



TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

A Guide for Parents on Having
Age-Appropriate Conversations

INTRODUCTION

No matter how much you wish to slow time down, your children are quickly growing, becoming more independent, and spending more time away from you. Although you want to do everything in your power to protect them from all that is terrible in the world, you know that there is only so much you can do.

Among the many things you teach and talk about with your child, it is imperative to talk to them throughout their childhood and adolescence about sexual violence. Any unwanted, nonconsensual sexual act - whether abuse, assault, or harassment - is sexual violence, and a crime. The key word is nonconsensual. In other words, one of the two parties involved has not agreed to what is happening.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are victims of sexual abuse before the age of 18. While there is limited research specific to Muslim communities, there is no reason to believe that these numbers are any different. Because the rates of sexual violence are so high, it is imperative that you know how to recognize and address sexual violence should someone reach out to you for help.

We wrote this guide to help you begin this important but often difficult conversation with the children in your life. Written in a frequently-asked-questions format, you will find the following information in this guide:

- » Background information on sexual violence including definitions and statistics
- » How to recognize if your child is a victim of sexual violence and how to address it if he or she is a victim
- » Tips on how to have these conversations in an age-appropriate manner with each of your children



WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Any sexual activity between an adult and child (under 17) including:

- » Rape
- » Touching a child's body
- » Making a child touch someone else's body
- » Sexual contact with a child
- » Watching or photographing a child in sexual situations
- » Someone exposing his or her body to a child
- » Someone exposing a child to pornographic material
- » Talking to a child in a sexual way

HOW OFTEN DOES IT OCCUR?

Child sexual abuse is more common than you think. The likelihood of you knowing a child who has been sexually abused is high. According to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN):

- » 44% of sexual assault and rape victims are under the age of 18
- » 93% of juvenile sexual assault victims know the attacker
- » 34.4% of attackers are family members

WHO CAN BE A PERPETRATOR?

Attackers who target children generally appear to be a friendly neighbor or acquaintance. They often do not appear to have predatory characteristics. They are usually not scary looking or mean people, but rather more than 90% of the time, the attacker is known to the victim - he or she may be a relative, a neighbor, friend, teacher, or the like. They go out of their way to appear trustworthy, gain trust by offering gifts and sweets, and seek out settings where they can gain easy access to children, such as youth centers, schools, playgrounds, and the child's home.

Predators thrive on never being exposed, and so they often use manipulative tactics like guiltning a child into not telling anyone or threatening that if the child tells anyone, the family will be hurt.

Other times, they may use gift giving and extreme affection to confuse the child, causing the child to not be able to identify that he/she is being abused.

An important note: Sexual violence is never about the sex. Rather, it is about the power and control the abuser wants to exert over his or her victim.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Children who are victims of sexual abuse carry physical, emotional, psychological, and social consequences with them throughout their life.

- » Many survivors often suffer from low self-esteem, guilt, and shame, and lack the ability to trust anyone or build relationships easily.
- » Sexual abuse survivors have a higher likelihood to engage in risky behaviors such as excessive drug and alcohol abuse, attempted suicide, depression, and eating disorders.
- » Approximately 40% of sex offenders report being sexually abused as children themselves.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR NOT HAVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

These conversations aren't easy to initiate. However, there are many benefits to having these conversations with your children early on. The risks involved with not having these conversations include:

- » Children being misinformed about their rights.
- » Children being influenced to believe such sexual activity is acceptable.
- » Letting the cycle of abuse continue.
- » Children not being able to seek help from a trusted adult or doctor.
- » Children not having the language or tools to identify when they are being abused.



HOW CAN I HAVE THESE CONVERSATIONS IN AN AGE APPROPRIATE WAY?

Many parents struggle with having these conversations with young children because they are uncomfortable with teaching their kids about sexual abuse, especially when they are very young.

On the next page, you will find some tips on how to introduce these concepts based on your child's age and how to continue adding to these conversations as they get older.

Our hope is that these conversations are natural, ongoing throughout childhood and adolescence, open, and free of shame and blame.

INFANTS & TODDLERS

- » Teach them the difference between “my body, your body.”
- » Use correct terms for body parts.
- » Teach them how to say “no” and respect their wish when they do.

PRESCHOOL (3-5)

- » Welcome their many questions and answer them calmly.
- » Use books and videos to assist in your discussions.
- » Share the ONLY instances where their private parts can be seen and/or touched. Explain that no one should physically hurt them, especially in their private parts. Discuss who can see and touch them, such as doctors or dentists (the mouth is private too), with a parent present.
- » Help them identify adults they can reach out to if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- » Talk to your child about the difference between a secret worth honoring and a secret that is unsafe to keep.
- » Be mindful of your body language and tone.
- » Teach them the difference between shame and modesty. While many religious traditions call for keeping certain body parts private and maintaining modesty, they should not feel shame around their bodies or bodily processes.
- » Reintroduce the concept of consent and boundaries.

AGES 6-8

- » Be more forthcoming and detailed in the information you offer, without blame or shame.
- » Teach them about puberty by age 8.
- » Talk about and practice setting boundaries.
- » Remind them about unsafe secrets.

PUBERTY (9-12)

- » These years are full of many physical, emotional, and social changes and are crucial to creating a safe, judgement-free space for your child as he/she navigates through an often confusing time.
- » Give accurate and more in-depth information on their bodies, sexuality, and relationships.
- » Help them practice decision-making.
- » Familiarize yourself and your child with local resources such as hotlines, crisis centers, and other social services so that they know what resources they have access to.
- » Respect their privacy.
- » Talk about what they see in the media and teach them to think critically of the messaging they are receiving.
- » Discuss what a healthy and unhealthy relationship looks like (both in friendships and in intimate relationships).
- » As your kids become more social and independent, they may have friends confide in them, possibly about an abusive relationship or an act of sexual violence. Teach them how to be a resource for their friends and how to identify the instances when they should reach out to a trusted adult.
- » Delve deep into a discussion about consent- how to give it and how to honor it. Use hypothetical scenarios to demonstrate what consent is and isn't, and remind them that to give consent is one's right and to honor consent is one's responsibility.

WHY DO CHILDREN OFTEN NOT DISCLOSE?

Many children do not disclose their abuse to other trusted adults. There are many reasons for this and it is crucial to understand why this happens and learn how to identify signs of sexual abuse. Common barriers to disclosing are:

- » **They do not know they are being abused:** Many children often do not have the vocabulary to talk about the abuse because they are not educated about their bodies or may not understand what constitutes a healthy relationship. Similarly, if the child is taught that only rape is bad, then he/she may minimize all other types of abuses (molestation, exposing one's genitals, etc). They may also be unaware of the resources and services that can help them.
- » **Stigma, shame, embarrassment, and self-blame:** They feel very ashamed that something like this happened to them and might think that it is their fault.
- » **Familiarity with the perpetrator and/or love and respect for the perpetrator:** Most of the time, the perpetrator is known to the child (a neighbor, relative, friend, parent, etc). Often times, the child loves and respects his/her perpetrator and struggles with exposing the perpetrator, especially if they might go to jail.
- » **Fear that the abuse will worsen, perpetrator will harm their loved ones, or that others will find out:** This may be a result of threats from the perpetrator.
- » **Fear of not being believed:** Many children fear that no one will believe them, especially if the perpetrator is a respected and loved member of the family or community.
- » **Fear of being blamed for assault:** This fear is especially stronger if the victim was somewhere or with someone they were not supposed to be with.
- » **Loss of trust:** This is especially true if the perpetrator was a trusted adult to them. If they can no longer trust the perpetrator, they may find it hard to trust other adults as well.
- » **Fear of breaking up or destroying family:** Child may fear causing turmoil in the family or community.

- » **Fear of social consequences:** Child may be afraid of social consequences such as being outcasted. Older girls may be concerned about being shamed and not being marriageable.
- » **Modesty and belief in privacy:** Often times, the need for modesty and privacy around sexual health issues is confused with having shame and stigma. May also fear that others will find out and their identity will not be kept private.
- » **Denial:** Victim may not believe that something like that happened to them, or that they imagined it because they don't believe the perpetrator would do something so bad.
- » **Religious tradition:** Some religious traditions encourage people to cover up another's sin and to forgive those who have transgressed.

WHAT SIGNS SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?

Although every survivor of child sexual abuse responds differently. For example, they may respond by going into shock, or by expressing an extreme emotion, like uncontrollable anger, crying, or even laughter. Some others have described sexual abuse as an out-of-body experience, where it was like they were outside their body, watching the abuse. On the following page are a few things to look out for:

- » Signs of physical injury or illness
- » Unhappiness
- » Withdrawal
- » Regression
- » Changes at school
- » Aggression
- » Destructive behavior
- » High risk sexual behavior
- » Trouble sleeping/nightmares
- » Changes in eating patterns

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO IF MY CHILD TELLS ME THEY'VE BEEN ABUSED?

In order to help you child through a healing process, it is very important to react in a way that your child feels safe and free of blame.

- » Remain calm and don't overreact.
- » Listen non-judgmentally.
- » Affirm their experiences by using phrases like: "It's not your fault. I believe you. You have options."
- » Silence is okay.
- » Do not project or assume – let him/her tell you details when ready.
- » Be mindful of word choices and questions. Validate their feelings. "It is normal to feel..."
- » Acknowledge the sexual violation without forcing acceptance on the survivor to be labeled a 'rape victim.'
- » Deal with explicit language (especially if child is an adolescent). It may be a way for them to cope.
- » Provide resources, offer support, and seek the guidance of a trained professional. Report immediately to law enforcement and prepare the child for the next steps.
- » It is important for you to determine whether you are a mandated reporter. It is a crime if you do not report. Each state has different guidelines, but typically, medical personnel, clergy, social workers, teachers and administrators, and law enforcement officers are required to report abuse of a minor to Department of Children and Family Services.

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER RESOURCES I CAN USE WHEN I HAVE THESE DISCUSSIONS?

Books, for children ages 3+

- » Your Body Belongs to You, by Cornelia Spelman
- » Some Parts are Not for Sharing, by Julie K. Frederico
- » Do You have a Secret? (Let's talk about it) by Jennifer Moore-Millanos
- » I Can Play it Safe by Alison Feigh
- » I Can be Safe: A First Look at Safety by Pat Thomas
- » Uncle Willy's Tickle: A Child's Right to Say No by Marcie Aboff

Books for children ages 7+

- » Reena's Bollywood Dream: A Story about Sexual Abuse by Jewel Kats
- » Some Secrets Should Never be Kept, by Jayneen Sanders
- » Tornado Warning: A Memoir of Teen Dating Violence and its Effect on Women by Ellin Stebbins Waldal

Videos

- » Komal, a film by Childline (available on Youtube) Found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vky0xqtw6W8>

Online Resources

- » Rainn.org
- » CalgaryCasa.com
- » National Sexual Violence Resource Center
- » Rape Victim Advocates
- » HeartWomenAndGirls.org

About Us

HEART Women & Girls promotes sexual health and sexual violence awareness in Muslim communities through health education, advocacy, research and training.

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