

Elementary Health Education

Grade Pre-K & K PERSONAL SAFETY UNIT PARENT GUIDE

(Created 2008-2009)



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INTRODUCTION

The Personal Safety unit has been in place as a 3rd grade unit of instruction for over 20 years. In 2006-07, the Frederick County School Health Council and the Frederick County Sexual Assault/Harassment Task Force recommended that this instruction should take place below grade 3—in every grade PreK-3. Following this recommendation, a rigorous review process of all curriculum and materials of instruction occurred by parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, local health agencies, and the Frederick County Family Life Advisory Council in 2007-08. Final approval was made by the FCPS Board of Education in 2008.

The goal of the Personal Safety unit of elementary health education is to protect children from unsafe and abusive situations through their expanded knowledge, empowerment, and continued awareness of safety skills.

Just as we teach fire safety, bicycle safety, and safety around the home, the personal safety unit is also part of the health curriculum under the standard, “Safety and Injury Prevention: Students will demonstrate the ability to apply prevention and intervention knowledge, skills, and processes to promote safe living in the home, school, and community.” In every grade, students will be taught safety rules to follow, what to do when safety rules are broken, and identify the trusted adults that they can turn to when they feel uncomfortable.

Lessons will be taught by your child’s classroom teacher, who was specially trained to teach this unit. The school counselor will also consult on the instruction and be available to support the classroom teacher. The unit will be taught in five lessons with an optional booster lesson.

Parental support is crucial to the success of any personal safety program. Children are much more likely to know and use personal safety skills if they have multiple opportunities to discuss and practice them. Studies show that when parents and schools work together to present personal safety information, children are more likely to retain the information and less likely to be victimized. A consistent message that is reinforced at both home and school is the best prevention. This parent guide and other resources are available to support you in this endeavor.

Frederick County Public Schools are grateful to be a partner in teaching safety to your child. If you have questions or concerns, please contact your child’s classroom teacher, school counselor, or Principal. You are also welcome to contact James Hitchner, Curriculum Specialist for Elementary Health and Physical Education at (301) 644-5161 or james.hitchner@fcps.org.

Frederick County Public Schools

GRADE Pre-K & K

PERSONAL SAFETY HEALTH CURRICULUM

PreKindergarten

HE.PK.50.02 Demonstrate an understanding of personal body safety, including prevention skills and appropriate intervention

- HE.PK.50.02.a Define safe touches, unsafe touches, and unwanted touches
- HE.PK.50.02.b Identify the differences between safe and unsafe in terms of personal body safety and abuse
- HE.PK.50.02.c Identify unsafe situations for potential abuse, including ways to stay safe around strangers as well as people you know
- HE.PK.50.02.d Identify how people you know can sometimes hurt you or make you feel uncomfortable
- HE.PK.50.02.e Define “private parts” as those parts that are covered by a swimsuit
- HE.PK.50.02.f Define the “secret rule” as “I don’t keep secrets that make me feel unsafe or fearful”
- HE.PK.50.02.g Define warning signs as “one’s feelings when they are in an uncomfortable or unsafe situation”
- HE.PK.50.02.h Identify and demonstrate refusal strategies and skills to respond to threats to personal body safety, such as using words, not keeping secrets, getting away, and seeking help
- HE.PK.50.02.i List the trusted adults that you would go to for help
- HE.PK.50.02.j Explain importance of immediately reporting threats to personal body safety to a parent, school staff member, or other trusted adult

Kindergarten

HE.K00.50.04 Demonstrate an understanding of personal body safety, including prevention skills and appropriate intervention

- HE.K00.50.04.a Define safe touches, unsafe touches, and unwanted touches
- HE.K00.50.04.b Identify the differences between safe and unsafe in terms of personal body safety and abuse
- HE.K00.50.04.c Identify unsafe situations for potential abuse, including ways to stay safe around strangers as well as people you know
- HE.K00.50.04.d Identify how people you know can sometimes hurt you or make you feel uncomfortable
- HE.K00.50.04.e Define “private parts” as those parts that are covered by a swimsuit
- HE.K00.50.04.f Define the “secret rule” as “I don’t keep secrets that make me feel unsafe or fearful”
- HE.K00.50.04.g Define warning signs as “one’s feelings when they are in an uncomfortable or unsafe situation”
- HE.K00.50.04.h Identify and demonstrate refusal strategies and skills to respond to threats to personal body safety, such as using words, not keeping secrets, getting away, and seeking help
- HE.K00.50.04.i List the trusted adults that you would go to for help
- HE.K00.50.04.j Explain importance of immediately reporting threats to personal body safety to a parent, school staff member, or other trusted adult

MATERIALS OF INSTRUCTION

Materials of instruction are tools that teachers use in order to teach the curriculum standards and indicators. Materials were carefully chosen for developmental appropriateness and underwent a rigorous review process. Teachers have a curriculum map and were trained to implement model lessons (see *Personal Safety Teacher's Guide*).

Parents have the opportunity to view all of these materials by:

- Attending the FCPS Personal Safety Unit Parent Preview Session, conducted by the Curriculum Specialist for Elementary Health Education.
- Contacting your child's school counselor to set up an appointment to view the materials.
- Contacting the FCPS Instructional Materials Center (IMC) at (240) 236-8825 to set up an appointment to view the materials. The IMC is located at 44 W. Frederick St., Walkersville, MD, 21793, and is open from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Depending on availability, materials can be checked out for three days.
- Some of the books may also be available for check-out through the Frederick County Public Library System.

The following materials of instruction will be used for grades PreK & K:

- Approved portions of the curriculum kit: *Talking about Touching: A Personal Safety Curriculum for grades preK-K*; published by Committee for Children that includes:
 - *Joey Learns the Touching Rule* DVD
 - Safety Steps Poster
 - Talking about Touching Photo/Lesson Cards #'s 6-16
 - Vocabulary Cards
- Book: *Your Body Belongs to You* by Cornelia Spelman and illustrated by Teri Weidner. Published by Albert Whitman and Company.
- Book: *Hands are Not for Hitting* by Martine Agassi and illustrated by Marieka Heinlen. Published by Free Spirit Publishing.
- Audio CD: *Can't Fool Me!* Published by Yello Dyno, Inc.
- Know Your Body Puppet set (Shelley, Sheldon, MiShell, Darwin, and Shelby), Kendal Hunt Publishing

PERSONAL SAFETY VOCABULARY FOR PreK & K

Personal Safety: How to keep your body safe.

Safe Touch: A touch that makes you feel cared for, loved, and important (for example: hugging, holding hands, pats on the back, an arm around the shoulder, and a shot from the doctor).

Unsafe Touch: A touch that hurts you or someone else, or you or someone else's feelings (for example: hitting, pushing, pinching, kicking, and touching the private parts of your body). You are allowed to say "No" to an unsafe touch.

Unwanted Touch: A touch that you do not want or that makes you feel uncomfortable. This can also be a safe touch that a child just doesn't want at that time, or by that person, or in that way. You are allowed to say "No" to an unwanted touch, even if the touch is from someone you know.

Private Body Parts: Parts of the body that are covered by a bathing suit.

The Touching Rule: Nobody should touch your private body parts except to keep you clean and healthy.

Surprises and OK Secrets: Are fun, make you feel good, and will always be told when the time is right. They do not make you feel uncomfortable.

Not OK Surprises and Secrets: Secrets that can hurt you or somebody else if not shared, and/or may make you feel uncomfortable. Nobody should ever keep secrets about the Touching Rule. Nobody should ask you to keep a "not ok secret" from your parents or whoever takes care of you.

The Secret Rule: I don't keep secrets that make me feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Secrets about touching are not ok.

Safety Steps: No! Go! Tell! (1. Say words that mean "No", 2. Get away, and 3. Tell a trusted adult.)

Trusted Adult: Someone who: I can ask for help, I can talk to when I feel scared, I am happy to be around, makes me feel safer, and cares about me.

Warning Signs: Your feelings when you are in an uncomfortable or unsafe situation

Always Ask First Rule: Always ask first if someone you know (or a stranger) wants to give you something, or if someone you know (or a stranger) asks you to go somewhere with him/her.

PreK & K PERSONAL SAFETY

LESSON SUMMARIES & DISCUSSION STARTERS

Lesson One: Introduction & Trusted Adults

The teacher will begin by introducing a set of puppets that will be used during the unit. Then, the teacher will begin with, “This week we are going to be talking about Personal Safety. Personal Safety is how to keep your body safe.” The teacher will then read the book *I Can Play It Safe* as an introduction to the unit.

The teacher will discuss pages of the book in detail as she/he reads. For example, the teacher will define the “Always Ask First” rule when reading pages 4-5. The teacher will identify the “uh-oh feeling” as warning signs when reading pages 6-9. The students will discuss the differences among a surprise, an ok secret, and a not ok secret when reading pages 12-13. When reading pages 16-17 and pages 28-29, the teacher will emphasize that children should tell a trusted adult when they feel uncomfortable.

The teacher then discusses the characteristics of a trusted adult. The teacher will make a list of trusted adults that the students come up with and display it in the room. Students will identify a trusted adult and draw/color a thank you card to give to their trusted adult.

The lesson will finish each day with the “My Body’s Mine” song by singing and performing the accompanying movements.

Lyrics to Chorus of My Body’s Mine

My body’s mine, mine, mine, My body’s mine, mine, mine,
I can take it to school, I can keep my cool,
‘Cause you know my body’s mine.

My body’s mine, mine, mine, My body’s mine, mine, mine,
I am no fool, I play by the rules,
‘Cause you know my body’s mine.

Parent Discussion Starters, Lesson One:

- So, you started the Personal Safety unit today. What is Personal Safety?
- Who did you pick as your trusted adult? Why did you pick that person?
- What makes a grown-up a trusted adult?
- Thank you for choosing me as your trusted adult! That makes me feel so special. You know that you can always talk to me when you need anything, right? I will always try to help keep you safe. So will (Daddy, Mommy, Grandma, etc.) Who are some other trusted adults that you can think of?
- If one of your trusted adults doesn’t listen to you, what should you do? That’s right—keep telling until somebody listens.
- When I get that “uh-oh feeling,” my body feels funny. (Give examples such as my stomach gets upset, sometimes my heart starts to beat fast, or my hands get sweaty, etc.) What happens to your body when you get that uh-oh feeling (or warning signs go off)?

- Do you remember when _____ happened? How did you feel? Those were your body's warning signs! (give example of an unsafe situation that recently occurred. Or, give example when child got "caught" doing something they weren't supposed to do and was going to get in trouble, as this physical response simulates a stressful situation where a child's warning signs would be initiated)
- What is the difference between a surprise/ok secret and a not ok secret?
- Can you remember when we kept _____ a surprise? (give example like a surprise birthday party or a Christmas present) That was fun, wasn't it? It was a good surprise, or an ok secret, because it made you feel good and we told when the time was right.
- What is an example of a not ok secret?
- What would you do if somebody asked you to keep a secret from me?
- Has anybody ever asked you to keep a not ok secret from me?
- Did you learn a new song today (*My Body's Mine* song)? How does it go? Will you show me the movements?
- Do you have any questions? Remember, you can talk to me about anything, including personal safety.

Lesson Two: Safe Touches

The lesson will begin with the "My Body's Mine" song and the students performing the movements. The teacher will review definitions and clarify any misconceptions from the previous lesson. Then, he/she will define a safe touch.

The teacher will then use the picture cards from the Talking about Touching Curriculum Kit. In the pictures, students will be shown a picture of safe touch (boy hugging his father) and discuss how they know the picture is a safe touch. The teacher will lead the students to discover the importance of body language and how someone makes you feel in determining a safe touch during the discussion. Students will also identify other safe touches.

Students will then demonstrate safe touches with the puppets. They will also be shown a picture of a doctor performing a check-up on a child so that they will associate this being a safe touch because it keeps you healthy. The class will finish with the "My Body's Mine" song.

Parent Discussion Starters, Lesson Two:

- What did you learn today during your Personal Safety unit?
- What is a safe touch? How do you know if a touch is a safe touch?
- Is this a safe touch (hug child)? How does a safe touch make you feel?
- What are some other safe touches?
- When we go see Dr. _____, and he/she performs the check-up, is this a safe touch? Why?
- When you are reading a book to your child or watching television with your child, see if he/she can identify safe touches in some of the pictures in the book or in the show. Be sure to describe body language such

as smiles, laughs, etc. as a way to identify a safe touch.

Lesson Three: Unsafe and Unwanted Touches: Saying No

The lesson will begin with the *My Body's Mine* song and dance. The teacher will review safe touches. She/he will then define unsafe touches. Using the Talking about Touching picture cards, the teacher will show a picture of an unsafe touch (a girl grabbing a boy to pull him off the slide at the playground) and discuss why it is an unsafe touch. The students will also brainstorm what they could do instead of push or grab, and review any classroom rules for this type of behavior.

The teacher will read the book, *Hands are not for Hitting*, and state that hitting is an unsafe touch. The teacher will use his/her own classroom rules to reiterate other examples of unsafe touches. Students will brainstorm strategies for what they can do instead of hit when they are angry. The teacher will then state that grown-ups can also give unsafe touches. Students will be told that if a grown-up gives an unsafe touch and it leaves a mark, then they are to tell a trusted adult.

The teacher will then define an unwanted touch by using a picture card (girl trying to put her arm around her friend who doesn't want that touch). The teacher will reinforce that it is appropriate to say no to unwanted or unsafe touches, as well as the rule that if another person says "no" then you are to stop touching. The teacher will also model ways to say "no" in a strong voice. Students will practice saying "no" firmly but politely.

Parent Discussion Starters, Lesson Three:

- What did you learn today during your Personal Safety unit?
- What is an unwanted touch? What are some examples of an unwanted touch?
- Remember when _____ (give situation such as "when you were cranky when you woke up early and didn't want a hug to say good morning" or "when we visited Aunt _____ and you didn't want to kiss her hello?") Was that an unwanted touch?
- Is it ok to say "No" to an unwanted touch? Even if the touch is from an adult?
- What is an unsafe touch?
- What should you do if someone gives you an unsafe or unwanted touch?
- Has anybody ever given you an unsafe or unwanted touch? What did you do?
- Some children may ask about being spanked or slapped by parents or caregivers when being disciplined. This is a delicate issue, as families have their own values, beliefs, and practices regarding discipline. Reflect on your own discipline style. Realize that disciplining by hitting sends a mixed message that may be confusing to children (for example, spanking as a punishment when a child hits his/her sibling). Safe discipline ends and physical abuse begins when a parent or caregiver intentionally causes repeated injury to the child's body, or when discipline causes extreme pain or has lasting physical effects, such as broken bones, burns, bruises, cuts or internal damage. If you are having difficulty with this issue, please contact your child's school counselor and she/he will direct you to many resources that are available to you in terms of healthy discipline.
- Help your child to talk about what feels good (such as snuggling when we read together before bedtime) and what feels uncomfortable (such as being tickled against their will). This leads to confidence in a child's perceptions.

- Give scenario: You know, I was really angry the other day at . It was really hard not to yell at him/her. But, I counted to ten and got my patience back. Do you have any strategies you use when you get angry?
- Did you practice saying “No” in a firm way today in class? Let me see! Let’s practice saying “No” in a firm way. (give scenarios and let your child practice with you).
- What are some other ways to say “No”? (For example: “No, thank you.” “Leave me alone please.” “Stop that.” “I’m not allowed to play touching games.” “I don’t like that.”)
- Help your child to realize that getting away can be as simple as moving away from someone or going to another room. Or, it might mean running home immediately. Tell them that even if they can’t get away, then the telling becomes even more important.
- Let’s sing the “My Body’s Mine” song together!

Lesson Four: Your Body Belongs to You and Private Parts

The lesson will begin with the *My Body’s Mine* song and dance. The teacher will then review definitions of safe, unsafe, and unwanted touches. The class will demonstrate saying “No” firmly to a puppet. The teacher will read the book *Your Body Belongs to You* and review all the rules and definitions that students previously learned.

The teacher will then define private parts and The Touching Rule by using the Talking about Touching Curriculum picture card (children in their bathing suits at the pool). The teacher will then state that if someone touches a child’s private parts, then it is an unsafe touch.

The teacher will clarify The Touching Rule by discussing what it means “to keep you clean and healthy.” Examples such as changing a baby’s diaper, helping a child who needs help in the bathtub or wiping his/her bottom, and going to the doctor will be given.

Students will then go over the Safety Steps and practice what to do if somebody breaks The Touching Rule.

Parent Discussion Starters, Lesson Four:

- What did you learn today during your Personal Safety unit?
- What are your Private Parts? Is your head a private part? Are your feet private parts? Etc.
- While FCPS employees will not use correct anatomical terms for a child’s private parts in grades prek-3, you might want to consider doing so yourself. Sexual assault experts recommend using correct anatomical terms so that if necessary, the child is able to communicate accurately about any touching questions or problems that arise. Additionally, health education experts recommend using proper anatomical terms so that children do not develop a negative stigma surrounding those body parts, and so that students are accustomed to using proper terms rather than slang terms.
- What is the Touching Rule?
- What does it mean “to keep you clean and healthy?”
- Has anybody ever broken the Touching Rule with you?

- Remind your child that if somebody ever does break the touching rule, it is never too late to tell...I will always listen. It is never a child's fault if somebody breaks the Touching Rule, and you should never keep secrets about touching.
- What if somebody did break the Touching Rule? What would you do? What are the Safety Steps? That's right—Your Body Belongs To You.
- Let's sing the "My Body's Mine Song"

Lesson Five: Your Body Belongs to You and Private Parts

The lesson will begin with the *My Body's Mine* song and dance. The teacher will review all definitions and concepts that the students have learned. Students will view the video *Joey learns the Touching Rule*. In this video, Joey explores the parts of the Touching Rule. He realizes that when his mother changes the baby's diaper, that is a safe touch because it keeps the baby clean. He also learns that when he goes to the doctor and gets a shot, that is a safe touch because it keeps him healthy. Another example of a safe touch is when his grandmother helps him in the bathtub because it keeps him clean. Yet, when the babysitter asks him to play a secret touching game, Joey realizes that the babysitter is not following the Touching Rule. Joey says "No," gets away, and tells his mother that the babysitter wanted to play a touching game. His mother thanks him for telling her, says that he is a brave boy, and that she will keep him safe.

The teacher reviews all the rules and definitions from the Personal Safety unit after watching the video.

Parent Discussion Starters, Lesson Five:

- What did you learn today during your Personal Safety unit?
- What happened to Joey in the video that you watched today?
- What does it mean "to keep you clean and healthy?"
- Who did Joey talk to when his babysitter wanted to break the Touching Rule?
- Did he wait to tell, or did he tell immediately? That's right, it is important to tell right away!
- Has anybody ever broken the Touching Rule with you?
- Remind your child that if somebody ever does break the touching rule, it is never too late to tell...I will always listen. It is never a child's fault if somebody breaks the Touching Rule, and you should never keep secrets about touching.
- What if somebody did break the Touching Rule? What would you do? What are the Safety Steps? That's right—Your Body Belongs To You.
- Let's sing the "My Body's Mine Song"
- Now that you have finished the Personal Safety unit, what do you think was the most important thing that you learned?

NOTE ABOUT INSTRUCTION FOR ALL STUDENTS

Last year in Frederick County, over 3000 calls and referrals were made to Child Protective Services. Of those, 310 reports of child abuse were indicated (substantiated.) However, reporting rates of abuse are significantly lower than actual cases of abuse. Experts estimate that only 36% of abuse cases are reported. If that is accurate, there are likely over a thousand cases of child abuse in Frederick County each year.

The youngest children are the most vulnerable in terms of child abuse. According to the US Dept. of Health and Human Services, 39% of all abuse cases occur before the age of 3. Over half of abuse cases occur before a child reaches 3rd grade. 63% of all abuse occurs while a child is in elementary school.

These statistics reaffirm the Board of Education's decision to begin developmentally appropriate personal safety instruction in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten in Frederick County Public Schools. It is our hope that through their expanded knowledge, empowerment, and continued awareness of safety skills, children are less likely to be victims of abuse.

Nationally, in 87% of all physical abuse cases, 77% of neglect cases, and 27% of sexual abuse cases, the child's parent is the perpetrator of abuse. Thus, the expectation in Frederick County Public Schools is that all children receive instruction about personal safety. Parent permission is not required. Yet, we highly encourage parents to be partners in educating students about the dangers of abuse and threats to personal safety.

FCPS realizes that personal safety instruction is a sensitive topic that may not be suitable for all students. After reviewing the materials of instruction and the model lessons, if you wish for your child not to receive instruction, contact your child's school Principal. This decision will be made on an individualized basis.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

From Your Body Belongs to you book by Cornelia Spelman

“Children need an abundance of warm physical affection to thrive. However, when children indicate that they don’t want to be hugged or kissed, we need to respect their reactions. In this way, they learn that being touched is their own choice, not another’s; that their bodies “belong to them.”

We often unwittingly teach the opposite lesson when we force children to give a goodnight kiss to a relative or friend, or when we permit others to pick up, tickle, or kiss our children against their wishes.

There is a big difference, of course, between a friendly hug and sexual abuse. However, to protect our children against sexual abuse we must realize that abuse is only the most extreme end of a continuum of unwanted touch. Children who are taught very early that their bodies belong to them and that they have the right to decline touch are being taught that they are not powerless. They are being taught that their own response to touch counts.

This book is meant to convey a few simple ideas in simple language: a child’s body is his or her own; a child has the right to decline touch—no matter how innocent; and the parts of a child’s body that are covered by a bathing suit are never to be touched by others except in certain circumstances. Keeping the message simple is important for very young children.

Young children also need to know the words for the parts of their bodies...They need to know to tell you if anyone tries to touch their private parts.

Help them talk about what feels good and what feels bad (such as being tickled against their will). This leads to confidence in their perceptions.

Explain to your children that *any* touching which has to be kept secret is not good touching. While there are pleasant secrets, such as not telling about a birthday present, secrets about touching are always suspicious and are never permitted.

If your children tell you someone has touched them in ways that make them uneasy, pay close attention. Find out exactly what happened to cause their discomfort, and protect them from contact with the person involved while you figure out what is going on. Reassure them that it is right to talk about such things, that you take their discomfort seriously, and that you will keep them safe.

As your children mature, they’ll give you many opportunities to teach them more. Let them know that you welcome any questions about any subject. Children who know that they can talk to their parents will have an ongoing source of protection from many possible dangers, including sexual abuse.”

Source: Spelman, C. (1997). Your Body Belongs to You. Morton Grove, Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

From *I Can Play It Safe* book by Alison Feigh

- “When a child is abused or abducted, the offender likely is someone the child knows. So teaching kids about “stranger danger” is not effective. In fact, there may be times when a child needs to ask a stranger for help.
- Along with the Always Ask First rule, teach children what to do if an adult tries to get them to go somewhere without letting them ask first. For example, make as much noise as possible, quickly get away, and find someone you trust to help. Also, explain how to use a family password for those unplanned times when you need to send another adult to pick up your child.
- Perhaps our greatest safety defense is that gut instinct we all have. Sometimes our gut works faster than our brain. When you know that a certain person makes your child afraid or uncomfortable, do not allow that individual to be alone with the child. Learning to listen to the “uh oh” feeling is a powerful tool to help protect kids their entire lives.
- Teach kids to be wary of anyone who asks them to keep a secret from their parents or guardians. The child should tell the person that they do not keep secrets, and then find a trusted adult to tell what happened. Even if the adult doesn’t have bad intentions with the secret, the child’s response will be a reminder for the adult to self-check his or her behavior.
- If an adult asks a child for directions or to help find a lost pet, the child’s first instinct likely is to help. Teach your child to leave the situation to find a trusted adult. Even in an emergency, the best thing to do is to leave the situation and call 911. At the same time, kids don’t need to feel useless. They can still help a friend or a neighbor, but the Always Ask First Rule always applies.
- Attention and affection are common lures of child abductors. The need for love and attention can be used against children. Kids who receive appropriate love and attention from trusted, caring adults are more likely to be suspicious when someone offers inappropriate affection in an attempt to gain control over them.
- One of the obstacles that prevent children from seeking help in cases of abuse is the fear that they will be blamed or that parents will not love them anymore. It is easier for children to stand up for themselves if they know they have the love and support of the people closest to them...let the kids in your life know that you love them and want them to be safe.”

Source: Feigh, A. (2008). *I Can Play It Safe*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

From Protection from Sex Offenders by the Maryland Office of the Attorney General

<http://www.oag.state.md.us/sexualoffender/protect.htm>



WHAT CAN I DO TO PROTECT MY CHILDREN FROM UNIDENTIFIED SEX OFFENDERS?

The **single, most important fact** that we must understand to protect our children is this:

MOST SEX OFFENDERS ARE NEVER APPREHENDED BY THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

Being concerned about the sex offenders we do NOT know about, therefore, is just as important as focusing on those we do. This means taking steps to safeguard your children against sexual abuse from known convicted offenders, other strangers, and people they know. The following are common sense guidelines to help your children stay safe:

A. TALK OPENLY AND LISTEN CAREFULLY.

The key to your children's safety is effective two-way communication. You must give your children the knowledge they need to protect themselves, and they must feel able to express their fears and describe any real problems they may encounter. This requires an environment where you and your children feel comfortable talking about sensitive, embarrassing, or frightening things. Listen to them and believe them, even about little things, for the conversations about little things build the foundation for communication about big things that could change their lives. Emphasize a few key points which will foster more open communication:

- You always want to know if something scary, confusing, embarrassing or weird happens to them and you will never be angry. You want to know even if they are not sure exactly what happened.
- If an adult does something that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable or confused, it is the adult's fault and not the child's fault, even if the adult tries to blame it on the child. You will never blame it on your child.
- An adult who tries to make a child keep a secret, or tells him something bad will happen if he does not keep a secret, is very wrong. Children should not keep adults' secrets.
- You or someone can always help, even if your child thinks something has happened that can never be fixed.

B. TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO BE AWARE AND CAREFUL, BUT NOT AFRAID.

Be honest and open about dangers, but you know more than your children need to know. Avoid scary details, talk in a calm and reassuring manner, and use language that is age- appropriate. For example, with a young child it would be enough to warn, "there are people who do bad things to children," when talking about safety rules.

C. FOCUS CHILDREN ON CERTAIN SUSPICIOUS SITUATIONS AND BEHAVIOR RATHER THAN CERTAIN KINDS OF PEOPLE.

Warning children to beware of “strangers” ignores their vulnerability to unidentified sex offenders whom they may know quite well. Teach your children instead to be on the lookout for suspicious behavior in any adult. Be sure to emphasize that they should tell you or another trusted adult immediately if they encounter such behavior, which can include:

- Asking a child for help. Children help other children, but should not be asked to assist adults, like giving directions or helping to “find a lost puppy.” An adult who tells a child his parent is in trouble and offers to take the child to the parent is also highly suspicious.
- Paying an unusual amount of attention to a child. Offenders often initiate seemingly innocent contact with a victim and cultivate a close relationship over time. Most adult-child relationships are healthy and positive, of course, but certain behaviors can be warning signs of trouble, like insisting on physical affection the child does not want, giving inappropriate gifts, wanting time alone with the child, etc.
- Touching a child or asking to be touched by a child in areas of the body that would be covered by a bathing suit. No one should touch your children in any way that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused.
- Asking a child to get into a vehicle or following a child on foot or by car. Children should know never to get into someone’s car without parental approval, and always to make a loud scene if someone tries to take them somewhere or force them into a car.
- Asking to take a child’s picture. Children should know never to let an adult take their photograph without parental consent.

D. BE SPECIFIC AND ENGAGE IN ROLE-PLAYING TO TEACH THE BEST RESPONSES TO DANGER.

Act out different situations and give children specific ideas about what to do. Examples include:

- Your child is separated from you in a store or other public place. Tell your child not to wander around looking for you, but to go immediately to a police officer, store salesclerk or other person in authority, or to a mother with children.
- A man tries to get your child into his car. Tell your child to make a loud scene by kicking and resisting physically, and by screaming things like, “this man is trying to take me away,” or “this man is not my father,” or “help me - he’s hurting me.”
- Your child’s soccer coach gives him a ride home and touches him in a way that feels uncomfortable. Tell your child that he does not need to be polite. He should say no, or stop, or he should push the coach away. He should also tell you immediately what happened, even though the coach said not to tell anyone else. Emphasize that people who do this kind of thing almost always make the child afraid to tell anyone else, and explain that this is wrong. Explain that a child should not believe any adult who says something bad will happen if he tells a secret. Your child should not keep other adults’ secrets from you. Emphasize also that if an adult touches your child or asks to be touched, it is NOT your child’s fault.

E. TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO TRUST THEIR INSTINCTS AND UNDERSTAND IT IS SOMETIMES O.K. TO SAY NO TO ADULTS.

In the effort to raise our children to be polite, well-mannered, and respectful of authority, we may miss conveying the message that their safety is nonetheless always more important. They must learn to trust their own feelings and know that they have every right to say no when they sense something is wrong, like someone trying to take them somewhere, touch them inappropriately, or do anything else that makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused.

F. MAKE YOUR CHILDREN AWARE OF KNOWN, SPECIFIC THREATS.

If a convicted sex offender does live or work in your community, make your children familiar with the offender and the risks he may pose to them. Show them the offender's photograph, warn them to avoid inappropriate or unsupervised contact, and instruct them to tell you immediately if the offender initiates contact with them or makes them feel uncomfortable in any way.

G. KNOW YOUR CHILDREN. KNOW WHERE THEY ARE, WHO THEIR FRIENDS ARE, AND WHAT THEIR DAILY ACTIVITIES ARE. BE SENSITIVE TO CHANGES IN THEIR MOODS AND BEHAVIOR.

Although sex offenders can be the most unlikely suspects, you are the best gauge your children have of whether they are at risk from someone in their familiar circle. Watch for suspicious behavior in adults who come into contact with your children, and watch for changes in your children which could signal trouble. Above all, keep talking to them.

WHAT ARE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD SEX OFFENDERS I SHOULD WATCH OUT FOR?

Sex offenders come in all shapes and sizes. They can be adolescents or senior citizens, homeless or executives in Fortune 500 companies, and they can come from any racial, ethnic or religious background. They cannot, therefore, be identified easily. Yet certain behaviors can be a sign of trouble, although it is also important to remember that such behaviors are not always indicative of sexual offending. Some common warning signs can include an adult who:

- insists on hugging, kissing, touching, wrestling or holding a child even if the child resists;
- is too interested in a child's developing body, sexuality, dating habits, etc.;
- seeks uninterrupted time alone with a child;
- spends more time with children than with people his own age, and more time doing activities involving children;
- offers to baby-sit children free of charge and/or takes them on overnight outings alone;
- gives children inappropriate gifts or money for no reason;
- often walks in on children in the bathroom;
- is too permissive with children and allows misbehavior;
- talks repeatedly about the sexual activities of children and teens;
- talks with children about sexual fantasies, and seems unclear about what is O.K. to do and talk about with children;
- encourages children to keep secrets;
- looks at child pornography;
- asks adult partners to dress or act like children or teens during sexual activity;
- has a series of children who are "special friends;"
- makes fun of children's body parts, and calls them sexual names such as "stud"

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CHILD IS BEING ABUSED?

Both behavioral and physical signs may provide clues that a child is being sexually abused. Keep in mind, however, that many of these changes can also occur at other times of stress or trauma in a child's life, like a divorce or the death of a loved one or pet.

Behavioral warning signs:

- nightmares, fear of the dark, or other sleeping problems;
- extreme fear of “monsters”;
- loss of appetite, trouble eating or swallowing, or constant stomach aches and disturbances for no apparent reason;
- sudden mood swings, e.g., rage, fear, anger, or withdrawal, or spacing out at odd times;
- fear of certain people or places not formerly feared, or uncharacteristic behavior around a certain person, e.g., a talkative child becomes quiet and distant around a babysitter;
- regressive behavior, like a return to thumb sucking or bed-wetting;
- imitating sexual behavior with toys or other children;
- using new words for body parts;
- refusing to talk about a “secret” the child shares with an adult or older child;
- talking about a new, older friend;
- suddenly having money;
- cutting, burning, or hurting himself or herself as an adolescent.

Physical warning signs:

- unexplained bruises, redness, bleeding, or pain around a child’s genitalia, anus or mouth;
- sores or milky fluids in the genital area.

OTHER RESOURCES

Frederick County 2-1-1 Mental Health Services Directory

Call 211 on the phone or go to www.211md.org

Frederick County Mental Health Association and Child Care Choices

263 West Patrick St.

Frederick, MD 21701

(301) 663-0011

<http://www.fcmha.org/>

Kids on the Block Puppet Show <http://www.kotb.com/>

Frederick County Sheriff's Office Registered Sexual Offenders Mapping

http://ww3.frederickcountymd.gov/gis/mapServices/agreement_rso.html

Sex Offender Compliance and Enforcement for Maryland

<http://www.socem.info/>

Frederick County Child Protective Services in the Department of Social Services

100 East All Saints Street

Frederick, Md 21701

301-694-2464

(After 5:00 p.m. & weekends : 301-694-2100)

<http://www.fcdss.sailorsite.net/cps.htm>

Victim Services of Frederick County (contact information for multiple agencies)

<http://www.dpsecs.state.md.us/victimservs/frederick.shtml>

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. <http://www.missingkids.com>

NetSmartz Internet Safety www.netsmartz.org and www.netsmartzkids.org

Talking about Touching Personal Safety Curriculum

<http://www.cfchildren.org/talking-about-touching.aspx>

Yello Dyno Safety Party Curriculum

<http://www.yellodyno.com/>

US Dept. of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families

www.acf.hhs.gov

Stop It Now! The Campaign to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse, *Warning Signs About Child Sexual Abuse*, 2005, <http://www.stopitnow.org/warnings.html>