



# Protecting Your Child Against Sexual Abuse

By Pinky McKay

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“If I tell him my name, then he’ll know me and he won’t be a stranger any more,” declares James, aged four.

If your child, like James, finds the concept of ‘stranger’ difficult to grasp you may not be too worried. After all, our precious, protected children are unlikely to encounter dangerous strangers. At least, not while we are diligently watching over them.

Unfortunately, it isn’t strangers who pose the greatest threat to a child’s personal safety. In fact, 85 per cent of child sexual abusers are people known and often implicitly trusted by the child. Some are older children.

It’s easier for us to believe the real danger to our children is from a stranger in a raincoat easily recognisable at a hundred paces. It’s also easier to tell our children about “stranger danger” than to discuss sexual abuse. Added to our discomfort about such discussions are understandable concerns about corrupting children – we don’t want to put old heads on young shoulders, we don’t want to frighten them and, perhaps more than anything, we don’t want to destroy their carefree childhood innocence.

Ironically, it is our reluctance to consider the possibility of sexual abuse and discuss it with children that exposes them to the greatest risk. In fact, the most significant preventative factor against child sexual abuse is talking to children. Talking about sexual abuse stacks the odds in favour of children, because it increases the odds of disclosure. If there is any threat to the secrecy of a perpetrator’s behaviour, they are likely to reconsider their actions. And, contrary to parental fear about frank discussion destroying a child’s innocence, many children have heard about sexual abuse from other sources. In one American study in which twelve year olds were asked to name their greatest fear, the majority answered, “rape.”

While talking to children about sexual abuse may prompt parental discomfort, the concept of prevention programs in schools, especially at primary level, arouses outright controversy. Yet, protective behaviours can and should be taught to all children – even preschoolers.

Thankfully, very young children can be taught protective behaviour without ever hearing frightening terms like “sexual abuse”.

The underlying philosophy behind protective behaviour programs such as those currently taught in many schools includes two themes:

- We all have a right to feel safe at all times.
- Nothing is so awful that we can't talk about it with someone we trust.

Pat Jewell, Manager of Parenting and Prevention Programs for the Children's Protection Society, Victoria, acknowledges that these concepts are probably as abstract to a preschooler as the concept of "Stranger Danger."

However, it is never too early to sow the seeds of Protective Behaviour, she claims. Unlike the old "Stranger Danger" messages, Protective Behaviours do not prescribe action to be taken by children. Instead, the emphasis is on learning communication skills, assertiveness and problem solving.

According to Pat Jewell, these skills can be best learnt from good parental role models. She says, "These are life skills and can be used in day to day situations as well as any threatening situations, from being unable to put on a kindergarten smock to forgetting a school lunch or being offered a lift by a drunk driver."

Children learn to recognise body signals such as butterflies in the stomach, sweaty palms, shortness of breath and a fast heartbeat, which could be early warning signs that they may be in a potentially unsafe situation. Pat Jewell says, "Little children may be frightened by a dog barking or the open toilets at the kindergarten. It is the child's right to decide whether she feels safe or unsafe. It's important to respect that feelings belong to each child and that feeling is right for that child."

Children may need help to name and express their feelings appropriately. Instead of discussing or redirecting feelings, affirm your child's right to listen to her body signals then encourage problem solving by asking, "Can you think of a way to make it safe?" Suggest, "You don't feel ready yet?" this helps her believe she might be able to do the scary thing (perhaps jump into the Pool) another time.

As well as teaching children proper names for body parts including the genitals, we can teach them that the mouth and areas covered by the bathing suit are special and no one has the right to touch these against a child's will. Children can be taught that if such touching occurs, they can declare an emergency. In an emergency, all bets are off. It's OK to resist with biting, kicking, screaming- whatever they need to do to protect themselves.

Children's conditioning to obey adults may mean they need permission to take control of their bodies. Pat Jewell emphasises the importance of giving consistent messages about compliance. She says, "Children have a right to refuse any unwanted touching, whether it's Grandma's kisses, cheek tweaking from

strangers or unrelenting tickling when a child is clearly upset. “No means No” is a good family rule.”

We can help children develop the concept of networks – people they can trust and approach if they need help – by problem solving. Discuss situations such as, “What if you get separated from me at the shopping centre, who could you go to for help?” Older children who can understand the concept of a network, can be shown how to draw their network. Trace an outline of one of their hands. The thumb represents people at home and each finger represents other adults who are accessible, will listen to the child and will believe the child and take action if necessary. Children themselves can decide who they want on their network and they may change the people at any time.

Children need to know that if they ask for help and they aren’t taken seriously, they should try again or ask another person.

Above all, demonstrate by your own actions that you are willing to listen to your child. Encourage children when they share their feelings with you by saying, “I’m happy you told me that.” Recognise that when we listen to children and take their concerns seriously, we are playing an important role in preventing abuse and violence. Children who are used to being listened to are more likely to disclose information about unsafe feelings or behaviour.

There are benefits to implementing Protective Behaviour strategies as part of family life, but they should never be seen as a magic wand to keep children safe. Children need supervision until they develop the skills to understand that they might be in danger.

Pinky McKay is the author of Parenting By Heart and 100 Ways to Calm the Crying (Lothian). She offers Terrific Toddlers workshops in Melbourne. Contact Pinky through her website at [www.pinky-mychild.com](http://www.pinky-mychild.com)