



Having Conversations with Your Children and Teens About Sexual Abuse

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News that a trusted adult in our community has been arrested for possessing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) has understandably left many families feeling shocked, saddened, and uncertain about what to say to their children. While authorities have indicated there is currently no evidence that local students were physically harmed, many parents are wondering how to respond.

As parents, we do not need to have every answer. What matters most is creating a home where children know they can ask questions, talk openly, and come to us if something ever feels wrong.

Calm, ongoing conversations about body safety, healthy boundaries, respect, and consent are among the most effective ways to protect children. By listening without judgment, responding with care, and taking concerns seriously, we help create a community where children are safer, survivors are supported, and abuse is less likely to remain hidden.

Why These Conversations Matter

Child sexual abuse is more common than many people realize, making regular, age-appropriate conversations about body safety and healthy boundaries an important part of keeping children safe. Nearly every minute, someone in the United States experiences sexual assault. Every

nine minutes, that victim is a child. Approximately one in nine girls and one in twenty boys experience sexual abuse before the age of 18.

Child sexual abuse can have lasting effects on emotional and physical health. Survivors are at increased risk for depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance misuse. At the same time, it is important to remember that sexual abuse does **not** define a child's future. With the support of caring adults, evidence-based treatment when needed, and safe, trusting relationships, children and adult survivors can and do heal.

Although these conversations may feel uncomfortable, they are among the most effective ways parents can help protect their children. The goal is not to frighten children or suggest that something has happened to them. Rather, it is to help children understand that they can always come to a trusted adult with questions, concerns, or anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, confused, or unsafe.

Teach Safety—Not Fear

One of the most effective ways to help prevent child sexual abuse is to have regular, age-appropriate conversations about body safety. Rather than having one "big talk," look for opportunities to weave these discussions into everyday life as your child grows.

Children should know that:

- Their body belongs to them.
- They have the right to say "no" to unwanted touch or interactions that make them uncomfortable.
- It is always okay to tell a trusted adult if someone makes them feel uncomfortable—even if that person is someone they know, love, or respect.
- They will never get in trouble for telling the truth or asking for help.
- Adults should never ask children to keep secrets about touching or private body parts.

Recognize Unsafe Behaviors

Rather than teaching children to identify "bad people," teach them to recognize **unsafe behaviors**. People who sexually abuse children often appear trustworthy and respected. They may be family members, acquaintances, or people in positions of trust. What matters most is not who a person is, but how they behave.

Help your child understand that some adults may use **grooming**—a gradual process of building trust before crossing boundaries. Grooming behaviors may include:

- Giving gifts or special privileges.
- Paying unusual or excessive attention to one child.
- Encouraging secrecy.
- Creating opportunities to be alone with a child.
- Gradually testing or ignoring boundaries.
- Making a child feel responsible for an adult's feelings.

Kindness, mentoring, or generosity are not inherently concerning. The warning signs emerge when an adult begins creating secrecy, dependence, inappropriate emotional closeness, repeated boundary violations, or situations that isolate a child from protective adults.

Teach children that trustworthy adults do **not** ask children to:

- Keep uncomfortable or confusing secrets.
- Break body safety rules.

- Hide interactions from parents or other trusted adults.
- Put an adult's needs or feelings ahead of their own safety.

Build a Circle of Trusted Adults

Regularly reassure your child that they can always come to you if something makes them feel uncomfortable, confused, or scared. Let them know you will listen, believe them, and help them.

Also encourage your child to identify other trusted adults—such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, older sibling, teacher, school counselor, coach, or family friend—whom they could talk to if they ever felt uncomfortable speaking with you.

Remind your child that if the first adult they tell doesn't listen or isn't available, they should keep telling another trusted adult until someone helps.

Online Safety Matters Too

The same body safety rules apply online.

Remind children and teens that:

- No one should ask them to send pictures of their private body parts.
- No one should pressure them into sexual conversations or ask them to share sexual images.
- No one should ask them to keep online relationships or conversations secret from a trusted adult.
- If something online makes them feel uncomfortable, scared, confused, or pressured, they should tell a trusted adult right away.

Keep the Conversation Going

As children become teenagers, continue these conversations. Adolescents face additional risks, including:

- Grooming through online friendships or romantic relationships.
- Sextortion.
- Pressure to share intimate images.
- Manipulation through social media, gaming platforms, and messaging apps.

Teenagers may be especially hesitant to talk about sexual concerns because they may feel embarrassed, worry they will lose access to devices or friendships, fear judgment, or believe adults will overreact. A calm response helps keep the door open.

Ongoing, age-appropriate discussions help children and teens recognize unsafe situations, ask questions, and know they can always come to a trusted adult for help. The goal is not to have one perfect conversation, but regular, open conversations that are calm, supportive, and woven into everyday life. By talking openly about body safety, healthy boundaries, and respect, parents help children develop the confidence to recognize unsafe behaviors, trust their instincts, and seek help whenever they need it.

What If My Child Knew the Accused?

Many parents are asking the same question: *"My child knew this person. Should I be worried?"*

It is completely understandable to feel concerned when someone in a position of trust is arrested for possessing child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Parents naturally want to know whether their own child could have been affected.

At this time, authorities have indicated there is **no public information suggesting that local students were physically harmed**. If that information changes, law enforcement will communicate with affected families.

Remember that **most children who knew or interacted with an adult accused of these crimes will not have experienced abuse**. At the same time, every child deserves the opportunity to be heard if they have concerns. The goal is not to look for a disclosure or convince a child that something happened. The goal is to create an environment where children know they can share concerns if they ever need to.

NOTE: Before beginning a conversation with your child, take time to process your own feelings and gather accurate information. Children often take emotional cues from trusted adults. A calm, reassuring approach helps children feel safe and supported while still allowing space for honest conversations. You do not need to hide your feelings, and, do try to avoid sharing details that may overwhelm your child or make them feel responsible for comforting you.

You might begin by saying:

"You may have heard adults or other students talking about something that happened in our community. I wanted to check in with you and see what you've heard."

or

"Sometimes news like this can make people have questions or mixed feelings. Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

Follow your child's lead. Some children may not want to talk about it. That's okay. Avoid pushing for answers. Instead, respond with something like:

"You don't have to talk right now. I just want you to know that if you ever have questions or if anything has ever made you uncomfortable, you can always tell me. I'll listen, and I'll help."

Then continue normal routines and revisit the conversation another day, if appropriate.

If a child does begin talking, listen more than you speak. Give your child space to share what they know and feel in their own words. Be careful not to assume what happened or ask questions that put ideas into your child's mind. Avoid asking:

- *"Did your teacher ever do anything to you?"*
- *"Were you ever alone with him?"*
- *"Did he make you uncomfortable?"*

Children often do not disclose abuse immediately. They may feel confused, embarrassed, frightened, loyal to the person involved, worried about getting someone in trouble, or uncertain whether what happened was wrong.

If Your Child Shares Something Concerning

1. **Stay calm.** Your reaction helps determine whether your child feels safe continuing to talk.
2. **Thank them for telling you.**
"Thank you for sharing this."
"I'm glad you came to me."
3. **Reassure them.** Children are never responsible for an adult's behavior.
 - *"You're not in trouble."*
 - *"I'm glad you told me."*
 - *"This isn't your fault."*
4. **Listen. Let them do most of the talking in their own words.**
 - Simple, open-ended prompts such as: *"Tell me more."* *"What happened next?"* or *"Can you help me understand?"* Encourage children to share what they remember without pressure or suggestion. (Avoid, *"Did your teacher touch you?"*, *"Were you abused?"*, *"Are you sure?"*)
 - It is natural to want answers. However, children—especially younger children—can be influenced by adults' questions. Questions that suggest an answer or introduce new information may unintentionally shape how a child describes an experience.
 - Instead, if further questioning is needed, professionals specially trained in interviewing children can do so in a way that protects both your child's well-being and the integrity of any investigation.

If you are concerned your child may have experienced sexual abuse, seek professional guidance.

- Contact your child's pediatrician, a Children's Advocacy Center (CAC), or another professional trained in child trauma. Children's Advocacy Centers use specially trained forensic interviewers who know how to speak with children using developmentally appropriate, non-leading techniques.
- You do not need to wait for a child to disclose abuse before seeking guidance. If you have concerns, trained professionals can help you understand appropriate next steps.
- Remember, reporting concerns is not about determining guilt. It is about ensuring children's safety while trained professionals determine what happened.

Other reasons to seek additional support

Children and teens may show stress in different ways. Changes that last or interfere with daily life may be a sign that additional support could help, including:

- Increased anxiety, fear, or worry
- Changes in sleep or eating
- Withdrawal from friends or activities
- Significant mood changes, difficulty concentrating
- Increased anger, sadness, or irritability
- Avoiding a particular person, place, or activity

These signs do not necessarily mean abuse has occurred. They may indicate that a child is experiencing stress and could benefit from support.

Every Adult Has a Role

Preventing child sexual abuse is an adult responsibility.

Parents, caregivers, educators, coaches, clergy, youth leaders, medical professionals, and community members all play a role in creating environments where children are safe, respected, and supported.

Protecting children often begins with adults noticing concerning behaviors, asking questions, setting appropriate boundaries, and speaking up when something does not feel right. You do not need proof that abuse has occurred to address behaviors that cross professional boundaries or raise legitimate concerns.

Adults can help create safer environments by:

- Modeling respect for children's boundaries and choices.
- Taking children's questions and concerns seriously.
- Avoiding situations that create unnecessary secrecy or isolation.
- Following child safety policies and professional boundaries.
- Reporting concerns to the appropriate authorities when required or when a child's safety may be at risk.

Speaking up is not about making accusations or assuming the worst. It is about ensuring that concerns are taken seriously and that children have adults who are willing to protect them.

Children should never bear the responsibility for preventing their own abuse. The responsibility always belongs to the adults who create safe environments and to those who choose to harm children.

Recovery Is Possible

Sexual abuse can have lasting effects, but it does **not** define a person's identity, worth, or future.

Children and adult survivors can and do heal. With support, many survivors go on to build healthy relationships, find a sense of safety and control, and live fulfilling lives.

Healing is supported by:

- caring adults who believe, listen, and support them
- evidence-based treatment when needed
- safe, trusting relationships
- opportunities to regain a sense of safety, choice, and control
- being free from blame, shame, and secrecy

The responsibility for sexual abuse always belongs to the person who chose to abuse—not to the child or survivor.

One of the greatest gifts a parent can give is to respond with calm, belief, and consistent support. A child's experience after disclosure—including whether they feel believed and protected—can play an important role in their healing.

Healing is not always a straight line. Children and teens may respond in different ways and may need support at different times in their lives. Some may want to talk right away, while others may need time before they are ready to share their feelings or experiences. Continued patience, openness, and connection matter.

If you feel overwhelmed yourself, seek support from trusted friends, family members, counselors, or victim advocates while continuing to reassure your child that they are loved, believed, and safe.

Creating a Safer Community Together

Creating a culture where children feel safe speaking up requires all of us. When adults listen, believe, set healthy boundaries, and respond with care, we strengthen the safety net around every child. These conversations may feel difficult, but they are an important part of helping children understand their rights, recognize unsafe situations, and know they are never alone. Together, we can create a community where children are protected, supported, and empowered to seek help whenever they need it.

Additional Resources

If you are unsure what to do, you do not have to figure it out alone. Parents and caregivers can seek guidance from any of the resources below before taking action. Trained professionals can help you understand next steps while keeping a child's safety and well-being at the center.

Massachusetts Children's Alliance (MACA) / Children's Advocacy Centers

Website: <https://www.machildrensalliance.org>

Phone: 617-573-9800

Connects families with local **Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs)** across Massachusetts. CACs bring together multidisciplinary teams that may include child interview specialists, medical providers, victim advocates, law enforcement, child protection professionals, and mental health providers to support children and families after suspected abuse.

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)

Website: <https://www.rainn.org>

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673)

Text: HOPE to 64673

Online chat: Available through RAINN's website

Provides confidential support, education, and referrals for survivors of sexual abuse and assault, as well as family members and loved ones supporting survivors. Services are available 24/7 for all ages and genders.

Stop It Now!

Website: [Stop It Now!](#)

Helpline: 1-888-PREVENT (1-888-773-8368)

Provides confidential guidance for adults who have questions or concerns about child sexual abuse, including concerns about a child's safety, another person's behavior, or how to respond appropriately.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)

Website: <https://www.missingkids.org>

24-hour Call Center: 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

Provides resources on online safety, grooming, child sexual exploitation, sextortion, and reporting suspected online exploitation.