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## CHAPTER 14

# Preventing and addressing abuse of children

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Children depend on many people as they grow. Family members, guardians, friends, teachers, and others all provide children with love, guidance, support, and protection, and children have a right to all of these. But no one is born knowing how to care for children. Everyone has to learn, and everyone sometimes makes mistakes that hurt children.

Caring for small children can be very demanding. It requires a lot of patience and understanding. Some people are not prepared for how much work it is to be a parent or caregiver, or do not know what to expect of a young child, a difficult child, or a child with a disability.

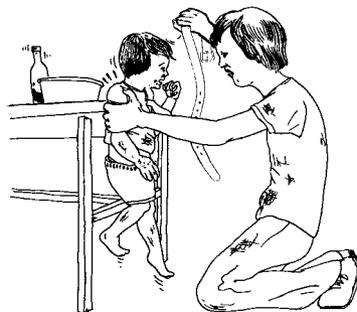
HIV adds even more stress, leaving families and communities with fewer resources, fewer people to care for children, and more people suffering from stigma, worry, fear, illness, anger, and sadness. This affects children deeply. While children grieve, react to their family's health and economic problems, or learn to get along in new families, their behavior can become even more difficult to deal with.

Children need adults to help each other become better caregivers — for children and for all community members. If we can do this, children will have a better chance to develop well, families can be spaces of love and support, and children can learn skills that will make them better people and better parents later on. Community support for families can make a big difference for children and in preventing and stopping abuse.



## What is child abuse?

Walking home, Jojo was tired and upset from an argument with his boss. At his doorway, 4-year-old Donny ran into him, hands covered in mud, and got Jojo's uniform dirty. Jojo grabbed the boy, yelled at him, and took off his belt to give him a whipping.



Two-year-old Frank had his sister's glasses in his hand when she woke up, and they were broken. She took them from him angrily and pinched him, thinking, "How can I teach him not to touch my things?" She put his hand in water so hot it burned his skin.



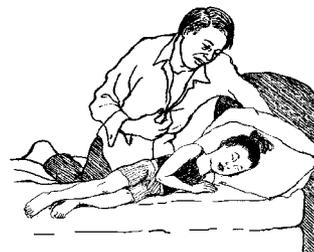
Cora's dirty diaper had been changed recently, but William could tell she was dirty again. There were no more clean cloths. Since he wanted to spend time with his friends rather than wash anything, he left her overnight in the dirty cloth.

Five-year-old Aya was carrying a pot of stew to her aunt and cousins who were waiting to eat when she tripped and spilled some. Her aunt called her a stupid, ungrateful child who did not deserve to eat with them, and said she was probably the cause of her parents' death.



Yacob, age 6, went to live with his aunt and uncle after his father died. To earn his way, he worked long hours at a sandal factory and was not sent to school. He ate after the family, not with them, and was always hungry and tired.

Bettina was 7 and her mother worked at night. Sometimes the uncle who lived with them lay down with Bettina at night and rubbed himself between her legs.



Sexual abuse is an especially harmful form of child abuse, and, sadly, all too common, especially for children affected by HIV. Because some signs, causes, and ways to support the child are different than in other types of abuse, we mostly discuss sexual abuse in the section starting on page 275.



Child abuse is something done to a child that hurts the child's health or development physically, emotionally, or sexually. Children may be abused by individuals, families, institutions, and social and economic systems. Abuse can be intentional, a "side effect," caused thoughtlessly through neglect, or caused by circumstances beyond a person's control. Child abuse is not always obvious.

## Signs of physical abuse and neglect

While signs of physical abuse are usually the most visible, you may also see signs of emotional abuse or neglect. When watching out for abused children, it is best to observe children over several days or a week. Watch for:

- cuts, scars, burns, bruises, and frequent injuries.
- hard-to-believe stories about how injuries happened.
- signs of malnourishment (see page 245).
- unusual levels of dirtiness, or poor physical care.
- signs of low self-confidence, such as not playing with other children, not being interested in what is going on, or being anxious or fearful.
- anger and quickness to fight.
- an over-eagerness to please adults.

For signs of sexual abuse, see page 279.

## How does abuse harm children?

Violence, emotional abuse, and neglect harm a child's development. Babies who lose a parent may not get enough to eat or enough stimulation. These babies may grow more slowly, physically and mentally, and even have permanent damage. If babies do not get enough breast milk, or substitute milks with enough nutrients, it can affect their brain and body development.



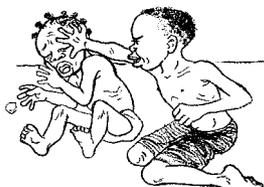
Babies also need love, not just food. Children who are pushed away, hurt by caregivers, rejected by their community, or not shown love often live with anger, sadness, or depression (no interest in anything). These children often struggle to learn and make friends.



Being regularly abused by a caregiver makes children live in constant fear of physical violence, scolding, being belittled or shamed, or other harsh treatment. Abused children may lack confidence or may become bullies themselves. Their world is dangerous and unpredictable. Fearfulness and lack of confidence make children less active, less curious, and less social. These all make children slower to learn and develop.

Children who often face sudden, harsh punishments may also learn to obey adults without question. This makes a child more vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation. See page 278.

In extreme cases, both neglect and harsh treatment can cause injuries, disabilities, and even death. For example, when a baby does not stop crying, a caregiver may become so frustrated that he shakes the baby, which can permanently harm the baby's brain or even kill him.



**Children who are abused or bullied often do the same to others.**

Being abused causes many children to develop problems later in their lives, such as drug or alcohol problems, depression, violence in their relationships, or wanting to kill themselves. And as older children or adults, they may abuse their own children.

How much harm child abuse does depends on how serious it is, how many times it happens, and if the child has support to recover from the abuse.

## Why do adults abuse children?

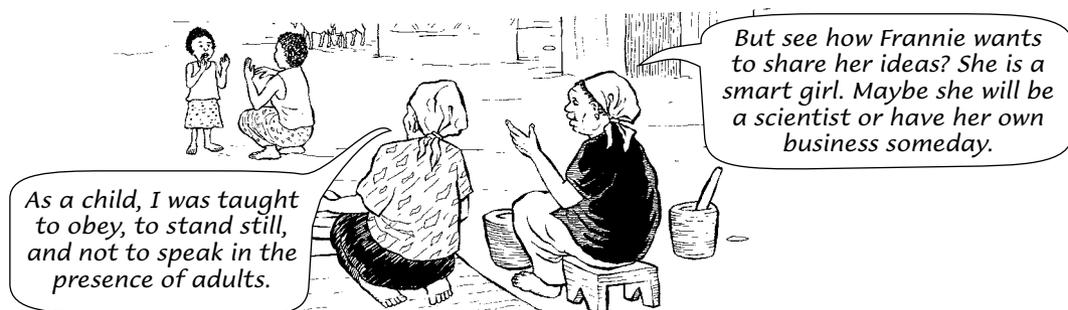
Most parents and caregivers do not mean to abuse a child or cause her lasting harm. Sometimes adults abuse children because they:

- are tired, angry, frustrated, embarrassed, or upset about their own problems, so they lose control over how they respond to a child's behavior.
- expect a child to have abilities and understandings beyond her age.
- do not know, or believe in, other ways to guide or discipline children.
- resent the children in their care.
- are not aware of or cannot control what they are doing because they are using drugs, are mentally ill, or are depressed.
- know they will suffer no consequences.
- were beaten or shamed themselves as children, so they think it is proper to do the same to their children.
- think that girls and women exist to satisfy the desires of men.



Orphaned children may behave in very difficult ways as they grieve. They may resent and fight the new family they have been thrust into. The same changes that are hard on these bereaved children are often hard on the new family too. Caregivers easily lose patience, making the situation worse for everyone.

Many caregivers are mistreated themselves by society. They may be discriminated against because of race, gender, disability, or other stigma. They may be humiliated or bullied by employers, police, or the military. Feeling powerless, angry, or uncaring because of this treatment can lead them to abuse others — including children.



## Raising children with understanding

Much knowledge about how to raise children well and protect them from abuse can be learned from older people in your community, especially women. But when families are stressed or broken apart by sickness, death, loss of land, or migration for work, traditional ways of passing on knowledge or finding help may not work. A family that has difficulties will often not seek help out of a sense of shame or embarrassment.

While many traditional ways of raising children are healthier than modern ways — such as carrying young babies most of the time, close relationships between children and grandparents, or communal childcare — not all traditional ways are healthier. People in many communities are rethinking some common ways of treating children.

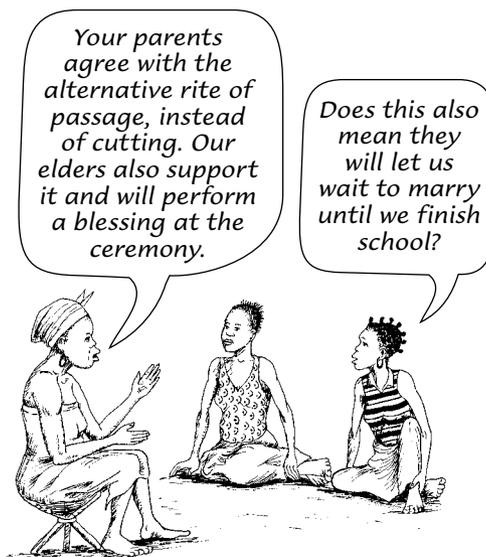


For example, it is becoming no longer acceptable to punish children at school with beatings, shame boys for crying, or feed girls last and least, even if this happened to us as children.

Harsh punishment may seem like good parenting since it sometimes makes a child quickly change his behavior. But these punishments usually do not stay effective, and can also harm the relationship between parent and child.

Other practices being ended are the genital cutting of girls, and early marriage for girls. Cutting can cause serious health problems — even death — when it is first done to a girl, as well as later in her life. Both cutting and early marriage make sexual relations, pregnancy, and birth more difficult and dangerous for women, and harm their emotional development. And both practices help spread HIV.

To stop genital cutting and early marriage of girls, communities must find ways to agree it is unhealthy and unacceptable, and publicly communicate that women who are not cut are fully acceptable, marriageable, and worthy of status and respect.

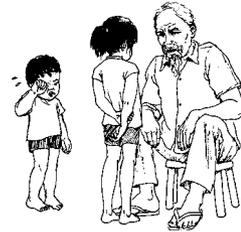


## How to guide and discipline children

Children experiencing loss may misbehave more to gain attention. With patience, you can find out what a child needs. Handling misbehavior in a kind and effective way is important when caring for very young children.

Sometimes young children misbehave because they do not understand what is expected of them. Be patient. Help them understand when something they do is dangerous or wrong for some other reason. When possible, discuss rules with children to make sure they understand them. Apply rules consistently, fairly, and equally to all the children in your household. Children learn best when we suggest or show them what to do rather than only yelling “No!” or “Stop that!”

*Jin doesn't know any better. We must teach him, not hit him.*



*Don't chase the chickens, Paolo. Help me find the eggs!*



A child's ability to understand and follow directions changes as he ages.

Watch children to see what you might explain to them. As they grow, they will understand more. Give children limits that make sense for their ages and abilities.

Notice and praise a child when he or she is behaving well. Show children you see when they are being helpful or making a good effort. Point out what children do well — not just what they do wrong. This builds their confidence and sense of worthiness. It helps them want to do more.

**Children under 1 or 2 years old** do not understand what is safe or acceptable. Remove dangerous things from their reach, and distract them if they are doing something wrong by showing them things that are OK to do.

*These glasses are not OK for playing. You can play with this gourd.*



*Blocking the door to the kitchen was a good idea.*



**Children from 2 to 3 years old** need to be able to explore their world and handle many different kinds of things to develop well.

Children this age cannot understand or remember most rules about what they can play with or where they can go. Safe areas to explore and things OK to play with lessen the need for discipline. Help them learn more words so you can better understand each other.

**Children from 3 to 5 years old** and older want to and can do more things for themselves and with other children. Make sure they understand any rules you want them to obey. Encourage them and talk with them about how to solve problems when they happen.

For more about what children need and can do at different ages, and how to communicate with them as they grow, see Chapters 3 and 4.



**Explain rather than scold if the child wants something she cannot have.**

### **Discipline teaches children better than punishment**

Sometimes guidance is not enough and some kind of discipline is necessary. Ignoring a child's serious misbehavior is not kind or helpful to the child. But using harsh words, cruelty, or physical actions such as slapping, beating, or burning to punish a child are hurtful and may create greater misbehavior.

Effective discipline makes children feel they are cared for and are being guided, even if the person who disciplines them is angry or disappointed with them. The purpose is to encourage respect for others and to learn and understand rules of behavior, which cover everyone. Good discipline does not cause fear. It teaches children necessary limits and the results of good or bad behavior. These are some helpful ways to discipline a child:

- Give a child a “time out,” a few minutes away from toys, activities, or other children, to make clear a behavior is unacceptable. Use the same minutes as his age.
- Take away your child's privileges for a short time — such as not letting him watch TV, play football, or go to a friend's house.
- Talk with the child about the results of his behavior and have him apologize to anyone who was hurt by it.
- Give the child some kind of useful task to make up for the misbehavior.



Discipline should not take away food, medicine, or other necessities.

For more about dealing with a child's difficult behavior, see pages 52 to 57.

## Family support for raising children

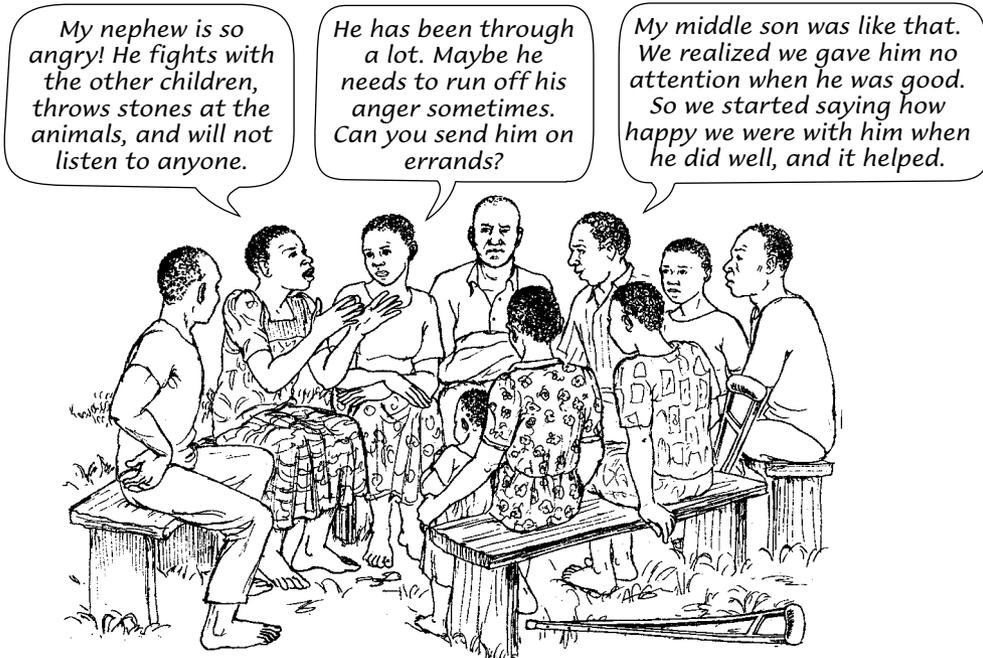
Community support for families with children can prevent a lot of abuse. When neighbors can talk openly with others about their child-rearing goals and problems, it is easier for everyone to offer and receive help and support.

Private (anonymous) support can also prevent abuse. In some places caregivers can call a “hotline” for help when they are so angry or upset they feel they might hurt their child. Talking to a sympathetic person or trained volunteer can stop someone from hurting a child and help her consider other ways to respond.



Parent support groups can help people share ideas about how to handle the difficulties that arise in caring for children. Parents can learn together about how children develop and what babies and children are able to understand and do at different ages. Parent groups can also be places where people can talk about how to balance guidance, discipline, and punishment in raising children to best help them learn and develop. For some examples of parent support groups, see the next 2 pages.

Other kinds of community support can help caregivers be less stressed and have more time and energy for children, including any extra children they have taken in. Providing food assistance, transportation, school fees, basic income, or opportunities to feel included and respected by the community have all been successful in different places. For more about community support, see Chapter 15.



### Parenting with love and respect

Plan Uganda's Parenting Program gives parents and other caregivers a place to discuss how to raise healthy children. They talk about what kind of parents they want to be and the problems they face as parents. The program focuses on 5 ways to help children grow strong, healthy, and smart: talking, playing, eating well, washing hands, and creating love and respect in the family.

The program helps parents see how conflicts and other difficult problems in life cause stressful emotions, such as sadness, unworthiness, and anger. Parents often cope with these emotions in ways that make them show less love and respect for each other at home. Men often express anger with violence — shouting, throwing things, or hitting. Violence may make the man feel better, but it is very bad for others in the family, especially children and women. Women who are stressed often withdraw from family life — they may stop speaking, hold their emotions inside, or show little interest in their work around the home or in others. This hurts everyone, including the woman, since she stops feeling supported by friends and family and feels less close with her children.

Plan Uganda's parenting groups discuss what they can do to feel better, and how they can avoid ways of acting that lead to abuse. For instance, they practice communication skills that help parents work out conflicts while showing respect and love for themselves, each other, and their children.

For example, parents might talk about how one form of criticism could cause a child to want to do better, while another kind of criticism might lead her to feel useless, insecure, or angry. They also talk about how it feels to be slapped or praised, or how a child might feel when he is slapped, praised, or hugged.

*Let's pretend you made a bad meal today. If I was your husband, I could say: "You are a good wife, doing so many chores and cooking good food. But this does not taste good. Please don't make it again."*

*Or I could shout: "What a terrible meal! You are lazy and stupid. I work hard all day and come home to this awful food. What kind of wife does this!?"*



### Father Support Program

In Turkey, the idea for a parenting program for fathers came from a mothers' support program. The mothers were learning about how to help their children grow well from an early age, and they wanted fathers to learn too. Fathers already felt responsible for supporting their children financially and morally. But few understood how much they could help their children by listening to them, talking and playing with them, and fitting their expectations better to their child's age and abilities.

The fathers met every week for 3 months. They started with memories of their own fathers and what their fathers wanted for them as children. Many realized that as children they wished for more closeness with their fathers. Over the weeks, they discussed ways of parenting, communicating effectively with children, and methods of disciplining children based more on helping the child gain inner control than on fear.

By the end of their program, the fathers said they listened more to their children, were better able to control their anger, and had stopped beating and harshly punishing their children. They were surprised that the new ways they had learned often seemed to result in more obedient children!

*I remember when my father slapped me on the face. My brother and I had not finished our homework. I cannot forget this, though it is not how I want to remember my father. As children, these moments enter our bodies and they remain there.*



### Community support can help children in need

Sometimes families are unable to provide good care for their children, but the children are not in great danger. It can make a big difference to a child when someone simply listens to his problems and feelings, and gives him encouragement. This could be someone like an older friend, a teacher, or a caring person in the community who the family knows.

However, when serious abuse places the child in danger, it may be necessary to involve authorities to protect the child – community or religious leaders, social workers, health workers, or even the police.



Some groups organize and train community members to visit families regularly, to see what they need and how children are doing. These community social workers, who may be paid or volunteer, provide support by offering advice about different ways to help children, and by helping families get the resources and services they need. This support is especially important for an older child taking care of younger siblings.

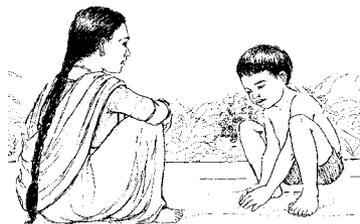
If you are organizing a child welfare group that will visit families, here are some ideas.

- Try to identify children and families in need before problems become desperate. See the signs listed on pages 265, and 279 to 280 for problems to watch out for. Or your group might prepare and conduct a survey to learn how many children under 5 there are in each household or how many children have disabilities or do not get enough to eat.
- Pay attention to how each child or family is coping. Do not undermine strategies that seem to be working, but encourage and build on them.

Helping families solve their problems can be difficult, and more so when families are also affected by HIV. Community volunteers who support struggling families may need support groups of their own.

### Watching out for children together

A children's welfare committee in India worried that orphaned children in the community were being abused. To protect them, the committee found volunteers on each street to give extra attention to households that had taken in children. These "street mothers" approached children and encouraged them to talk with a street mother if they had difficulties. The volunteers also spoke with parents to explain their concerns and enlist support for their project.



When the "street mothers" heard about a home where children were being treated harshly or neglected, they would go as a small group to talk with the family and try to resolve the problem. If abuse continued, they reported the household to the local police. The local department of education began training teachers and police how to recognize and deal with child abuse. Police, teachers, and the "street mothers" all became important allies for vulnerable children.

## Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is when adults or adolescents seek out children for sex. It can involve touching children, forcing them to perform or receive oral sex, or having penetrative sex in a child's vagina or anus. It can also involve showing children sexual photos or films, making children pose for them, or forcing children to say sexual things or watch others having sex.

Almost all sexual abuse happens with someone close to a child, not with a stranger. It can be a relative, a family friend, a teacher, a healer, or a pastor. Usually the abuser is male. Older boys often abuse younger girls and boys.

Most abusers use a position of trust or influence to pressure a child to have sex. The abuser uses his power — expressed through “kindness,” gifts, threats, force, or all of these — to take advantage of a child. People may promise a child or her guardian a better life for the child, working as a maid or servant, but she is then abused or sold into prostitution.

Sexual abuse happens all over the world and in all kinds of families. It happens to boys and girls of all ages. Children with no one to look after them are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse. Sometimes when a child and an older man have a sexual relationship, the older man is called a “sugar daddy” because he gives the child money or food, or pays for clothes or school fees. This is still abuse, even if you do not see signs of sexual abuse and no physical force was used.

See pages 279 to 280 for more information about signs of sexual abuse.

### 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!**

## Abuse causes lasting harm

Sexual abuse can cause serious physical harm. Children can be infected with HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, and girls can become pregnant before their bodies are fully grown. Sexual abuse of a baby or young child can cause severe tearing and injury to the vagina or anus, leaving lasting damage.

The emotional harm of sexual abuse is just as serious. Sexual abuse disturbs normal sexual development for children, forcing them to deal with feelings, thoughts, and experiences they are not ready for. Children who have been abused often feel deeply guilty and ashamed. They may also feel confused, afraid, or angry. Because of the abuse, they may later be unable to trust others or have loving adult relationships.

Sexually abused children may later become violent, use alcohol or other drugs, and suffer from depression or thoughts about killing themselves. Some boys who are abused become abusers later. It is important to stop this cycle of abuse, to help children understand how abuse affects them, and learn how to heal.



Girls and boys who have been abused need support to heal, physically and emotionally. Treating abused children as damaged or ruined can worsen their feelings of guilt, shame, and depression. Working together at a community level to change this stigma is important for the health of our children.

### How HIV makes children face more sexual abuse

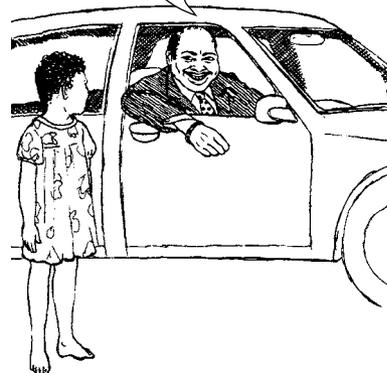
Children affected by HIV may lack food, clothing, or shelter because of illness or death in their families. They may move into the home of a relative or neighbor. These difficult situations make children easier prey for abusers, who often offer needed items to persuade children to do things they would otherwise not do. Men in the household may feel it is OK to use the child for sex, and stressed caregivers may not notice or be able to deal with what is happening. Children getting used to new relationships to caregivers are more easily abused.

HIV sometimes causes disabilities in children, such as deafness or mental slowness, that make it difficult for children to understand or communicate about abuse. Also, an abuser may think it is OK to use a child with a disability for sex.

The stigma of HIV makes children and families affected by HIV less able to ask other community members for protection.

A very harmful myth makes some people believe that if a man has sex with a child (a virgin), his HIV will be cured. This dangerous belief is not true. Men who act on this myth can spread HIV to the children they abuse, especially because abuse often causes tears in the child's skin that allow HIV to pass more easily to the child.

*Hello, Sandra! Give your sick mama a rest, and come with me to get something to eat.*



## Preventing sexual abuse

To keep children safe, we must confront sexual abuse in our communities. Adults must face the fact that it happens. We can also help children learn what abuse is, be better able to resist it, and know who they can talk to if they are scared or worried about someone.

Caregivers can agree amongst themselves to watch out for the children in the neighborhood or area. Communities can work with the police and courts to ensure that abusers are quickly dealt with, in ways that protect children.

**Talk to your child about abuse** by explaining different kinds of touching. For example: “Shaking hands is okay, sometimes a hug or a kiss is okay, but if someone touches you in your private parts, it is not okay.”

*This kind of touching is not OK for children.*

*And if someone says you must keep a secret or something bad will happen, that is not true. You must tell me, OK?*

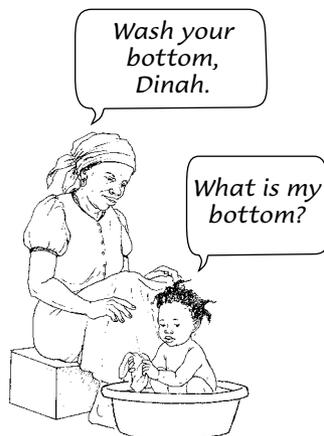
**Talk to your child about secrets** and how loving relationships do not involve secrecy and fear, especially not about being touched. Ask young children to say this back to you.

**Assure your child you will always believe her.**

**Communicate with your children.** Ask about their day, pay attention to what they say, and watch for signs they are worried or upset. Give extra attention to your child’s safety when he shares a room with adults or older children.



## Help your child understand that some body parts are private



Children can learn names for different parts of their body by about 18 months old. Use the time you dress or bathe children to help them learn. Include names for their private parts, such as bottom, butt, penis, vagina. By ages 3 to 5 years old, children can understand that these are parts of their body that no one but them should touch. Also tell your child that she should not agree to touch someone else’s private parts or look at pictures of private parts. You can also use pictures or dolls to help your child understand. Be ready to repeat this information.

### Help your child know where to go for help

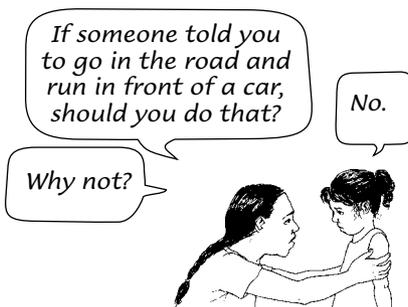
Make sure your child knows who he can talk to if someone touches him or asks him to do something that makes him uncomfortable. Name at least 3 people that your child can go to for help. They can be family members, neighbors, or anyone you trust who the child knows well.



### Teach your child she can stand up for her rights

Most children are taught from a very young age to obey adults, to do as they are told. Children need to know that sometimes they may disobey.

Try making up different stories with someone asking a child to do things that are dangerous or wrong, or to keep a secret. Ask why the child should disobey, to see if she understands.



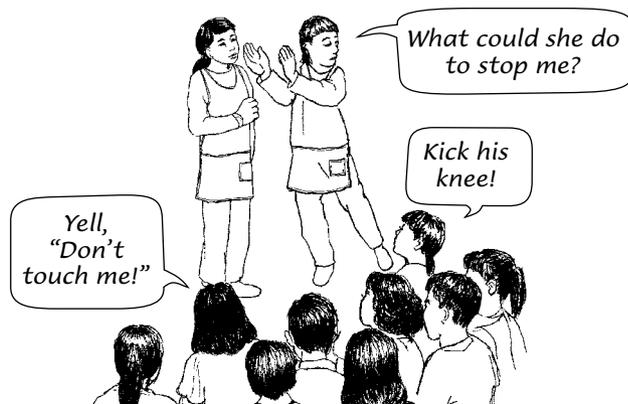
*If someone hurts or scares you, yell or say, No! Let's practice.*



Explain to your child that if someone tries to touch her, hurt her, or make her go somewhere, she should yell for help. Help her practice shouting "No!" so she will be able to do it later, if necessary. Practice by telling stories, or using pictures, puppets, or dolls.

School-age children can learn self-defense skills, different ways to make noise or say "no," and how to hurt someone enough to get away.

When groups of girls practice these skills together, they become more prepared, more confident, and better able to use their skills.



## How to know if a child has been abused sexually

Young children who are abused may not know how to tell you or may be afraid. Often the abuser warns the child not to say anything. Sometimes the child fears he did something wrong. Since children do not always communicate about abuse, you need to watch for signs. The following signs are not always the result of abuse, but they should always cause concern, especially if a child shows more than 1 of them.

### Physical signs include:

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



### Sexually abused children may:

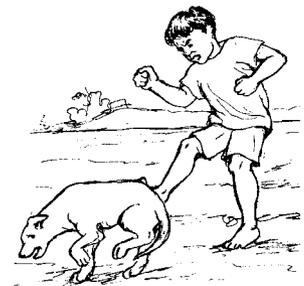
- stop bathing, or wash themselves more than usual, or refuse to get undressed.
- play sexually with other children or with toys in a more knowing way or more often than you would expect for their age.
- know more about sex than other children their age.

Let me see  
your  
wee wee.



### 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 a parent.
- be secretive or want to be alone most of the time.
- start acting in a younger, more baby-like way.
- 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.
- not want to be touched or do physical activities.



**Abused children often become more violent themselves.**

### How abusers may act

Most abusers are good at hiding their abuse. And sadly, they are often among the most trusted members of a family or community – a helpful uncle, a kind teacher, a priest, or a respected healer. But some ways of acting should raise concern if there are any other signs of abuse:

- having an overly close relationship with the child, especially one with lots of close physical touching.
- arranging to be alone with the child, or being found at an unexpected time or place with the child.
- giving the child gifts and money.
- strong changes in how the child acts when the adult is near, or in how the child talks about that adult.



### If you suspect abuse

Stay calm. Encourage your child to show you what has happened or what she knows. Pay careful attention to what she says or shows you because she may not know enough words (or signs, if she is deaf) to explain herself clearly. She may be afraid no one will believe her.

Sometimes you can learn more about what happened by watching how a child plays or draws.

Can you use the dolls to show me what he did?



Some children can work out many upsetting feelings about abuse through play, if you allow them. Their play may show fear of the abuser, anger that no one protected them, or desire to punish. You may see signs they feel guilt, they think the abuse was their fault, or they fear that telling someone about it will cause harm. Using play this way takes time, but can help children a great deal.

## Supporting a sexually abused child

Strong reactions from others may discourage a child who has been abused from saying more about what happened. Be as calm, reassuring, and loving as possible with the child. To help most:

- believe what she says or shows you. Children rarely make up stories about sexual abuse. Some abusers are very friendly to parents, to make them less likely to believe or report abuse, and to gain better access to the children.
- 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 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.
- contact the police or local authorities. Find out if the child should have a physical examination that can be used in court. If the abuse just happened, save any torn or stained clothing (with semen or blood on it), and do not wash the child before the examination.
- get your child tested for sexually transmitted infections, even if she does not have any signs. Some sexually transmitted infections have no signs, or signs do not show until a child is older. Consider giving the child PEP, medicine that can prevent HIV infection if given within 72 hours of abuse (see page 113). An older girl should be examined or tested for pregnancy even if she has not yet started her monthly bleeding.

As a caregiver, you also need help. Caregivers feel many emotions when they learn their child has been abused, including disbelief, anger, sadness, and shame. Caregivers may blame themselves or each other for what happened. It can help to talk about these feelings with someone you trust. Writing, drawing, playing music or singing, or calming herb teas may help you. Be patient. It takes 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. It is not caused by the family.





A child may have trouble relating to people after being abused. She may feel guilty, sad, fearful, or angry. She may feel nervous or ashamed to see her friends or family. Encourage others to welcome her with understanding and caring. It may take time for the child to trust others again, but gradually she will resume doing normal things. It may help her to reassure her of this.

The community must help both abused children and their caregivers. Families need to be accepted and not avoided, insulted, or excluded. A child who is given support and treated kindly can recover well from abuse.

Sometimes children who were abused seem fine at first but become upset later. Watch for changes in behavior and continue to offer support.

## Working in the community to stop sexual abuse

Most people are not comfortable talking about sexual abuse, but creating awareness and helping people report and respond to abuse are important ways to protect children. Speak with teachers, health workers, religious leaders, police, service organizations and others to make sure they know how harmful child abuse is, and how common.

Community meetings and programs in schools 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 ways for communities to work to prevent sexual abuse:

- Show abusers and children you will not remain silent. Report abuse when it happens, take abusers to court, and put them in jail if possible. If that is not possible, decide as a community how you will protect children from sexual abusers when they have been identified.
- Hold workshops to help parents and teachers learn ways to communicate with young children about the danger of sexual abuse. Read written materials aloud with parents if discussion is not yet possible.
- Train teachers, school staff, nurses, and other health workers how to notice signs of abuse and how to talk with a child who may be a victim of abuse.
- Educate school children to prevent sexual abuse. This can include teaching children to watch out for each other, and providing age-appropriate education on healthy sexuality, such as the importance of consent.
- Set procedures for reporting child sexual abuse in schools and institutions and explain them to parents.

### How one community is healing from abuse

Our indigenous community has many problems, including unemployment, violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, and depression. But one problem nobody talked about for a long time was sexual abuse. It was a horrible, never-talked-about secret. Then a group of us who work together began to open up and talk about how we had been abused as children.

It was very painful to share our own experiences of abuse, but it helped us see how much of a problem it was. We learned it was easier to bring it out in the open when when we worked together to make it safe to talk about it. This experience led us to raise the problem of sexual abuse publicly in our community, and we became more confident discussing it. When we brought the discussion to our schools, our children began to disclose that it was happening to them too. The abusers were the men in their families.

*We struggled about what to do. We believed the children when they told us they were being sexually abused, and we knew they needed to be protected and helped.*



*But we did not believe the Canadian justice system could help men learn how to be different.*

When people go into the justice system they may find punishment, but they do not find help. And many families do not want their men jailed, for all the other problems that causes a family.

We saw both sides — the children needed counseling, support, and protection, and the men needed to take responsibility and repair their spirits. We did not want to send the men away only to have them return angry and hardened, and likely to abuse again. We wanted healing. When someone accepts real responsibility for the harm he has done, then healing is possible. We wanted to find a way to keep the men in the community to work on this, separate from the children, to protect them and their own healing process.

Some of our men now work closely with men who are accused, which can be very hard work — for all of them. The men do not want to take responsibility. They deny, they try to manipulate the people around them, they make and break agreements. Counselors get mad and frustrated when they see the same behaviors and hear the same excuses time and again. It takes persistence to reach them, to convince them to admit the truth, and to understand the impact of their actions. A men's group helps a lot, because a man does not feel alone with his guilt and shame there. Still, it takes a lot of time and patience.

*We expect you to change and we know you can change. We can all change.*



We also began consulting our elders about our people's traditions, the old ways we had given up. We re-learned the cleansing rituals and healing circles and they became important tools to help abusers change, to face what they had done to themselves and their children. These are serious ceremonies that work deeply on all who participate. Some broken families slowly came together again.



Children depend on the men and women in our families and communities to watch out for them and care for them. We need our men to join in this work, and break the cycle of abuse. Knowing that we are healing by relying on ourselves, on our traditions — not on the white world that only sees us as problems to be ignored, rejected, or imprisoned — has made the whole community stronger.