

Talking About Touching: Teaching Your Child about Personal Safety

With all the responsibilities you have as a parent or caregiver of a child on the spectrum, the possibility of a predator attempting to talk, trick, or force a child into touching or other unwanted sexual behaviors can be overwhelming. Many people are not fully aware of the prevalence of child sexual abuse and some prefer not to discuss it. Avoiding or postponing the discussion does not protect children. While some parents and caregivers approach this topic with trepidation, it actually represents an opportunity to take a positive step towards their child's self-advocacy.

As a prevention educator for NOVA, one of my roles is to help children recognize personal safety issues, make safe decisions, and encourage communication with adults. To help adults, NOVA provides education programs for parents, professionals, and other community members with proactive personal safety information and strategies for everyday living.

As part of a broader approach, we want to encourage and enhance family skill-building strategies. Even when parents have addressed the topic of personal safety with their child, they may have questioned "was it enough?" If you have not communicated the personal safety message, or it is on your "to do" list, now is the time to begin.

Regardless of functioning level, your child needs to be aware of his or her personal safety in a way he or she can understand. Research suggests most children rely on their parents for important information. Build healthy channels of communication by first establishing an atmosphere that reflects you are comfortable talking about sensitive matters and that your child can talk to you without fear. Your knowledge and comfort with personal safety issues will convey the personal safety message in a way that is supportive and non-threatening, and will additionally provide a strong basis to support your child as he or she grows into adolescence.

Help your young child develop body boundaries. In order to build awareness and nurture your child's well-being, keep concepts simple and in brief, repeated messages. Small conversations can take place in the midst of everyday life. Adapt the information provided below to your child's developmental level, mode of communication, learning style, and interfering behaviors.

1. **My body belongs to me.** This concept promotes body ownership, self-esteem, and confidence. Teach and practice saying with your child "my body belongs to me." It is a core principal for building mutual respect, responsibility, and independence.
2. **Safe touches are OK touches.** Safe touches make a person feel happy, respected, and comfortable and are part of healthy relationships. Together, identify safe touches. Associate how it feels getting a specific safe touch such as a hug or a high-five. There may be some safe touches your child may want and some, your child may not want; your child may want a hug from you but not from your sister. Even with safe touches, every person has a choice.
3. **Uncomfortable touches are touches a person does not want.** Help your child understand there are some people who may try to give an uncomfortable touch: a hug that is too tight, bothersome tickling, or any unwanted touch. This is an opportunity to support your child's decision making and promote a response to communicate "no" to touching that he or she does not like. Convey the message that your son or daughter can always tell you about any uncomfortable touch.

4. **Help your child identify touches that are not safe and NOT OK.** Your child will not always be under your protection. Help your child identify inappropriate touches and requests.
 1. **Ouch touches are touches that hurt.** Encourage your child to tell you if someone hurts him or her. Some examples of “ouch touches”: hitting, punching, or kicking.
 2. **NOT OK touches of private body parts.** These touches may not hurt and can be confusing. Keep concepts simple and appropriate for your child’s age and developmental level*
 - “No person can touch your private body parts except to help you stay clean or healthy.”
 - *Discuss possible examples and identify times it is necessary for someone to look at or touch your child’s private body parts (clean and healthy).*
 - *Discuss that during a medical check-up, you, as a parent, or a nurse is present.*
 - “And no person should ask you to look at or touch a private part of someone else’s body.” *Be clear that these types of behaviors do not always involve physical touching and can include showing a child pictures of private body parts or asking a child to touch or look at someone else’s private body parts.*
- *Note: While I encourage parents to use anatomically correct terminology with their children, the prevention education language of “private body parts” is used in these examples.*
5. Reinforce with your child that if someone gave any child a **NOT OK touch** (an inappropriate touch) - **it is NEVER the child’s fault.**
 6. **You have the right to say “no.”** Promoting the right to appropriate non-compliance is a critical lesson for your child. Explain that your child has the right to communicate “no” to any person who makes him or her feel confused, uncomfortable, or hurt. This is a positive step towards self-advocacy. The safety rule for **NOT OK touches** or requests is to say **NO** then **GO** and **TELL**.
 7. **Tell someone about any unsafe, confusing, or inappropriate behavior.** Explain that it is never safe to keep secrets about any inappropriate touch or request. Sexual abuse is a crime that usually no one witnesses. Sometimes children do not tell about abuse because there may be communication issues, the child may not recognize it is abuse, or the child may fear not being believed. It is important to focus on existing positive, respectful, and trusting relationships in your lives. Reinforce your commitment to safety and remind your child that he or she can always talk to you about any confusing or inappropriate touch and/or request. This is an opportunity for you to talk about other caring and trusted individuals who would offer support, if needed. Together, make a list of all the trusted adults in your child’s life.



NOVA provides educational programming for students, parents, and professionals covering a wide range of topics and issues.

<http://www.novabucks.org/preventioneducation/>

To schedule a program, please contact:

Mary Worthington
Elementary Education Coordinator

215-343-6543

24-hour hotline 1-800-675-6900