

## SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN

The prevention, recognition and treatment of child sexual abuse are important to every parent, regardless of the age of the child. This article will provide essential information for all parents. For ease of reading, all children are referred to as “he” in this article, but these guidelines refer to boys and girls.

**Prevention** is an ongoing process. Many people imagine scenarios where the perpetrator is a stranger seeking an unknown victim. While such crimes do occur, much more commonly the victim knows the abuser.

Parents must teach their children, from toddler-hood on, about “private zones”. This is most easily described as the area covered by a bathing suit. Tell your child that he can and should say “no” to anyone who invades his private zone. Make sure he knows to tell a trusted adult if someone makes him feel uncomfortable by talking about or touching private parts, and be sure your child knows you will not be mad at him. Listen carefully to your child- it may be very difficult for him to tell you about his experience.

Carefully monitor who will be alone with your child. Check school or daycare policies on abuse. Teach your older child (by second grade) about places where he might encounter trouble and how to avoid it. Answer questions about sex honestly and outline behavior your family considers acceptable. Continue this discussion into adolescence, when you should introduce issues such as date rape. See our handout on assault prevention.

**Recognition** of sexual abuse is extremely important. Remember that the victim usually knows the abuser and the child may be confused because he trusts or even loves this person. Bribes and threats are common and your child may be very frightened to disclose what has happened to him. Sometimes the child will tell a friend first, rather than a parent.

Be alert to potential signs of abuse. Your child may react in an unusual way when talking about a person or place linked to the abuse. He may react in an unexpected way if asked about abuse. Drawings may include sexual material, or vocabulary may include sexual words you do not use in your home. Younger children may exhibit behaviors that are sexually explicit in their play, and the victim may try to repeat the act of abuse with a friend. Sudden trouble with bowels or bladder may occur. Parents may notice changes in the genital or anal area of the victim’s body. Also, sleeping may be disturbed.

**Treatment** begins with disclosure. Believe your child – if you do not act on what your child tells you, he may not bring it up again. Tell your child the abuse is not his fault, and he deserves to be protected and safe. Be sure your child knows that any anger you show is not directed at him. Tell him how proud you are that he told you about the abuse, and recognize how brave and scared he is.

Parents are very rarely able to stop a sexual abuser themselves. It is in your child's best interest to report the abuse. What happens after the abuse is reported depends on the circumstances, but the first priority is to insure the child's safety. Whether criminal charges or other action follows is variable.

Get professional help for your child and for yourself. You will need support from family or friends, but the help of a professional trained to help abused children and their families is essential. Many families feel most comfortable starting to deal with child sexual abuse through their pediatrician, and we are here to help you.

Additional resources include:

Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) (908) 782-8784

Hunterdon Behavioral Health (908) 788-6401

Child Abuse Hotline (908) 782-8784

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