

Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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Sexual Abuse of Children

Sexual abuse of children is a topic of great concern to parents. Most parents want to believe "it cannot happen to my child." Studies indicate, however, that 1 out of 4 girls and 1 out of 7 boys will be sexually abused during their childhoods and that 10% of all rape victims are under 5 years of age.

Defining Terms

In Wisconsin, state law clearly defines what constitutes sexual assault of a child. First Degree Sexual Assault states that anyone who has sexual contact or intercourse with a person not yet 13 years old is guilty of a Class B Felony (maximum prison term of up to 20 years). Second Degree Sexual Assault states that anyone who has sexual contact or intercourse with anyone 13 years of age through 15 years of age (but not yet 16) is guilty of a Class C Felony (maximum prison term of 10 years or a fine of \$10,000 or both).

Sexual contact is defined as the intentional touching of intimate body parts (ie., penis, scrotum, breast, pubic mound, vaginal opening, labia, and buttocks) for any of the following reasons: sexual arousal or gratification of the perpetrator; sexual degradation or humiliation of the victim; or containing the elements of battery.

Sexual intercourse is defined in the law as any penetration, however slight, of the penis to the vagina, penis to mouth, mouth to vagina, penis to anus, or any object (including fingers or other body parts) into the vagina or anus of another. (Wisconsin Statutes, Chapter 948)

Signs to Look For

Many people wonder, "How would I know if my child has been sexually abused?" Below are listed some possible warning signs that may indicate sexual abuse. Please do not jump to any conclusions based on the existence of any one of these signs. If, however, you believe that your child has been sexually abused, talk to him/her in a non-threatening, non-accusatory manner. Ask open-ended questions, "Did someone hurt or frighten you? Who? What did she/he do?" Do not use leading questions such as, "Did someone touch you between your legs? Was it Uncle Joe? Did he put his hand down your panties?" Seek whatever professional help is needed (doctor, police, social worker, counselor).

Warning Signs

- ▶ irritation, pain or injury to genital area
- ▶ vaginal or penile discharge
- ▶ frequent sore throats and/or stomach pains
- ▶ nightmares
- ▶ significantly different treatment of one child in family or group
- ▶ regressive behavior (to earlier, safer time)
- ▶ significant changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- ▶ significant changes in personality or school performance
- ▶ sudden development of fear of certain people (either an individual or type of person)

Often abusers tell children, "If you tell your mom, she'll be mad at you and you'll make her cry." So remember that if your child tells you she/he has been

sexually abused and you become upset (which is pretty normal) it is important to reassure your child that she/he did nothing wrong and you are not mad at him/her. Let your child know that she/he did not hurt you, rather you are sad and upset because someone hurt him/her. The child needs to know that the abuser wasn't telling the truth about any part of what she/he said (otherwise any threats made might seem more valid too).

Prevention Strategies

These are some things that you can do for your child to help decrease the chances of sexual abuse, but there is nothing that can absolutely guarantee that your child will always be safe. Life holds risks for all of us and no one's safety can always be assured.

However, you can give your child some important tools for dealing with potentially abusive situations. The two most important things to provide are information and permission to say "No."

In the area of information, teach your child the correct terms for all body parts (not just eyes, ears, neck, fingers, etc.) This can be difficult for parents who are uncomfortable with words like penis and vagina. Yet a child who does not know these words may not be able to communicate sexual abuse effectively and/or may feel that these parts are "dirty" and be too ashamed to report abuse. Your child may use pet names for these parts (weeny, diamond, kit-cat, etc.) which you would immediately understand if the child reports the abuse to you, but might not be understood if the child is trying to disclose the abuse to a teacher or neighbor.

In the area of permission to say no, tell your child that she/he has the right to say NO! to touches that are uncomfortable or scary. This includes not forcing the child to kiss friends or relatives that they do not want to kiss. Present situations to the child and role play responses that you feel are appropriate. For example,

say to your child "Suppose a man tells you he has a great toy to give you but you have to come get it out of the trunk of his car. What can you do?" Possible responses include: "No!" or "I'll get my mom to come help me." or screaming or running away. Above all, develop strong communication with your child. Let your child know that she/he can come to you with any concern and be taken seriously and be taken care of. If your child tells you something that leads you to believe that sexual abuse has taken place, BELIEVE your child. Give your child the security of being trusted and loved no matter what.

What to Do If Your Child Has Been Sexually Abused

- ▶ Believe what your child tells you.
- ▶ Tell your child you are glad he/she told you about the abuse.
- ▶ Do not get angry at your child; stay calm, reassuring and non-judgmental.
- ▶ Tell your child he/she is not responsible for the abuse, regardless of the circumstances.
- ▶ Tell your child you will protect him/her from further abuse by the offender.
- ▶ Contact your local child protective services, police and/or crisis center. If the incident just occurred, do not have your child clean up, change clothes, use the toilet or bathe, or touch anything the offender may have touched.
- ▶ Let your child know you are always there to talk and listen. However, try to maintain the normal routine around the house, including chores and responsibilities. Children need the stability.

Sources:

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