



PROTECT CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE:

Tips for Parents of School-Aged Children



At this Age: 5–8 Years Old

At this age, your child is starting to understand more. They might start making close friends and seeing how other people live. It's important to talk with them, especially about topics that can help them feel safe. Such conversations should cover several issues, like relationships, growing bodies, and physical health. Starting when your child is young will help you have a stronger relationship and help them feel more comfortable. It might feel weird talking to them about their bodies, but all body development is normal. You can do it!



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What Should I Teach?



Teach internet safety

If your child has access to a phone or computer, they may accidentally see things they aren't ready for. At this age you should be careful to watch what your child sees on your phone or computer. They should know that if they see something they don't understand, they should come to you. When possible, supervise screen time and participate together in screen activities so you can monitor what content they see.

You can say: “Some of what is on the internet is made for kids, but some of it is not. We will try to keep you safe from the parts of the internet that are not for kids. If you see anything that makes you confused or uncomfortable, come to me and we will talk about it.”

Answer their questions

Remember to be age-appropriate and answer only what your child asks. Children this age will begin noticing friends who have different family structures than their own. Explain that all families are different, but they are all based on loving relationships.

Teach them about consent

When we say “consent,” we mean that no one is allowed to force anyone else to do things with their body that they do not want to do. This includes sexual behaviors, but it also extends to things like tickling, hugging, kissing, and rough-and-tumble playing. Beginning discussions about consent now can help your child feel safe in their own body, learn to trust others, and set good boundaries. This builds a strong foundation for later discussions about sexual consent as your child grows.



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You can say: “Your body is yours, and you are in charge of it. No one is allowed to touch you or make you do anything with your body that you don’t want to do. If someone tries to, you can always tell me, and we will solve the problem together.” And: “Other people’s bodies are theirs and they are in charge of them. We never touch anyone else without their permission or make them do anything with their bodies that they don’t want to do.”

Discuss reproduction

Start talking about how people make more people. If you or someone they know has a baby, they might ask questions. You may want to work up to talking about reproduction by talking in terms of building blocks or puzzles, which are more familiar to young children.

For instance, you might say: “All people are made of millions of tiny pieces, called cells. Making new

people requires building them out of cells, just like putting together pieces of a puzzle or building a block tower. Adults who love each other and have different kinds of cells can team up to put these pieces together to start building a new baby. Once these cells are started, most of the building takes place inside of a mom’s body during pregnancy. There, the cells grow and make even more cells, until all the cells come together to make a baby that is ready to be born.”

If your child is very curious and asks a lot of questions, you can tell them the real terms for how people make babies, but without all the detail.

You can say: “A mommy has an egg, and a daddy has a sperm. When they come together, they can make a baby.”

You know your child best, so follow their lead in how much you tell them.



How Do I Teach That?

When

You can easily bring up the conversation with your child if a family member or friend becomes pregnant. You can also talk when you see something in a show you are watching together, like people in a relationship. Your child will probably ask a lot of questions during this stage of life, so there will be plenty of times for you to talk.

Opportunities to talk about consent happen all the time. Make a practice of asking your child, “Would you like a hug?” before hugging them, for example. Never force a child to hug or kiss anyone, including adult relatives and friends, even if this could hurt that adult’s feelings—use the opportunity to teach children and adults that consent is always a top priority.

Where

It is best to have these conversations with your child in private. Make sure your child feels comfortable wherever you decide to talk. This could be your child’s bedroom, the playroom, the living room, or the bathroom.

How

You will probably feel uncomfortable when having these conversations. That is completely normal, but

it is important to act natural and talk openly with your child. This will help them feel comfortable and encourage them to come to you again about the subject in the future.

When interacting with children, show the importance of consent by giving them options, such as asking, “Would you like a hug or a fist bump?” Help children learn to respect boundaries by intervening in children’s physical play when they are not respecting consent boundaries.

When your child asks you a question, answer honestly. You don’t have to tell them everything you know, but understand that you are your child’s most important educator on this subject. It is perfectly fine if you don’t know the answer to one of your child’s questions. Simply say, “I don’t know. I need to learn more about that first.” Just be sure to come back to the topic later when you have the answer or feel more prepared to talk to your child. These early conversations will shape how they talk to you about issues when they are preteens and teenagers.



Great Books for Your Child

These conversations can be tricky and awkward. Thankfully, there are books that can guide you through these important topics and teach you what to say about sensitive subjects. You can read with your child and give them books to read alone. The books listed below can help you and your child feel more comfortable.

It’s Not the Stork! A Book about Girls, Boys, Bodies, Babies, Families, and Friends by Robie H. Harris

This book will help you talk with your child about how babies are made. It also shows them how both boys and girls grow up.

I Said No! A Kid-to-Kid Guide to Keeping Private Parts Private by Kimberly King

This is a great book to teach your child that their body is their own. It will help your child learn to set healthy body boundaries.

My Body! What I Say Goes! by Jayneen Sanders

This is a good book to help your child learn what safe and unsafe relationships look like. It will also help your child know to talk to you or another adult if they ever feel unsafe.

Resources

Sick Kids Staff. (2019, June 6). *Sexuality: What children should learn and when*. About Kids Health.

<https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/Article?contentid=716&language=English>

The Canavox State and International Leaders. (2020, February 26). *Tips for talking to your kids about sex: The elementary school years*. Public Discourse. <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/02/60563/>

Visit tips.extension.msstate.edu for additional parenting resources.

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