

How Parents Can Teach Their Child to Recognize and Prevent Sexual Abuse

It's perhaps a parent's greatest fear—that at some point his or her child will become a victim of sexual abuse. The statistics are alarming: Approximately 1 in 5 children will become victims by his or her 18th birthday. Authors Justin and Lindsey Holcomb have responded to parents' concerns by writing *God Made All of Me: A Book to Help Children Protect Their Bodies*, a resource for moms and dads who want to protect and educate their children.

Q: What prompted you to write *God Made All of Me*? What age range was it written for?

The book is for 2- to 8-year-olds. We wrote it because we have two young children and know parents need tools to help talk with their kids about their bodies and to help them understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch. It allows families to build a first line of defense against sexual abuse in the safety of their own homes. Our goal is to help parents and caregivers in protecting their children from sexual abuse. Because private parts are private, there can be lots of questions, curiosity or shame regarding them. For their protection, children need to know about private parts and understand that God made their body and made it special.

Q: What do the statistics about childhood sexual abuse tell parents about the importance of tackling this topic with their kids?

Child sexual abuse is more prevalent than most people think, and the offenders are usually people parents and the children know, not strangers.

Approximately 1 in 5 children will be sexually abused by his or her 18th birthday. A child is much more likely to be sexually abused by a recognized, trusted adult than by a stranger. Most victims of child sexual assault know their attacker; 34 percent of assailants were family members, 58 percent were acquaintances, and only 7 percent of the perpetrators were strangers to the victim.

Of child sexual abuse victims, approximately 10 percent of victims are age 3 and under, 28 percent are between ages 4 and 7, 26 percent are between ages 8 and 11, and 36 percent are 12 and older.

Q: You were intentional about using the terms “appropriate” and “inappropriate” when referring to kinds of touch, instead of the words “good” or “bad.” Why?

It is important to be clear with adults and children about the difference between touch that is appropriate and touch that is inappropriate. Experts discourage any use of the phrases “good touch” and “bad touch” for two main reasons. First, some sexual touch feels good, and then children get confused wondering if it was good or bad. Second, children who have been taught “good touch” or “bad touch” would be less likely to tell a trusted adult as they perceive they have done something bad.

To your child say something like: “Most of the time, you like to be hugged, snuggled, tickled and kissed, but sometimes you don’t, and that’s OK. Let me know if anyone—family member, friend or anyone else—touches you or talks to you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable.”

Q: Why do you encourage moms and dads to use the proper names when referring to private body parts, even for young children?

It can be uncomfortable at first, but using the proper names of body parts is important. This knowledge gives children correct language for understanding their bodies, for asking

questions that need to be asked and for telling about any behavior that could lead to sexual abuse.

Offenders most likely will not talk to children about their private parts by using the anatomically correct names for genitalia. They will likely use some playful-sounding term to make it sound more like a game.

Q: How did you approach talking about this issue with your own children?

We started by teaching them the proper names of their private parts at an early age and telling them their bodies are strong, beautiful and made by God. We read books to them from an early age on this topic and would talk about who can help them in the bathroom or bath and that it was OK for the doctor to check their private parts at appointments when Mom or Dad is present.

We would also role-play different scenarios to get them thinking what they would do if someone approached them and wanted to touch their private parts, show theirs, take pictures and so on. Play the "what if" game with them at the dinner table with different scenarios to see their thinking and problem-solving skills. "If someone asked you to show them your private parts and promised to give you candy if you didn't tell anyone, what would you do?" Remind them they can tell you anything and anytime without fear of getting into trouble.

We've also tried to instill a sense of control our kids have over their own bodies. We would tell them to say "no" or "stop" when they were all done being hugged, tickled or wrestled. We encourage them to practice this with us so they feel confident saying it to others if the need arises. We also tell them they don't have to hug or kiss a family member if they don't want to and teach them how to express this without being rude. It is important to empower children to be in

charge of their bodies instead of at the mercy of adults.

Q: Is there a way to educate your children about this without instilling fear?

To teach children about sexual abuse, it is important to explain about private parts. Clearly identify for your child which parts of their anatomy are private. Explain to your child that “some places on your body should never be touched by other people, except when you need help in the bathroom, are getting dressed or you go to the doctor.”

You can do this with young children during bath time or have your child dress in a bathing suit and show them that all areas covered by a bathing suit are “private.” The bathing suit analogy can be a bit misleading because it fails to mention that other parts of the body can be touched inappropriately (like mouth, legs, neck, arms and so on), but it is a good start for little ones to understand the concept of private parts.

To teach about sexual abuse offenders, it is important to teach your kids about “tricky people.” Tricky people are grown-ups who ask kids for help or tell kids to keep a secret from their parents. Teach your kids not to do anything or go anywhere with any adult at all, unless they ask for permission first.

Q: What do parents need to know about child offenders?

Although strangers are stereotyped as perpetrators of sexual assault, the evidence indicates a high percentage of offenders are acquaintances of the victim.

Most child sexual abuse offenders describe themselves as religious, and some studies suggest the most egregious offenders tend to be actively involved with their faith community.

Sex offenders are often religious, and many of them attend church. In a study of 3,952 male sex offenders, 93 percent of these perpetrators described themselves as “religious.”

Dr. Anna Salter, a sexual offender treatment provider, states it is important for parents and child-serving organizations such as churches to avoid “high-risk situations.” This is because “we cannot detect child molesters or rapists with any consistency” and thus “must pay attention to ways of deflecting any potential offenders from getting access to our children.”

Many youth organizations have prevented the abuse of children in their care simply by limiting the access of potential offenders to boys and girls. Child abusers count on privacy to avoid detection of their criminal behavior. When churches or other faith institutions remove this privacy, it becomes more difficult for the offender to succeed.

Q: Is it a bad idea to force our kids to sit on an uncle’s lap or to return Grandma’s kiss? What are some ways parents help their extended family understand the physical boundaries they allow their kids to have?

It is important to teach kids how to say “stop,” “all done” and “no more.” You can reiterate this by stopping immediately when your children express they are all done with the hugging or tickling. Your reaction is noteworthy for them as it demonstrates they have control over their bodies and desires.

If there are extended family members who may have a hard time understanding your family boundaries, you can explain you are helping your children understand their ability to say no to unwanted touch, which will help them if anyone ever tries to hurt them. For example, if your children do not want to kiss Grandpa, let them give a high five or handshake instead.

Q: What are some practical things parents can do to protect their children?

In our book, the last page is to parents and is called "9 Ways to Protect Your Children from Sexual Abuse." Some of the key practical things parents can do are: teach proper names of private body parts, talk about touches, throw out the word "secret" and identify whom to trust.

Q: What advice do you have for parents who want to create an open environment in their home, so children always feel comfortable talking to them about issues related to their sexuality or body?

We remind parents some people are out there looking to prey on our children. We have a duty to protect and prepare them for the world and to fight for them. By talking with them candidly (and, again, developmentally appropriate) about their bodies, we are setting up safeguards around them.

Dr. John T. Chirban has written an excellent book titled *How to Talk to Your Kids about Sex* that we highly recommend to all parents. He explains: "Someone is going to teach your kids about sex. ... Shouldn't it be you?" His book gives parents tools to talk with their children about the connections between sex, intimacy and love.

Q: What is personal safety education?

Education is important in preventing inappropriate sexual behavior or contact. By teaching children about their bodies and discussing appropriate and inappropriate touch, you are helping them understand their ability to say "no" to unwanted touch, which will help them if anyone ever tries to hurt or trick them.

Our friend Victor Vieth, the senior director and founder of the Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center, explains, "Personal safety education involves simply telling children that the parts of their bodies covered by bathing suits are not supposed to be touched by others and, when they are, they should tell someone. If the person they tell doesn't

believe them, they should keep on telling until they are believed.”

Parents are quick to teach about fire and swimming safety but are hesitant to encourage personal safety training, which is designed to empower and protect children against offenders.

Q: It’s every parent’s worst nightmare, but what should a mom or dad do if he or she suspects his or her child might have been the victim of sexual abuse?

You can call your local sexual assault crisis center and talk with a child advocate or hotline volunteer about your concerns. They will be able to point you to the proper authorities. Some areas would have you speak with a detective, where other areas would have you talk to a victim witness advocate. Don’t ask probing questions that could instill fear in your children. Just assure them you are so proud of them for telling you what happened and that you believe them and your job is to keep them safe.

Q: Tell us about GRACE. What does it offer to the church and families?

GRACE stands for “Godly Response to Abuse in Christian Environments,” and the mission is to empower the Christian community through education and training to recognize, prevent and respond to child abuse. We help educate churches and other faith-based organizations about how to protect vulnerable individuals from abuse, and we help churches love and serve survivors of abuse who are in their midst. Check out GRACE at [www.graceinstitute.org](#).

To keep up with Justin and Lindsey Holcomb, visit [www.holcombministries.com](#). You can also follow Justin’s page on Facebook or follow the Holcombs on Twitter (@justinholcomb and @lindseyholcomb).