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Play It SAFE

Preventing sexual abuse is an adult's job. Your vigilance may save your child from a problem more common than it should be.

by Kim Seidel

Hearing the chilling statistics on child sexual abuse can bring caring adults more awareness and knowledge of this pervasive problem:

One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18.

Nearly 70 percent of all reported sexual assaults occur to children ages 17 and under.

“Child sexual abuse prevention is an adult's job,” says Jeanne Meyer, program director of Stepping Stones Children's Advocacy Center in La Crosse. As a facilitator for the national Darkness to Light program, Meyer strives to help educate adults on this significant issue.

“We adults need to be educated and empowered about sexual abuse to protect our children,” Meyer says. “Children are our future. For them to be successful, they need to be kept safe during their childhoods.”

In schools, children hear about and practice safety for fires and storms. They learn about physical fitness, dental health, and their bodies during physical education and health classes. Let's educate them—and ourselves—about the high risk of child sexual abuse.

“We now know that the only way to protect children is for parents to view it as a priority—not once the deed is done, but as a preventive measure,” writes Robin Sax in her book, “Predators and Child Molesters: What Every Parent Needs to Know to Keep Kids Safe.” The intention to protect our children should be as natural as teaching them how to call 9-1-1, she says.

Learn the facts; understand the risks. Educating yourself on the statistics and realities of child sexual abuse is the first step to protecting your child.

It's important that parents realize that the greatest risk to children doesn't come from strangers but from friends and family, Meyer says. “We need to be aware of who our children are coming in contact with,” she says.

30 to 40 percent of children are abused by family members.

As many as 60 percent of children are abused by people the family trusts—abusers frequently try to form a trusting relationship with parents.

Nearly 40 percent of children are abused by older or larger children.

It's common for single parents and busy parents to depend on help from other adults, Meyer says, but remain vigilant—even with close family members and friends. If your child goes to the movies or takes a trip with another adult, ask a lot of questions before and after to find out the details of the outing, she says.

"The reality is that most perpetrators are men and most victims are female," says Sax, a sex crimes district attorney in California,

who answers 100 of the most asked questions in her award-winning book. It was voted Book of the Year in 2009 by the Amber Alert Registry.

In 2007, FBI reports revealed that there are more than 550,000 registered sex offenders in the U.S. Another 100,000 or more sex offenders fail to register each year.

"As a parent, I suggest that you check whether any sex offenders reside near your home, your school, grandparents' homes, and other locations where your kids frequently hang out," Sax says. "Be sure to share that information with co-parents, babysitters, nannies, grandparents, caretakers, and anyone else responsible for supervising and caring for your children."

By law, each state should have a database of all sexual offenders who have registered in the state. In Wisconsin, you can look up offenders at the state's sex offender registry. Go to www.wi-doc.com/offender.htm for information. Next, click on the website at the top of the page—<http://offender.doc.state.wi.us/public>. You can look up sex offenders in your community

by typing in your zip code. The offender's name, photo, and address will be posted.

Minimize opportunity for abuse. One-on-one relationships are valuable for children, but parents need to ensure their child is not being taken advantage of, Meyer says. This may seem obvious to parents, but recall the statistics on children abused by trusted adults.

"While it may be advisable to warn children of 'stranger danger,' I often remind parents that if they want to worry, they should worry about the people they know, as well as the ones they don't," Sax says. A molester can be a priest, minister, teacher, coach, neighbor, friend, or family member. "To assume that we understand the heart and intent of every person in our lives is to turn a blind eye to the statistics."

Statistics show that molesters do not always look "creepy," Sax says. In fact, molesters can appear warm, caring, loving, and respectful. "It is these very characteristics that allow them to continue their horrific acts without the fear of ever being caught," she says. "The idea that a

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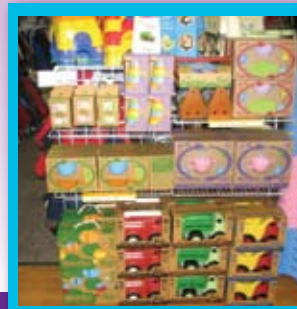
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child molester is not off-putting on initial contact is particularly difficult for society to embrace.”

“Grooming” is another aspect of child sexual abuse that’s difficult for people to accept as a dark reality. It’s a method by which abusers get victims to comply with their sexual wishes. In the end, the process blurs any awareness of improper adult behavior, because the offender has gained the child’s trust and confidence, Sax says.

Parents are often unknowingly involved in this grooming process. The perpetrator gains the parents’ trust by always being there, being eager to babysit—even in a pinch—and offering to give a confused parent insight into the child. The offender often has a conversation with the parent about a lie the child told, and may even suggest there’s something not right or unbalanced about the child.

A perpetrator, someone a parent usually knows and trusts, becomes “very manipulative and cunning,” Meyer says. “They’re friendly and charming. They’re everything you want them to be and more.”

Meyer has lost count of the times she’s heard parents remark, “I cannot believe he is capable of that.” She responds, “Anyone is capable of sexually abusing a child.” In addition, sexual abuse occurs any time—even during the holiday season, she says.

Sexually abusive acts do not occur in specific places but when the following two elements exist—access and privacy, Sax says. Predators seek opportunities and look for openings to be with children—after school tutoring, giving rides home, or paying a teen to do yard work are just a few examples.

“Parents should ask themselves, why is this person willing—or even wanting—to spend so much time with my child,” Sax says.

Predators will ensure there are no witnesses to the crime, and use the “dirt” gained through the grooming process to destroy the victim’s credibility, Sax says. “This creates an environment in which the victim is less likely to disclose the deed,” she says.

Talk about it. “There is no magic age to begin safety discussions,” Sax says. “They

should be part of your parenting as soon as your child can understand what you’re talking about.”

Two types of safety education work well for families: pre-planned discussions and spontaneous opportunities.

“One lesson parents must teach their children is the anatomically correct name for their body parts,” Sax says. “While many parents call penises ‘wieners’ and breasts ‘boobies,’ there are literally hundreds of nicknames that vary from culture to culture and area to area. It is very difficult to ascertain the validity and the details of a sexual assault disclosure if the body part names used are not familiar to those taking the police report.”

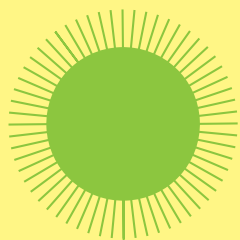
It’s appropriate to begin teaching key telephone numbers to children 5 and younger, such as mom and dad’s cell, home phone, grandparents’ home, and caregivers’ numbers, Sax says.

Discuss “going to get a grown-up before you answer the door” with young kids.

Children need to know whom to approach

*And then the day came,
when the risk to
remain tight in a bud
was more painful than
the risk it took to
Blossom.*

— Anaïs Nin



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if lost (such as another mommy) or what to scream if someone is trying to abduct them (“You are not my Dad! Help!”)

Other teaching opportunities will arise before family vacations. Discuss “stranger danger” and make a safety plan. Before and after the trip, talk about meeting places, whom to call for help, and what they should do if they get lost, Sax says.

Sometimes there are news stories in the papers and on television about people who have committed crimes against children. These times offer parents an excellent opportunity to explain bad behavior and its consequences to children.

“If you, as a parent, decide that it is OK for a child to know what’s really going on, then you must be prepared to hold a well-planned, follow-up discussion to elaborate on the news story, answer questions, and see what messages the child has gotten,” Sax says.

Besides what’s in the news, parents must discuss with their children an extremely important concept: that their body is their own, that nobody can touch them without their permission, Sax says. Emphasize that “no” means “no” and that anybody who refuses to respect that should be considered dangerous and reported to the police.

“We need to let our children know that they can come to us any time, without fear or embarrassment,” Sax says. “If they have been touched inappropriately, they should know that it is never their fault.”

Along with talking in an age-appropriate manner with children separately, it is also vital to talk to your children together about sexual abuse. “Siblings can then hold each other accountable, and help to keep one another safe,” Meyer says. “They can warn, ‘Remember what mom told us?’ Children can place expectations on one another.”

Stay alert. Rationalizing a sexual abuse situation is extremely common—and dangerous. “Our minds often don’t want to go ‘there’ to the possibility that this person is an abuser,” Meyer says. “We need to recognize and to accept what we feel and see in situations.”

Many times people don’t report a highly trusted and visible individual for fear of

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ruining his reputation. "I would rather inconvenience the life of one adult than devastate the life of a child," Meyer says.

Be aware that "very few" reported incidents of sexual abuse are false. Listen to your child. Trust your child. And listen to your own instincts. Teach your child about listening to their inner self as well.

Parents know their children better than anyone. If your child begins to act out of their normal realm of behavior, pay attention, and ask questions, Meyers says.

"As hard as it may be, do not react to what your child is telling you," Meyer says. "When you begin to show fear or anger, the child may shut down."

Cultivate an open and healthy relationship with your child, Meyer says, by repeating often over time, "It's OK to tell me anything."

Make a plan. It's true for most parents that when their child runs a high fever or breaks a bone, they remain relatively calm in the situation. Why? Because they know where to take their child to the doctor and

they have mentally prepared themselves for the bumps and bruises of childhood.

Reacting to child sexual abuse must be the same scenario for parents, Meyer says.

Child sexual abuse is a crime. Every state requires that professionals who work with children report reasonable suspicions of child abuse.

In Wisconsin, reports of alleged child abuse or neglect should be made to the county where the child's family resides. In La Crosse County, contact the Human Services Department at 785-6054 (office hours) or 785-9634 (after hours).


Childhelp is a national organization, staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Phone calls are kept confidential at 800-422-4453.

If you're unsure whether to make an official report, or just need support, contact Stepping Stones, a program of the Family and Children's Center, at 791-3882.

Darkness to Light Stewards of Children prevention program is offered regularly in

the Coulee Region. For more information, contact www.darkness2light.org.

For more information and resources from Robin Sax, visit www.robinsax.com.

Information from the book, "Predators and Child Molesters: What Every Parent Needs to Know to Keep Kids Safe" (2009, Prometheus Books) by Robin Sax, was used in this article with the author's permission. 

Kim Seidel is associate editor of Coulee Parenting Connection and the mother of two daughters in Onalaska.

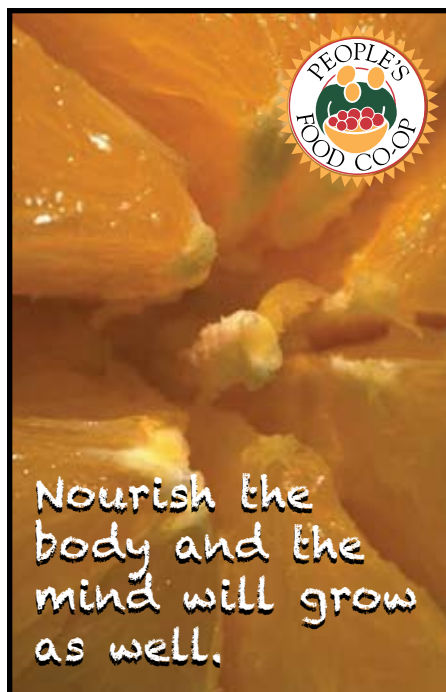
Resources


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