

Sexual Violence Prevention

If you or someone you know is a victim of abuse, call the Oklahoma Safe Line 1-800-522-SAFE (7233) to speak with an advocate.

Sexual Safety in Sports: Talking about Coaches Who Show Inappropriate Interest in Kids

Too often, the news carries stories about a bus driver, teacher, or even coach who sexually abused a child, stories that leave us wringing our hands. And yet, how many of us know what to watch out for or how to talk to our child when the risk of sexual abuse is more complicated than the scary guy at the playground offering them candy to get in his car.

To help parents, we've put together tips on how to talk with children and young people about coaches or other adults who show signs of sexual interest in children. Take time to learn to recognize and speak up *before* a child is harmed.

Talk about who sexually abuses children

90% of the time, children and young people are sexually abused by someone they know. Children are most at risk to be abused by someone they have regular contact with including relatives, coaches, teachers, neighbors, babysitters, etc. Use this knowledge when talking about who sexually abuses children. Say, "What if a neighbor asked you to look at some pictures of naked people, what would you do?" Or, "what if the babysitter always comes in the bathroom without knocking? What would you do?" Then talk to them about what they should do and say.

Talk about and help them recognize concerning behaviors.

People who sexually abuse children often show signs before they abuse. While there is no foolproof warning sign, certain behaviors are cause for concern. Talk about why it is important to tell a safe adult if anyone's behavior makes them uncomfortable. Say, "Some people need help if they can't remember the rules for how to behave around kids." Since most of the time children and young people know and often like the person who abuses them, it is helpful to use neutral language like "the rules" rather than talking about "perverts", "predators", etc

Talk about boundaries

People who sexually abuse children may disrespect or ignore a child's personal space or tease or belittle them when they try to set a limit. Sometimes this adult will hug, touch, kiss, tickle, wrestle with, or hold a child even when the child doesn't want this contact or attention. Ask your child to talk with you or a safe adult if this happens to them or to a friend.

Talk about inappropriate behavior between adults and children.

People who sexually abuse children can be more focused on relationships with kids than with other adults. They may turn to a child for emotional or physical comfort or share personal or private information or activities with a child or treat the child more like a peer. They might allow kids to get away with inappropriate behaviors, or point out sexual images or tell dirty or suggestive jokes or talk with them about sexual interactions or images. They might be overly interested in the kids' bodies or their dating relationships. Sometimes they will spend excessive time emailing, text messaging, or calling children or youth. Ask your child to tell you or another safe adult if this happens to them or a friend.

Talk about how someone creates opportunities to sexually abuse children.

People who abuse kids often first build a relationship with the child. They may "test" the child to see how the child reacts to different situations. For example, the adult may put their arm around a kid then move to hugging them or asking them to sit on their lap. They might also give a child special treatment like buying them things, giving them special privileges, offering alcohol or drugs or sharing sexual material, explaining that these are their (the adult's and the kid's) special secret.

Talk with your child about these "tricks" and how, because they've enjoyed the extra privileges or attention, it could make it harder for them to tell a safe adult. Tell them, "No matter what, other people aren't allowed to make you uncomfortable by talking with you or touching you in ways that feel uncomfortable or that you don't like. When that happens, tell a safe adult."

Talk about why it is important to tell a safe adult.

Talk with your child about how someone might discourage them from talking to a safe adult. Say, "Sometimes people will scare you by saying Mom or Dad won't believe you or you'll get in trouble or even that it's your fault. But, Mom and Dad will believe you and you won't get in trouble. Sometimes they'll even say they will hurt Mom and Dad or the family pet. We know how to handle these things. We'll be safe and you'll be safer if you tell a safe adult."

Talk about and help them identify 'safe adults'

All children and young people need safe adults they can talk with, in addition to their parents. Ask your child who they would talk to if they had a concern or were worried about something and you weren't available or they weren't comfortable talking with you about this.

If your child can't come up with someone, help them think through who they might consider. If your child mentions someone who you don't trust, talk with them about alternative adults. Say, "I want you to talk with these adults whenever you feel scared, uncomfortable or confused about someone's behavior toward you."

Speak up when you see or experience concerning behavior

If a child reports behaviors that aren't explicitly sexual (for example, someone who gives them the creeps) don't ignore it. At a minimum, talk with the person whose behavior is concerning your child. Don't accuse them. Instead describe the behavior and ask them to stop. Say, "When you do XYZ, Jimmy doesn't like it. Please don't do that any more." If you're uncomfortable talking directly with the person, report your concerns to someone in authority or ask another adult to support you as you talk with the person.

If you observe interactions or behaviors that concern you, speak up. Say, "I'm uncomfortable when you hug Ana after every race. How about high-fiving instead?" If your child suddenly loses interest in an activity they previously enjoyed or tells you they want to quit, consider the possibility that someone has made them uncomfortable or unsafe. Support their "no" while trying to understand what's behind it.

Report anything you know or suspect might be sexual abuse. While some professionals (e.g. teachers, child care providers, etc.) are *legally mandated* to report their concerns about sexual abuse, anyone can make a report if they are concerned a child has been or is at-risk to be sexually abused. If a child tells you about someone touching them or asking them to touch them in a sexual way or showing them sexually explicit photos, report it. In most cases, start by calling your local police. Don't feel you need to have proof. It is not your job to investigate or even to ask for more details. Leave this up to the experts.