

Three Important Steps for Keeping Children Safe from Abuse

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This is an ever-changing world and there are many things in it that we would like to protect our children from, especially sexual abuse. The last thing any parent wants to see is their child violated, hurt or in pain. As parents, we do our best to provide our children with safety equipment, expose them to lessons that will give them the tools to protect themselves and be there for them when they need us. Unfortunately, we cannot be with our children 24-7, especially as they grow and venture into the world toward independence. Despite our role as protector, we can only control so much of what will happen to our children BUT we can equip them with the most powerful weapon of all—knowledge and information.

A big fear among parents is that their child will fall victim to sexual abuse. Is it possible to make a child abuse-proof and resistant to the enticements of a perpetrator? In addition to all the quick and easy safety proofing tips and the important information found in books and on websites, parents work to instill the message that their child's body belongs to them, they encourage them to never keep unsafe secrets, and they explain the importance of saying NO—what more can a parent do?

There is much we can do as parents to protect our children from this heinous crime, and we can begin at a very early age. True protection goes beyond telling our children not to talk to strangers. True protection lies in creating a child that is internally resistant and a child whose inner strength will make them less vulnerable to the crafty approaches of a child molester. The following suggestions may seem simple because we automatically do them as parents but we often don't realize how powerful they are in keeping our children safe:

1. Strive to enhance your child's assertiveness skills: Learning how to be appropriately assertive rather than aggressive or passive is one of the best gifts we can give our children. Individuals who seek out children for their own distorted purposes are counting on them to be passive and will not spend time grooming a child who is likely to speak up for herself. We can begin this process at the early age of two or before when our little cherubs take their first step toward assertion by discovering the word "no". This simple word contains much power and could be the one thing that keeps them safe.
2. Help your child acquire a capable sense of self: Children who appear capable are less likely to be targeted by individuals who prey upon children. These individuals are searching for those who are vulnerable, those who seem helpless. Helping our children become as independent as possible is our job and the sooner we nurture appropriate independence

the better. We need to be mindful of the tendency to do too much for children and creating learned helplessness. As we teach our sons and daughters to do things for themselves rather than do it for them, their confidence grows. Don't ever hesitate to help your child learn and master a new task if you think they are ready, the feeling of "I can do it myself" is powerful and will serve as one more layer of protection from the hands of any perpetrator.

3. **Make sure your child knows what a healthy relationship is:** Our children must have an accurate sense of what constitutes a healthy relationship in order to have proper instinctual knowledge—a gut feeling—of what is normal. Perpetrators spend a lot of their time trying to convince their intended victim that "this is what people do when they care about each other". Their success lies in their attempts to normalize the invasive behaviors they use to set up their potential victims. Making sure your children know that a healthy relationship doesn't require keeping unsafe secrets, uncomfortable touches and insidious remarks, will ensure that these messages fall on deaf ears. They will also know that "normal" does not mean constant enticement with gifts or atypical attention either.

Our job must go beyond role modeling healthy relationships to talking about it with our children, honestly, specifically and often, until they fly from our nest. When our children are grounded in what a healthy relationship looks like, sounds like and feels like, we are not only providing them with strong armor that will shield them from possible harm but important knowledge that will reap many positive benefits in all aspects of their life for years to come.

*As a parent educator and certified parent coach, Connie Hammer helps parents uncover abilities to change possibilities with her more than twenty years of experience working with families. A licensed social worker, she currently consults with and focuses on supporting parents of young children recently diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. For additional information or a complimentary 15-minute phone consultation, call 207-615-5457 or contact her at connie@parentcoachingforautism.com. Visit <http://www.parentcoachingforautism.com> to get your FREE resources—a weekly parenting tip newsletter, **The Spectrum**, and a parenting e-course, **Parenting a Child with Autism—3 Secrets to Thrive**.*