



## Chapter 12

# Preventing Sexual Abuse

As children become more independent, they meet more people and relate to them in many different ways. Just as they must learn to move around the house and community safely, they must also learn about personal safety. This chapter is about protecting children from sexual abuse.

It might seem strange to find material about sexual abuse in a book like this. Sadly, children with disabilities like blindness can be more at risk for sexual abuse than children who can see, so it is important to discuss.

**Keep our children safe**

Nobody has the right to use a child for sex.

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



*Parents need to talk about sexual abuse with each other, and with our children. Talking about it is the first step in stopping it. Not talking about it only protects abusers.*

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

- people rarely talk 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 say who should talk to children about sex, what should be said, and when such conversations should happen.

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

## Some facts about sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is any direct or indirect sexual contact between an adult (or older youth) and a younger child. Sexual abuse can happen to any child. It happens in all communities, and in rich and poor families. It happens most often to girls but also to boys.

There are many different kinds of sexual abuse. Some of the most common are:

### Abuse that involves touching a child:

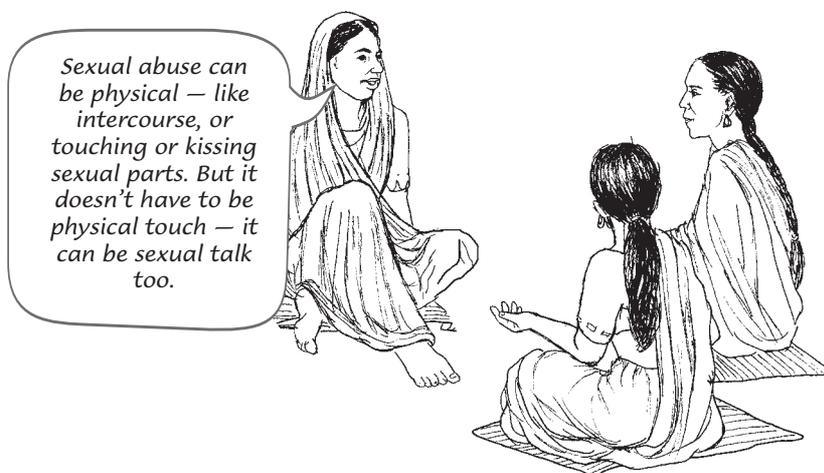
- kissing or hugging a child in a sexual way
- sexual intercourse
- oral sex (mouth to penis or mouth to vagina)
- touching a child's sexual parts or asking a child to touch an adult's sexual parts

### Abuse that does not involve touching a child:

- using sexual language to shock a child or make her sexually excited
- making a child hear or watch sex between other people
- making a child pose for pictures
- forcing a child to become a prostitute

Most sexual abuse starts when children are older than 5 years, but it can happen to younger children too. Most abused children are abused by someone they know, like a family member or neighbor —not by a stranger. Often the abuse goes on for a long time, sometimes for years.

We do not know exactly how common sexual abuse is, since children often do not tell anyone. But it is possible that as many as 1 of every 4 children in the world are sexually abused.



## Sexual abuse has lasting effects

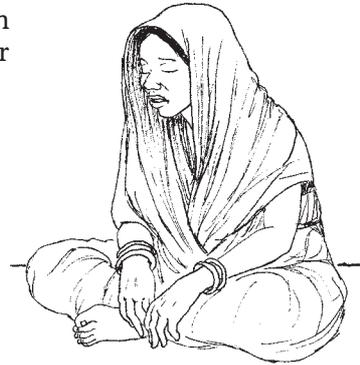
Even though talking about sexual abuse is hard, it is very important to make sure that you, or someone you trust, talk to your child. Explaining sexual abuse to children in a way they can understand will not make them more worried. It will not hurt them. It will make them safer.

Sangeeta was 4 years old when she was abused by her 14-year old brother. She went to her parents and in her childish way told them that her brother had hurt her. At first, Sangeeta's parents thought that she had bruised herself. Sangeeta did not know the right words to use, but she kept trying to explain.

Finally, when her parents understood what had happened, they did their best to cover up the incident. Sangeeta was not allowed to talk about it. Her parents "solved the problem" by sending her brother to a boarding school. For her parents, the matter was closed.

As Sangeeta grew up, her brother's abuse had lasting effects on her. She was afraid of men and she felt it was her fault that her brother had been sent away. When he came home for holidays, she could not talk to him. Sangeeta was convinced that she could never get married. She felt shame and was afraid of having "pain" again, she said. She also felt little hope for the future and had little faith in herself or her abilities.

When she was 16, Sangeeta began talking to her aunt who was a health worker about her childhood abuse. As she shared her feelings and fears, she began to gain confidence. Finally, with her aunt's support, she was able to share her feelings with her brother, who asked for her forgiveness. She is happier now, but she is still not able to talk to her parents about her feelings.



Sangeeta was fortunate because she was able to find someone to talk with about her feelings. Sometimes victims of abuse pretend that nothing happened. Sometimes they do not remember what happened until they begin talking about why they feel so afraid or unhappy. When adults who were abused as children cannot talk about their own feelings, they often cannot talk to their own children about how to protect themselves against abuse either.

## Why is my child at risk for sexual abuse?

Sometimes adults feel like they have the right to use a child sexually. Sometimes older children do not realize they are doing something bad.

All children are at risk for sexual abuse because they trust adults and older children, and depend on them for care. This makes it difficult to say 'no' to them. Very young children also have less developed thinking skills and do not know what is acceptable adult behavior.

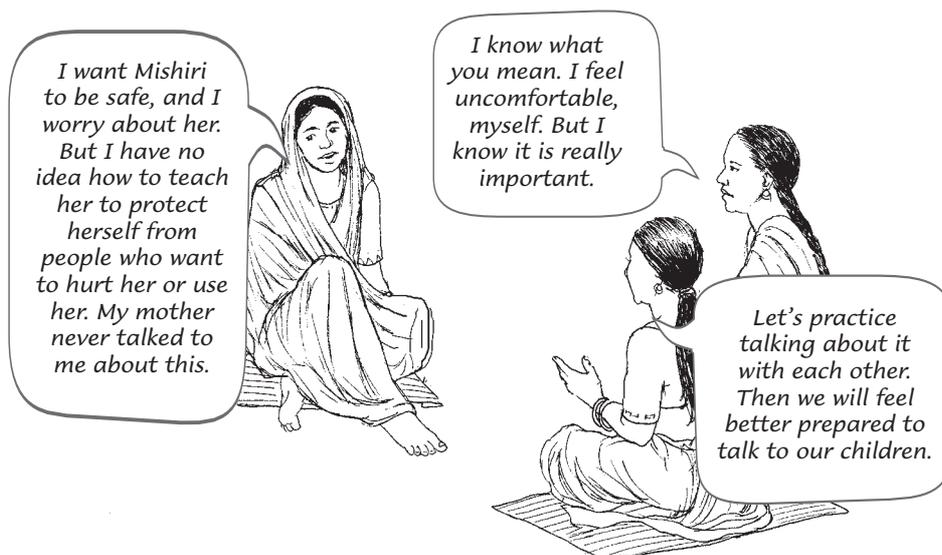
Children with disabilities are especially at risk for sexual abuse because they must often depend on other people for care even more than children who do not have disabilities. In addition, children who are blind or cannot see well:

- may have less developed communication skills. This can make it difficult for them to understand what you say about their safety. It can also make it harder for you to understand them if they try to tell you about abuse.
- may have less information about their bodies, and the differences between boys' and girls' bodies, than children who can see.
- miss important information, like a look on someone's face, that can sometimes help children learn safe social behavior.

Not all people who abuse children sexually use physical force. They can use:

- persuasion and sweet talk
- threats and bullying
- tempting treats

The result of the abuse is still violent and damaging to a child.



## Preventing sexual abuse

### ► To help your child learn about his or her body

A child about 18 months old can begin to learn the names of parts of the body.

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



Teaching can happen naturally, for example, while your child is bathing.

Children who are blind or have vision problems may need extra help learning about the parts of the body. See pages 102 and 103 for activities that will help. Using realistic dolls may also be helpful to teach about body parts.

### ► To help your child understand about his or her private body parts

Explain that some parts of the body are more private than others. Explain that people should not touch your child's genitals or private parts, and your child should not touch the private parts of others, even if asked to.

Also, remember to explain that not all sexual abuse involves touch.

*No one else should touch your private parts. If someone asks you to touch places that are private, that is wrong.*

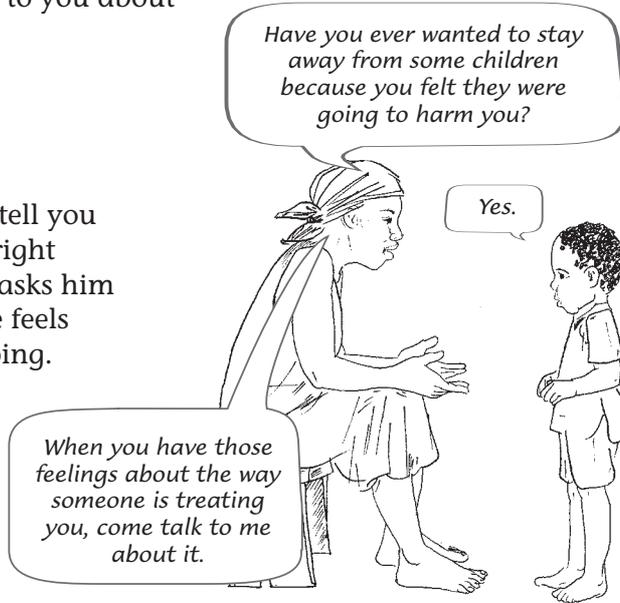
*Also if someone is talking to you about private things or asking you to watch private things, that is wrong, too.*



► **To help your child learn to say 'no'**

Help your child trust his feelings and encourage him to talk to you about what he feels.

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



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.



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



Teach your child that she should shout 'no, no,' scream, bite and struggle if an adult or older child tries to assault her.



► **To help your child understand about secrets**

Talk about secrets that are OK and not OK.

*If we don't tell Jean that Grandma is coming for her birthday, it is an OK kind of secret.*



*But we don't keep secrets about the private parts of our bodies. Be sure to tell me if anyone wants to touch your private parts.*

Explain to your child that if someone threatens her to keep her from talking about something, she must tell you. An abuser may say things like *This is our secret. If you tell anyone, I will kill you or kill the person you told. And I will tell everyone about the bad things you did.* Reassure your child that nothing bad will happen if she talks to you. A child needs to know that an abuser makes these threats because he is doing something bad, not the child.



*Sometimes a person may say that if you tell a secret, something bad will happen or they will hurt you. If this happens, it is very important for you to tell me.*

► **Respect your child's growing need for privacy while bathing or dressing**

A blind child may find it hard to understand the idea of private body parts because he or she needs help in so many everyday activities. But you can encourage your child to tell you when he or she does not want help.



## How can I know if my child has been abused?

When young children are abused, they may be afraid to tell you because the abuser warns the child not to say anything or because the child fears she did something wrong. Or a child may lack the communication skills to say what happened.

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

Some physical signs include:

- unexplained pain, swelling, or bleeding of the mouth, genitals or around the anus area
- torn or bloody underwear
- difficulty passing urine or stool
- sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- bruises
- headaches or stomach aches

Sexually abused children may:

- stop bathing, or wash themselves more often than usual
- play in a sexual way with other children or with toys
- know more about sex than other children their age

Children who have been victims of violence, including sexual abuse, may:

- seem very fearful, sensitive and watchful, or suddenly avoid or become afraid of certain people or places
- want to be with their parents all the time
- be secretive or prefer 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 and fears of the dark

**If you suspect abuse, try to stay calm. To get more information, try asking your child questions about how she is feeling. It may help to set up play situations that encourage your child to show you what has happened or what she knows. Listen carefully and make sure your child knows you believe her.**



## If your child has been sexually abused

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

- believe what she says. Children rarely make up stories about sexual abuse.
- praise her for telling you. Children need to know that they have done the right thing by talking about the abuse.
- reassure her that the abuse is not her fault and that you are not angry with her.
- protect her safety. Try to prevent future contact between the child and her 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 they do not come 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 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.

## To make all children in the community safer

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

Plan workshops for parents to help them learn ways of communicating with very young children about sexual abuse.

Hold meetings to decide how your community can respond to cases of sexual abuse. Some communities have suggested public shaming by demonstrating in front of houses of known abusers.

