



The Role of Parents and Caregivers in Preventing and Responding to Sexual Abuse

Attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching, and forcing victims to perform sex acts are all types of sexual violence.

The best time to start talking to your youth about sexual boundaries is between the ages 5 and 14. The second best time?

Right now!

Sexual abuse can happen to anyone, including youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Sexual assault is sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the victim.

Fact: Youth with IDD are at a higher risk for sexual abuse than youth without IDD.¹ They are also less likely to report assault to parents and caregivers, as well as the police.²

Why? One reason might be that youth with IDD might have increased dependence on adults. They might not be able to understand or communicate what's happening to them. They also might have less access to sexuality education at school.



Here is How You Can Help Prevent Abuse

Talk to your youth

- Talk with your youth in a developmentally appropriate way about personal safety and consent.
- Help youth understand that some parts of the body are private and people should not look at or touch them. Tell them that they have a right to decide who touches their bodies.
- Identify which caregivers or medical staff may touch areas typically covered by a bathing suit with their permission and the situations when they may need to do this. Also mention that youth can ask to have someone else in the room with them during medical exams.
- Help your youth identify what makes them uncomfortable. Emphasizing to them what is and isn't appropriate behavior will help them know when it's abuse.
- Remind them that it is okay to politely say no even to nonsexual touching, like hugs.

- Discuss what to do when using the restroom when you are outside the home, such as:
 - Using public restrooms independently if possible
 - Closing and locking bathroom or stall doors
 - Restricting nudity to appropriate spaces such as a bathroom, bedroom, or a changing room in a locker room³
- Let your youth know they can talk to you about anything, even if someone told them to keep something a secret or private.

Advocate for Your Youth

- Understand that most youth are abused by someone they know and trust. Avoid focusing exclusively on “stranger danger” or the idea that assault is only perpetrated by someone the youth doesn’t know.⁴
- Evaluate the caregivers who care for your youth. For example, contact multiple references, conduct a background check, and drop in unexpectedly when they are providing care.⁵
- Seek educational opportunities on sexual health outside the home. Make sure that your youth learns basic facts about sex.⁶

Parents and Caregivers Might be Able to Recognize Signs of Abuse in Their Youth

Recognizing sexual assault and ongoing sexual abuse can be more difficult in youth who are nonverbal or otherwise cognitively delayed. Parents can look for new or more frequent self-stimulatory behaviors, such as repetitive movements or sounds (known as “stimming”) and new or more frequent behaviors leading to self-injury.⁷

Youth might or may not disclose abuse to you. If they do, it could happen by telling you directly or indirectly by mentioning something like “a friend told me ...”. You can support your youth by:

- Believing them
- Never blaming them
- Providing a safe environment
- Reassuring them that they did nothing wrong⁸

Some Signs of Abuse or Assault*

Physical: difficulty sitting or walking, bruises or pain in genital areas, headaches, stomach aches, or sexually transmitted diseases.

Behavioral: depression, substance abuse, withdrawal, avoids specific setting or people, sleep or appetite changes, crying spells, seizures, phobias, regression, guilt or shame feelings, self-destructive behavior, feelings of panic, sexually inappropriate behaviors, severe anxiety or worry, resists physical exams, learning difficulties, irritability, or a change in habits or moods.

*** Look for repeated or multiple signs since these signs can also appear in youth who are not being abused. For example, a youth might feel depressed or have headaches due to another reason than abuse.**

Report Suspected Abuse Immediately by Calling:

911 for emergencies

Your youth's health care provider or a national resource such as **1-800-4AYouth (1-800-422-4453)** for the Youthhelp National Youth Abuse Hotline or **1-800-656-HOPE (1-800-656-4673)** for the National Sexual Assault Hotline.

TAKE ACTION!

Talk to your youth about sexual abuse right away. If you suspect abuse, ensure your youth gets help immediately.

Be sure to see our other snapshots:

- Talking to Your Youth with IDD About Sexual Health and Relationships
- Supporting Youth with IDD through Puberty and Early Adolescence
- Keep Youth With IDD Safe Online

Resources:

Click links for more information

- Tips from RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) [on talking to kids about sexual assault](#)
- Article from The Arc on [people with intellectual disabilities and sexual violence](#)
- Resources from the Youth Welfare Information Gateway on [responding to youth abuse and neglect](#)
- State-by-state listing from the National Youth's Alliance [of accredited Youth's Advocacy Centers](#) that offer coordinated support and services for victims of youth abuse, including sexual abuse

Endnotes:

- ¹ National Public Radio. *The Sexual Assault Epidemic that No One Talks About*. January 28, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/08/570224090/the-sexual-assault-epidemic-no-one-talks-about>. Accessed September 1, 2022.
- ² California Youth Abuse Training and Technical Assistance Centers Youth with Disabilities and Sexual Assault Fact Sheet. https://cirinc.org/file_download/284a5f31-04d4-4b3d-97d9-84fa73862bea. Accessed September 1, 2022.
- ³ Autism Speaks. "Recognizing and Preventing Sexual Abuse." n.d. Available at <https://www.autismspeaks.org/recognizing-and-preventing-sexual-abuse>. Accessed July 14, 2022.
- ⁴ National Public Radio. *The Sexual Assault Epidemic that No One Talks About*. January 28, 2018.
- ⁵ RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network). "Evaluating Caregivers." n.d. Available at <https://www.rainn.org/articles/evaluating-caregivers>. Accessed July 14, 2022.
- ⁶ Autism Speaks. "Recognizing and Preventing Sexual Abuse." n.d. Available at <https://www.autismspeaks.org/recognizing-and-preventing-sexual-abuse#:~:text=For%20youth%20with%20autism%20that,sexually%20abused%20may%20be%20missed>. Accessed July 14, 2022.
- ⁷ Edelson, M. G. "Sexual Abuse of Youth with Autism: Factors That Increase Risk and Interfere with Recognition of Abuse." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2010. doi:10.18061/dsq.v30i1.1058.
- ⁸ Youth Help. "Handling Youth Abuse Disclosures." n.d. Available at <https://www.youthhelp.org/what-is-youth-abuse/handling-youth-abuse-disclosures/>. Accessed July 14, 2022.