

## Kidpower Safety Tips: Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse

*By Kidpower Executive Director/Co-Founder Irene van der Zande*

A few simple skills can help children be safe from sexual abuse most of the time.

- 1. Teach children to be clear and persistent in setting boundaries and in asking for help.** Children who can set clear strong boundaries and who know how to get help are less likely to be abused and more likely to be able stop someone from molesting them. Help children practice moving your hand away and saying, "Please stop." Learning to set boundaries with simple safe touch such as to a shoulder or hand can prepare children to set boundaries with more dangerous kinds of touch. Have them practice interrupting a busy adult and saying, "I need help."
- 2. Respect children's boundaries in play, teasing, and affection.** If trusted adults respect a child's boundaries, the child can be more likely to notice and to tell when other people do not listen.
- 3. Teach children that touch, problems, and presents should never be secrets and that it is never too late to tell.** Tell children that anything that bothers them should not have to be a secret. Touch should not be a secret. Games should not be a secret. Gifts that someone gives them or favors someone does for them should not be a secret. Getting a shot at the doctor is not a secret. Getting a cavity filled is not a secret. Hugging, kissing, roughhousing, tickling, tagging, and hide and seek should not be secret. Tell children that it is never too late to tell. Ask them sometimes, "Is there anything you've been wondering or worrying about that you haven't told me?"
- 4. Teach children that touch for play, teasing, or affection needs to be safe.** Help them imagine that a friend is being too rough or trying to play in some other way that they think is not safe. Help them practice saying "Stop," leaving, and getting help.
- 5. Encourage children to talk about touch they do not like.** Many kinds of touch for health and safety can be painful, uncomfortable, or make children feel upset. Encourage children to talk about their feelings and then say, "Thank you for telling me! Touch for health and safety is not a choice, but any kind of touch should never be a secret."
- 6. Teach safety skills without telling scary stories or giving explicit information.** Just as schools have children practice fire drills without using scary details about what happens in real fires, adults can focus on practicing skills to prevent abuse instead of focusing on abuse itself. Here's how Kidpower explains the safety rules about touching private areas, "Private areas are the parts of your body covered by a bath suit. The safety rule is that for play or teasing other people should not touch your private areas and they should not ask you to touch their private areas. Even when those part of your body have to be touched, this is never a secret. Also, people should not show you pictures on the internet or anywhere else about people touching their private areas. If this happens, your safety plan is to tell the person to stop and to come and tell me or another adult you trust as quickly as you can."
- 7. Teach children to get help even if someone they care about might be upset or embarrassed.**  
Most child molestation is done by someone who has developed a relationship with a child, but telling children that the person most likely to harm them is someone they love and trust is not emotionally safe. At Kidpower, we tell children, "Sometimes the people children love have problems and sometimes their problems are so big that they might do things to hurt children. If that happens to you or someone you know, this does not mean that anyone is bad. It just means that people have problems. The way to get help with problems is to tell an adult you trust and to keep telling different adults until someone does something to make the problem stop."