

Talking with Children about Body Safety – A Fresh Perspective

Dear Friends,

I have been educating children, parents and youth professionals about child sexual abuse prevention for almost 40 years. During this time, I have spoken with countless survivors and child therapists whose experiences – along with academic research – inform my work as a prevention educator.

In this article, I would like to offer subtle but profound shifts in language so you can have more meaningful conversations with your children about body safety. Thank you for taking the time to read this important article and for helping to keep children safe from sexual abuse.

If you or a loved one would like to sign up for a Parenting Safe Children workshop, please visit the [Parenting Safe Children calendar](#). Attend with your family, friends, and neighbors so together we can help keep children safe from sexual abuse.



Talking about Body Safety – A Fresh Perspective

When I was first trained in child sexual abuse prevention in the 1980's, the focus of prevention education was providing children in preschool and elementary school with resistance skills: “Say ‘No,’ run, yell, and tell” – and “never keep secrets if someone requests or does engage in sexual touching.”



Today, many programs still focus on empowering children to keep themselves safe from sexual abuse using this approach. The belief behind this method is that if we teach children to say “No,” they can prevent sexual abuse, and they will be safer. Yes, it's important to teach resistance skills, but only teaching children to say “No” to potential abuse, puts the burden of prevention on children when it's up to adults to protect children, not for children to have to protect themselves.

Moreover, survivors report that in the face of sexual abuse, they did not say, “No,” much less run, yell, or tell, particularly when the abuse was by someone they trusted; in fact, survivors also report that by not being able to carry out the skills taught by the prevention program, they were left feeling even more shame and self-blame.

What can we as adults do with this input from survivors?

Body-safety rules and resistance skills are an important part of prevention; however, sometimes the language we use can inadvertently foster shame if in fact a child is sexually abused. Fortunately, minor adjustments to our language can go a long way in reducing shame and guilt.

Saying “No.”

Typical Prevention Language

“If someone touches the private parts of your body, asks you to touch theirs, or asks you to look at pictures of naked people, you **should** say ‘No.’”

Discussion

While it is important to teach children refusal skills like saying “No,” survivors tell us that very few children actually say “No” when faced with sexual abuse because the perpetrator is usually an authority figure and/or someone the child relies on – a parent, stepparent, older sibling, babysitter, grandparent, teacher, religious leader, or even a playmate. This person is usually larger, more powerful and has authority over the child. Children are taught not to talk back to authority, to be nice to their friends, please others, manage other people’s feelings, do as their told, and be respectful. Therefore, the likelihood that a child will refuse touch by saying “No” is low. In speaking with adults who have sexually abused children, they report that very few children have ever said “No” to sexual touch.

Preferred Prevention Language

Here is language that reduces shame and blame:

“You are **allowed** to say ‘No’ and try to get away if anyone tries to touch your private body parts, or asks for you to touch theirs, or breaks any of your body-safety rules. Saying ‘No’ and refusing would not be rude or disrespectful. You would not be in trouble. If you cannot say ‘No,’ it’s not your fault. I’ll love you even if you didn’t say ‘No.’”

(Note – Teach children correct terminology for genitals: Vagina, vulva, penis, testicles, breasts, nipples, anus, and include the mouth. Also, be aware that a child’s entire body is private and though we focus on genitals, discussions should extend to a child’s whole body.)

Running Away

Typical Prevention Language

“If someone touches the private parts of your body or makes you touch theirs, you **should** run away.”

Discussion

Where would a child run? Sexual abuse happens when children are sleeping in their own bed, at a playdate or sleepover with a friend, in a camp bunk, in a tent, on an overnight school trip, or in a school building or a religious classroom. The reality is that children do not run and usually cannot run.

Preferred Prevention Language

Here is language that reduces shame and blame:

“If someone tries to or does touch the private parts of your body, you are always **allowed** to try and move away and get help.”

Yelling

Typical Prevention Language

“If someone touches the private parts of your body, you **should** yell as loud as you can.”

Discussion

How would this work for a child—Wake everyone in the household from sleep? Yell at a teacher? Yell in a synagogue or church? Yell in the woods with other campers and counselors? Yelling is not realistic, and thus the “should” language can contribute to feelings of shame and blame.

Preferred Prevention Language

“If someone touches the private parts of your body, you are **allowed** to do anything you can to get away. If you’re not able to get away in that moment, it’s important to try to tell an adult you trust what happened. I will always believe and love you.”

Telling and Keeping Secrets

Typical Prevention Language

“If anyone touches the private parts of your body, or asks you to touch theirs or shows you pictures of naked people, you **should always** tell an adult right away.”

Discussion

Of all the survivors I have spoken with in my almost 40 years of prevention, only a handful have disclosed abuse while it was happening. Most children do not tell. From a child’s perspective, it makes no sense to tell. The threats are numerous. “If you tell...



- No one will believe you”
- We will both be in trouble”
- I will say you liked it”
- It will be your fault”
- I will go to jail”
- I will hurt your family”

It can do more harm than good to teach children that they must tell right away without also discussing the difficulty of telling and providing options. If a child is sexually abused after being taught they **should** tell right way, and they do not in fact tell, they may blame themselves. Shame is increased and they may never tell at all.

Preferred Prevention Language

“It’s important to try and tell an adult if someone tries to or does touch your private body parts, or asks you to touch theirs. I will always believe you. Even if you are too afraid to tell right away, you can tell later. It is never too late to tell. It is never a child’s fault if this happens.”

Help children identify the adults they trust and who they could tell if someone were to engage them in sexual touch or show them sexual material.

We Don't Keep Secrets in Our Family

Typical Prevention Language

“We don't keep secrets in our family.”

Discussion

It's important to discuss secrets with children, letting them know that they can tell you anything without fear of punishment; however, the reality is most children will not tell while abuse is happening. Most will keep abuse a secret. Many survivors do not disclose until their 40's or 50's, if ever. If we only say to children, “We don't keep secrets in our family,” and they do in fact keep sexual abuse a secret, once again, shame can be magnified.

Preferred Prevention Language

“In our family, we keep surprises, but it's not safe to keep secrets. Let me give you some examples: A surprise is when we don't tell your sister/grandma/etc. about her birthday present and it makes her happy when the surprise comes out. A secret is something someone asks you never to tell and can make you feel scared. If someone tells you to keep a secret about touching private body parts or about looking at naked pictures, that's not safe and you can tell a trusted adult. It's not safe for adults or teenagers to ask children to keep secrets – and it's never too late to tell.”

Best Practices in Prevention

A sound prevention approach includes three parts, all of which are provided by Parenting Safe Children: 1) Educating yourself about child sexual abuse prevention; 2) Inviting caregivers onto your Prevention Team™; 3) Empowering children by teaching them body-safety rules, which include resistance skills.

This blog posts makes two key points:

- All too often parents focus singularly on teaching children resistance skills, which puts the burden to prevent sexual abuse on children. Adults are responsible for protecting children from sexual abuse. Children can learn protection skills and it's important that they do; however, it is up to adults to protect children, not for children to have to protect themselves.
- When teaching body-safety rules and resistance skills, language matters—and adults can choose language that helps to keep children safe from sexual abuse and minimizes feelings of shame and blame.
 - “You are allowed to say, ‘No.’” vs. “You should say, ‘No.’”
 - “It's important to try and tell.” vs. “You should always tell.”
 - “If anyone touches the private parts of your body, you can tell a trusted adult. You don't ever have to keep secrets about touching private body parts.” vs. “You should always tell.”
- *Along with, “You are **allowed**,” you can also say, “You have my **permission**.”

Stay at Home with a Parenting Safe Children Workshop

All Parenting Safe Workshops are now offered via Zoom so people anywhere in the world can access my education programs from their home. Check out the [Parenting Safe Children calendar](#) for my workshop schedule! Attend with your family, friends, neighbors or anyone who has contact with your children. In addition, we welcome hosts: If you are interested in hosting a Parenting Safe Children workshop, please email feather@parentingsafechildren.com

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Your Partner in Safety,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Feather Berkower, LCSW". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Feather Berkower, MSW, is Founder of Parenting Safe Children and a Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Educator & Author