for years.

Not all people who abuse children sexually use physical force. Sometimes a person uses a position of trust or influence to make a child have sex. He might use persuasion and "kindness," threats and bullying, or give gifts or treats. (An abuser may even be a deaf person who befriends the child.) Whether someone uses physical force, threats, or "kindness" to make a child have sex, **the result of the abuse is still very damaging to the child.**

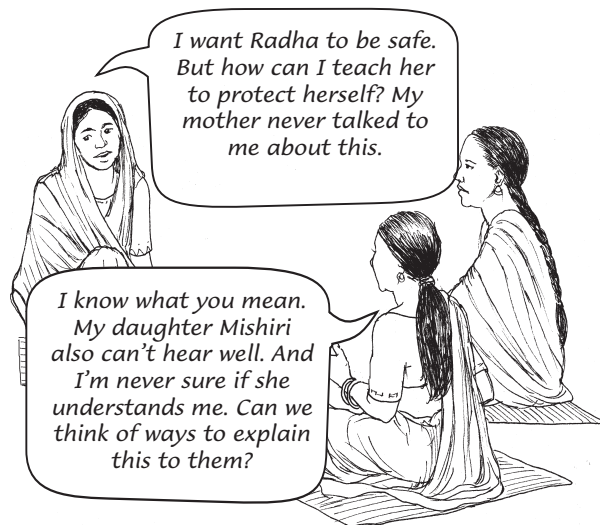


Why are deaf children at risk for sexual abuse?

All children are at some risk for sexual abuse because they must trust adults and older children, and depend on them for care. Children are taught that “good children” do as they are told. This makes it difficult to say no to adults. Very young children also have no way to know what is acceptable adult behavior.

Deaf children are especially at risk for sexual abuse because:

- Society, in general, values people with disabilities less than others. So an abuser may think it is okay to use a deaf child for sex. And because girls are usually valued less than boys, deaf girls are valued even less than deaf boys. So deaf girls are most at risk.
- Deaf people use touch to communicate—for example, to get someone’s attention. A deaf child may think someone’s touch is okay even if it is not.
- Deaf children have less information than hearing children, but are just as curious. They may also be isolated or feel lonely, which makes them easy targets for abusers.
- Deaf children who have limited communication may have learned to do what others want without asking why.
- Deaf children who have limited communication skills may not fully understand what you tell them about their safety.
- Limited communication also makes it harder for deaf children to tell anyone about abuse. Someone may abuse a deaf child because he knows she will not be able to speak about the experience. Deaf children may only be able to communicate with family members or others who look after them. If the abuser is also a family member, caregiver, or teacher, the child may not feel safe telling anyone.



Sexual abuse causes lasting harm

Sexual abuse harms a child at the moment when the abuse happens and can continue to harm a victim throughout his or her life. This is especially true if a child is unable to talk about the abuse or receive help, support, and treatment.

Lasting physical harm

Lasting physical harm can be caused by sexually transmitted infections (STIs). An abuser can infect a child with HIV/AIDS and hepatitis, which cannot be cured. Other STIs, if left untreated, can cause future problems with pregnancy, cancer, and death from severe infection. Children who get STIs from sexual abuse often do not show any signs and so they do not get treatment.



Lasting emotional harm

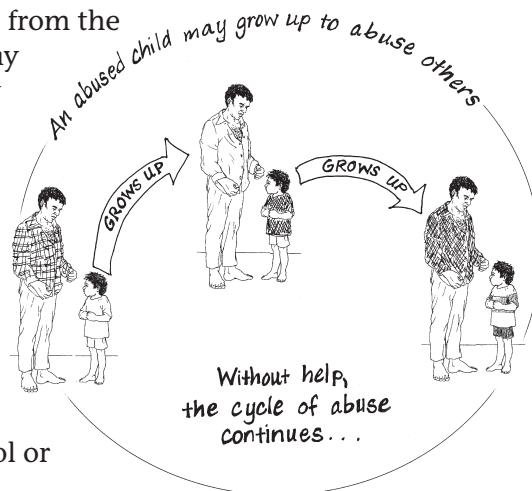
Children who have been abused sexually are likely to feel a great deal of guilt, shame, and anger. Many victims of sexual abuse are unable to trust other people. Victims are also likely to have poor self-esteem—they feel they are not valuable and not worthy of being treated with respect.

Cycles of abuse

Children who have been abused sexually may continue to be abused by others throughout their lives. Because of their experience of abuse as children, they may grow up to believe that sex is the only way to get affection or security. Being treated badly and being abused sexually can become a pattern in their lives.

Also, without support and help to heal from the abuse, boys who have been abused may become abusers themselves when they grow older. This cycle of abuse creates another generation of victims and future offenders.

The harm caused by child sexual abuse is not just to children and their families, but to entire communities. For example, people who are unfairly shamed and isolated because of sexual abuse can sometimes become destructive or violent, or turn to alcohol or drug abuse.



Preventing sexual abuse

How we are treated by others affects our self-esteem. When children are treated as helpless, and hopeless, they see themselves as helpless, and hopeless. So we must teach children to feel good about themselves so they will be confident and better able to protect themselves.

To keep children safe, we must give them the knowledge, skills, and confidence to reject sexual misbehavior — even from bigger, stronger, and more powerful people.



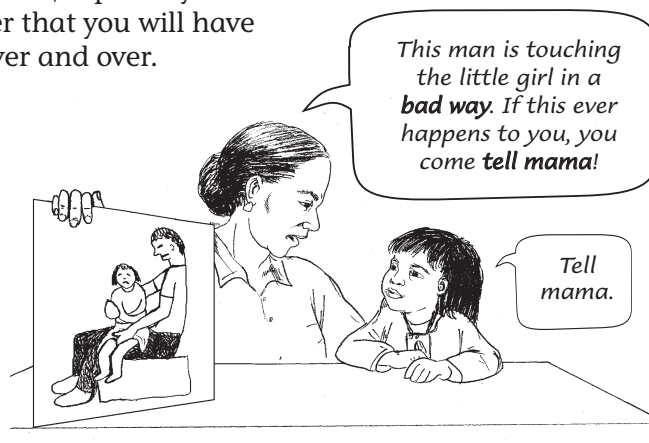
HELP YOUR CHILD UNDERSTAND AND COMMUNICATE ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

Deaf children learn most easily when they see things. Signs, body movements, and expressions on the face, along with picture cards, puppet shows, and role plays, can all help you teach a deaf child how to be safe from sexual abuse. Help her understand that:

- some kinds of touches are not okay (a handshake is okay, a hug may be okay, but touching genitals is not okay, and putting a penis in a child's mouth is not okay).
- she should tell you if something she does not like happens to her.
- she can refuse if someone tries to touch her sexually.

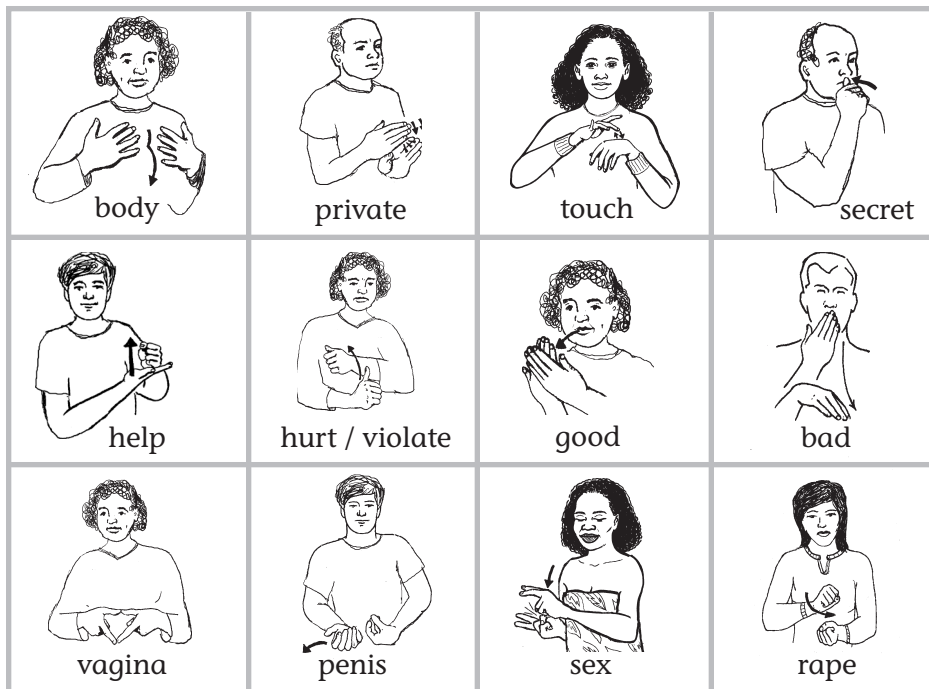
Ideas like "private," "secret," "trust," "safe," and signs for them, are hard to explain to young children, especially if they are deaf. Remember that you will have to explain these ideas over and over.

Use different signs, gestures, pictures, and words until you feel sure your child understands. Act out situations with your child, or use dolls or pictures to try as many ways of showing these ideas as you can.



Some examples of signs that may help you explain sexual abuse

These signs are in *American Sign Language*. Remember, the signs in your own country’s sign language may be different.



HELP CHILDREN NAME AND DESCRIBE ABUSERS

Give your children sign names for people in their lives. Practice noticing details about people and places and communicate about them with your child. Teach your child describing words, like tall, short, hairy, fat, thin, and others. When a child can describe a person, she can describe an abuser.

Give everyone a sign name

One of our little girls, a 6-year-old deaf girl, was raped. The police asked us to question her about who had done this to her. She was not able to give an answer. One reason is that she does not have sign names for everyone around her. We are now encouraging parents to give everyone who comes into their lives a sign name. In this way, anyone who hurt the child could be named and brought to justice.



— Nzeve Deaf Children’s Center, Zimbabwe, Africa

ACTIVITIES

Here are more activities to help your child be safer from sexual abuse.

► **Ways to help your child understand that some parts of the body should be private**

Explain to your child that her body belongs to her alone, and that some parts of her body are more private than others. Explain that adults and



older children should not touch her genitals or private parts, and that she should not touch an adult's private parts, even if asked to. Use dolls, puppets, or pictures, and show approval or disapproval by your body movement and facial expression.

Also, explain that if someone asks your child to watch private things or look at pictures of private things, that is not okay either.

When your child is between 3 and 5 years old, teach about genitals and other private parts of the body, and about the differences between boys' and girls' bodies.

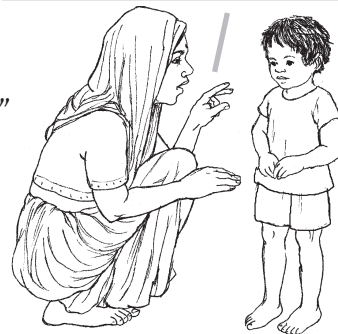
These are difficult ideas to teach, so use different methods to try to make sure your child understands. Teaching can happen naturally, for example while your child is getting dressed. You can also use or make a doll to teach about body parts.

► **How to help your child learn to make noise or yell for help**

Many deaf children do not like to use their voices. This is because they are laughed at or told they sound funny when they do. Explain to your child that it is okay to shout if someone is bothering him and he needs help.

If someone hurts you, yell or say "no." Let's practice yelling out loud.

Teach your child that he should shout "No, no!" or "Help!" or stamp his feet if an adult or older child tries to hurt him. He can also scream, bite, and struggle. Use dolls or play-acting to show him what you mean.



► **How to help your child learn to say no**

Deaf children often do not understand **why** they should do or not do certain things, or why things happen to them. They want to please people, and so they learn to obey without question. This can be a problem if someone tells them to do something that is wrong.

Help your child practice saying “no.” First, try making up situations in which a child may want to say “no.”



Later, talk about saying “no” and where your child can get help.

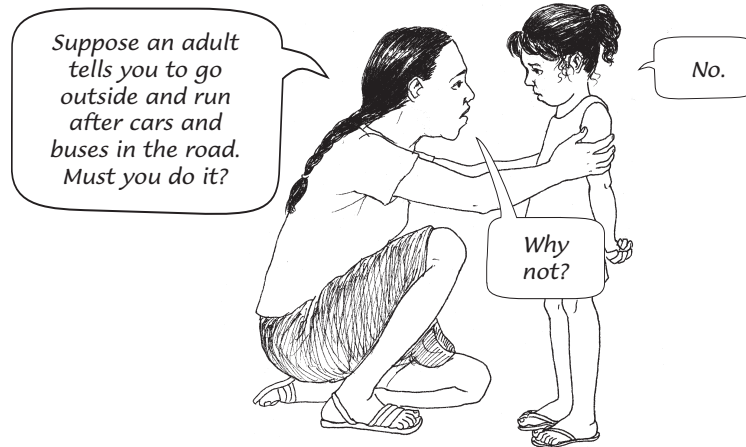


Ask your child to tell you or another adult right away if someone asks him to do anything he feels uncomfortable doing.



► **How to help your child understand that he or she does not always have to obey bigger people**

Once a child has learned to say “no,” you can make up situations in which the child does not have to obey adults.

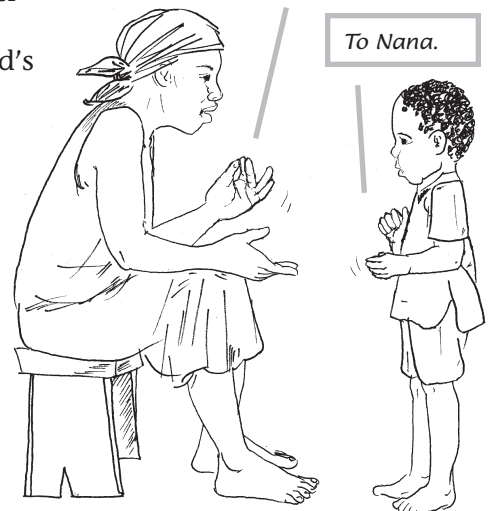


► **How to help your child know where to go for help**

Who can your child turn to? All children should have at least 3 people whom they can go to with problems. This could be their mother or father, older sister or brother, aunt, neighbor, or any other person both you and the child trust outside the family, like another child’s mother.

Children should know that if one person is not available or will not pay attention, they should go to the next person. Tell those people that you are teaching the child to go to them for help if necessary. Practice with the child how to go to people for different kinds of help.

Where could you go for help if I am at work? How about your Aunt Rose? Or Lisa’s mother? Who else?



How can I know if my child has been abused?

When young children are abused, they may be afraid to tell you. Often the abuser warns the child not to say anything. Sometimes the child fears he did something wrong. Or he may not know how to communicate what happened.

Since children do not always communicate about abuse, you need to watch for possible signs. The following signs are **not always** the result of abuse, but they should always cause concern, especially if a child shows several of the signs.

Some physical signs include:

- unexplained pain, swelling, redness or bleeding of the mouth, the genitals or around the anus area.
- torn or bloody underwear.
- difficulty passing urine or stool, or blood in the urine or stool.
- unusual discharge from the vagina, penis or anus, or a sexually transmitted infection (STI).
- bruises, headaches, or belly aches.

Sexually abused children may:

- stop bathing, or wash themselves more than usual, or refuse to get undressed.
- play sexually with other children or with toys, in a more knowing way or more often than you would expect for their age.
- know more about sex than other children their age.

Child victims of violence, including sexual abuse, may:

- seem very fearful, sensitive and watchful, or suddenly become afraid of certain people or places, or want to be only with their parents.
- be secretive or want to be alone most of the time.
- start acting in a younger, more baby-like way.
- become more violent and aggressive.
- try to run away from home.
- feel sad most of the time, or show no feelings at all.
- have difficulty sleeping because of bad dreams, fears of the dark, and bed-wetting.
- be afraid of touch or physical activities.



If you suspect abuse

Try to stay calm. Encourage your child to show you what has happened or what she knows.

To get more information, set up play situations with your child. Pay careful attention to what he shows you because he may not have enough words or signs to explain himself clearly. With your voice and your expressions, make sure your child knows you believe him and will not punish him.

If your child has been sexually abused

If your child has been sexually abused, you can help if you:

- believe what she shows or communicates with you. It may be difficult to believe that someone you know and trust has done this to your child, but children rarely make up stories about sexual abuse. Some abusers are very friendly to parents. That way they gain better access to the children and it keeps the parents from reporting the abuse.
- praise her for telling you. Children need to know that they have done the right thing by communicating about the abuse.
- reassure her that the abuse is not her fault and that you are not angry with her. Use as many different ways of communicating this as possible.
- protect your child's safety. Try to prevent future contact between the child and the abuser. If this is not possible, make sure you or someone who knows what happened is always with your child when the abuser is present.
- treat physical health problems from the abuse. Try to get your child tested for sexually transmitted infections, even if she does not have any signs. Some sexually transmitted infections do not have any signs, or the signs do not show until a child is older.



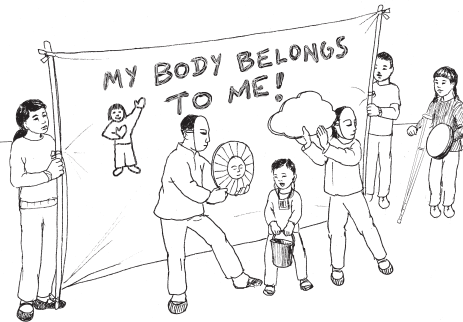
As a parent, you also need help. Parents feel many emotions including disbelief, anger, and sadness when they learn their child has been abused. Parents may blame themselves or each other for what happened to their child. It can help to talk about these feelings with someone you trust. Be patient with yourself. It may take a long time for these feelings to change.

There is no shame to the family if a child has been abused. Abuse is a crime—like theft—and was not caused by the family.

To make all children in the community safer

Most people are not comfortable talking about sexual abuse, accepting that children are not safe, or discussing the harmful effects of sexual abuse. Yet sexual abuse can only be prevented if everyone can talk about it.

Programs in schools and community meetings can educate the entire community about sexual abuse. Acting out short plays or skits about the effects of sexual abuse sometimes makes it easier for people to discuss abuse as a group.



Here are some community-wide ways to work on preventing sexual abuse:

- **Workshops for parents and teachers** to help them learn ways to communicate with young children about how to prevent sexual abuse. Read written materials aloud with parents if discussion is not possible.
- **Training for teachers, staff working in schools, doctors and health workers** so they can notice signs a child may have been abused, and learn how to talk with a child who may be a victim of abuse. Hold workshops with school staff to discuss the ethics of working with children.
- **Education for school children** to prevent sexual abuse. This education can also include age-appropriate education on healthy sexuality.
- **Reporting abuse when it happens** can help prevent it in the future. Find out what procedures exist for reporting child sexual abuse and make sure this information is available to parents, teachers, health workers, and others who may learn about the sexual abuse of a child. Work to create a procedure if none exists.

The more people know about the problem of sexual abuse, the more we can prevent it from happening to our children.

