

How to Talk to Toddlers About Child Abuse Prevention*

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I became interested in teaching preschoolers about child abuse prevention while I worked as a middle school counselor. The children at my school were 11 to 14 years old. They often recounted abuse that had happened to them when they were 0-8 years old. Most of them had never self-disclosed the abuse. As they aged, they were demonstrating risk-taking behaviors to try to combat the long-term effects of untreated abuse. Alcohol, drugs, and early sexual experiences did not heal or stop the pain they had lived with for so long. I felt powerless to help them in their recovery efforts. I wanted to rewind and start at the beginning and prevent child abuse rather than do remediation from widespread child abuse. After 20 years of doing this work, it became apparent to me that there was a huge information void on the topic of how to talk to very young children about child abuse prevention. I wrote the landmark children's book *Some Parts are NOT for Sharing* in 2007 and happily began my prevention career. In this paper, I will describe the details of how to talk to young children about child abuse and why this is so crucial for children's safety.

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Previous Research

Regretfully I could not find significant data/research from research institutions on how educating children about child abuse prevention can decrease one's risk of abuse. It seems as if this topic has not reached mainstream academia yet. Material about abuse: *It's Hard to Talk about Child Abuse* by Erin Gloeckner and Melanie Lockwood Herman (2020); "Understanding and preventing child abuse and neglect" (<https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/understanding-child-abuse>); the Kemp Center at the University of Colorado does child abuse research (<https://medschool.cuanschutz.edu/pediatrics/sections/child-abuse-and-neglect-kempe-center/research>); Step 3: Talk about it—Talking to kids about sexual abuse (<https://www.d21.org/education/5-steps/step-3/>).

* I am ending childhood sexual abuse one book at a time with my landmark children's book *Some Parts are NOT for Sharing*. Children as young as one year old can understand this information. I want to share this message with every child.

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Introduction

Alekseeva (2007) stated,

Children make up the segment of society that is the most defenseless, vulnerable, and completely dependent on adults. It is the fault of adults when children end up in areas of natural disasters and catastrophes or zones of military combat operation and become the hostages and victims of physical, sexual, and emotional violence. (p. 1)

“If you want to see the value of a nation, pay close attention to the way they (mis)treat children—for all children are pure, but not all adults are”.¹

Abuse manipulates and twists a child’s natural sense of trust and love. Her innocent feelings are belittled or mocked and she learns to ignore her feelings. She can’t afford to feel the full range of feelings in her body while she’s being abused—pain, outrage, hate, vengeance, confusion, arousal. So she short-circuits them and goes numb. For many children, any expression of feelings, even a single tear, is cause for more severe abuse. Again, the only recourse is to shut down. Feelings go underground. (Davis, 1991)

“It is amazing how much talk there is about forgiving the perpetrator and how little there is about holding them accountable” (Goodwin, 2021).

This topic needs to be addressed for obvious reasons. New federal child abuse and neglect data show an increase in the number of victims who suffered maltreatment for the first time since 2015. As in past years, rates of abuse and neglect are the highest among infants and young children. Of the 3,534,000 million (rounded) children who were the subject of an investigation or alternative response in the fiscal year 2018, 678,000 (rounded) children were determined to be victims of maltreatment, up from 674,000 (rounded) victims in 2017. In total, 60.8 percent of victims were neglected, 10.7 percent were physically abused, and 7.0 percent were sexually abused. More than 15 percent were victims of two or more maltreatment types (The Administration for Children and Families, 2020).

There is conflicting information on whether child abuse cases have increased or decreased during the pandemic. Mandatory reporters were removed from children’s lives when schools closed. This made the total number of reported child abuse cases decline. As families spent more time at home, and some families faced extreme financial pressure after laying off and losing jobs, I believe actual cases of child abuse have increased. These cases were not reported because the people who would have reported them were not in contact with children. Children are in more danger now than ever because of the changes in our lives and the changes coming in the future. Fortunately, most schools, for now, are open although many have had to temporarily close in the Fall of 2021.

Main Body

The goals of my research were to increase conversations between parents and children by training parents on how easy it is to talk to young people about child abuse prevention. This topic is worth examining to decrease the ever-increasing number of children who are being abused every year. Knowledge is power and I like to give children as much knowledge as is age-appropriate to keep them safe. When parents talk to children about body safety and give them permission to self-disclose if something happens to them, this empowers and

¹ See <https://childinsider.com/>.

protects children. If parents choose to say nothing, children say nothing, and nothing changes. I try to get parents, children, and the community to talk about child abuse prevention. Child abuse is a house of cards built on silence. Without silence, it quickly tumbles. Children need to be given permission to talk about child abuse and that it is okay to refuse unwanted touch. The most important thing that parents can say to children is, “I want to know if anyone touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable”. Children know instinctively that inappropriate touch is wrong. They also do not know what to do if someone does cross this line. I want this to be the last generation of children who are uneducated about body safety. I would like to move child abuse into a public health issue. When you ride a bike, you wear a helmet; when you drive in a car, you wear a seatbelt. When someone touches you in a way that makes you uncomfortable, you tell a trusted adult. Public health topics do not have the same stigma that child abuse topics do. I believe child abuse is still a taboo topic because so many adults were victimized as children and never told anyone. These parents are dealing with trauma that they might not even be aware they have. They are continuing with the no-talk theme because of their experiences, and children are suffering by the millions. It is time to talk; it is time to protect. It is time to educate!

Many adults get confused when talking about this topic. They lump body safety into conversations of premarital sex, consent, and teenage sexual behaviors. This is completely inappropriate. Body safety is body safety—nothing else, nothing more. The rules of body safety are:

1. Your body is your own;
2. You always deserve to be safe;
3. If someone touches you in a way that makes you feel unsafe, tell a trusted adult.

Children will understand these rules at a very young age. I read *Some Parts are NOT for Sharing* to my 18-month-old daughter. A month later, we were carving pumpkins and she asked me, “Mom, do pumpkins have private parts?” I knew then that I could change children’s lives for the better. My daughter was just a regular 18-month-old who understood my body safety talk. There is no greater gift a parent can give than the gift of safety.

I have talked at two national conferences on child abuse prevention. I gave the presentation “How to Talk to 2-year-old about child abuse prevention” at the Darkness into Light Conference and the Prevent Child Abuse America Conference. Both of these talks were very well received by conference attendees. They welcomed the information. Many of them reported they had never heard a talk about this material. I think this is sad. This information is so easy to understand and deliver. It can really change lives when we educate our children. This is a link to the audio recording (at <https://tinyurl.com/kexpacpk>).

Child abuse has exploded in our society. It is a problem with no voice, no street riots, basically no sound except the sound of children crying themselves to sleep. Child abuse is built on silence, but if this one card is removed, the whole house of cards crashes to the ground. I have been working since 2007 to get schools, families, parents, and teachers to talk about child abuse. Specifically, child abuse prevention. Child abuse is 93 percent preventable. Ninety-three percent of children know their perpetrator, contrary to what the media serves viewers. Ninety-three percent of the time, parents introduced the perpetrator to their children.

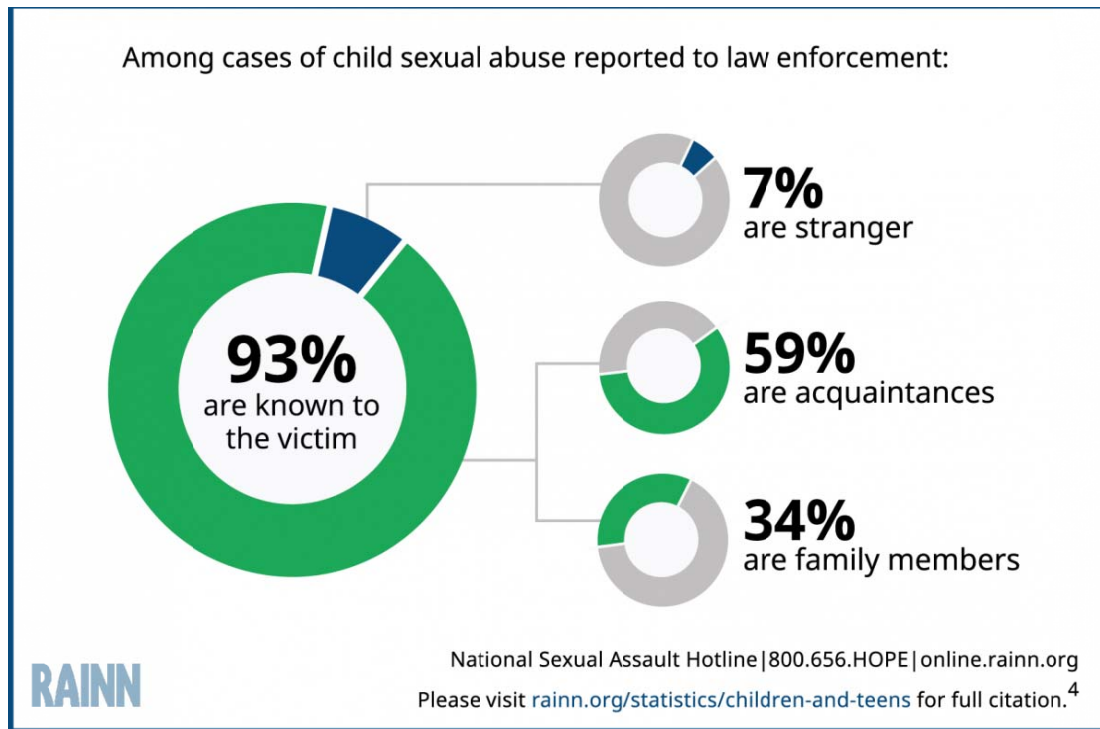


Figure 1. Child victims often know the perpetrator.

Families play a significant role in decreasing child abuse and are the chief source to educate their children. Parents need sound advice and help doing this. An excellent resource is Child Help (at <http://www.childhelp.org>). This site has many valuable resources for teachers and parents. All parents should educate themselves on body safety then educate their children. If parents choose not to do this, they are putting their children at risk for potential harm. Without body safety information, children are left in the dark about how to respond when another person touches them inappropriately. If parents do not educate their children, children will most likely not self-disclose if something happens to them. Parents need to be the ones to open this door for children. If you give your child permission to tell you if something is happening to them, they will be more likely to talk. If you do not know what to say to your children, read one of the body safety books on the market. *Some Parts are NOT for Sharing* is for children 0-8 years old. *I Said NO!* is for children 7-10 years old. This is a sample text to use with young children, I want to talk to you today about body safety. Body safety is very easy to understand and is extremely important. Your body is your own. You do not have to share it with anyone else. If someone touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, I want to know. If someone, anyone, touches you in an area your swimsuit covers, I want to know. You will not be in trouble if you tell me this. I will celebrate your bravery and get your help to stay away from this person. If someone touches you in an area where a swimsuit covers say, "NO!" and run to find a trusted adult. If another adult asks you to keep a secret, I want to know. Adults should not ask children to keep secrets.

All of this information shared is relatively easy to understand and repeat. Yet I feel like I face an uphill battle when trying to get this information out to the general public.

Can educating children about child abuse prevention decrease one's risk of abuse?

The practical significance of this work is that young people can understand how to protect themselves from child abuse with a few easy steps. This topic is often overanalyzed by parents and not talked about for fear of scaring children. Through using the language shared in this paper, every parent has the opportunity to discuss body safety with their child. Parents have a script to use and tools to make this conversation easier. To review the three simple rules of body safety:

1. Your body is your own;
2. You always deserve to be safe;
3. If someone touches you in a way that makes you feel unsafe, you tell a trusted adult.

Adults need to know that toddlers can understand child abuse prevention. Children can understand these simple concepts and need this material to be safe. With the information presented in this paper, parents have all information they need to share body safety rules with their children. I invite research institutions to contact me about doing more formal research on this topic. "Does teaching children about body safety decrease their risk of being victims of child abuse?" I think this is uncharted work that needs to be studied at length. So much more research needs to be done on this topic to protect children. From my work, I conclude that teaching children about body safety does make them safer. Children who do not have this information could be victimized at any time and their parents would probably never know. Let's get talking to protect our most precious resource, our children.

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