

# Personal Safety Skills Information Sheet for Caregivers

## **Who are the people who sexually abuse children?**

Although sexual offenders can be male or female, the overwhelming majority are men. Despite warnings of “stranger danger,” we know that 90% of sexual offenders are someone who knew their victim prior to the abuse. Often the offender is a relative (e.g., father, stepfather, uncle, etc.), friend of the family, and/or in a supervisory role (e.g., babysitter, coach, and educator). In addition to adult offenders, 30% of sexual offenders are juveniles, meaning that they are under 18 years of age.

## **What is grooming?**

Grooming is a series of actions designed to obtain the trust and compliance of a potential victim in order to eventually engage them in sexual behavior. In many instances, sexual offenders “groom” their victims by providing them with attention, bribes, treats, and privileges in order to gain their trust and affection. A sexual offender may test limits and boundaries with a potential victim by initially involving him or her in minor nonsexual “rule violations” (e.g., allowing him or her to violate curfew, smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, use adult language) and/or noncontact sexually inappropriate behavior (e.g., looking at pornographic images, talking about others in a sexual manner). Sexual offenders sometimes engage in these “minor” infractions in order to see whether the child will tell an adult about it or “keep it secret” prior to engaging them in contact sexual offenses (e.g., touching of private parts). Sometimes the “rule violations” are an attempt by the perpetrator to enlist the child in misbehavior in order to manipulate him or her into secrecy about the abuse. Specifically, an offender may tell the victim that if the child discloses the abuse, the offender will inform the child’s caregivers of his or her “rule violations.”

## **Who do sexual offenders target?**

Although any child can be targeted by a sexual offender, we know from research studying offender behavior that there are certain factors that make some children more vulnerable than others. Children who are most often targeted by sexual offenders are those who do not have adequate supervision by caregivers; may be overly trusting of others; have low self-esteem; are socially isolated; and may have interpersonal, behavioral, and/or emotional difficulties.

## **What can caregivers do to minimize children’s risk of future sexual abuse?**

Caregivers can begin by encouraging children to be open and honest with them and other adults regarding risk and safety. It is important to help children distinguish between a surprise and a secret and to emphasize the importance of telling about secrets to keep themselves and others safe. A personal safety plan can be clearly developed delineating the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and how to respond if confronted by a potentially risky or confusing situation. Children can be taught the Yell-Go-Tell personal safety sequence. This procedure involves yelling “no” or “stop,” quickly removing themselves from the situation, and telling a trusted adult who can help. Children are told that if they are not provided with immediate assistance, they are to keep telling until help is received. In order to make this procedure successful, children can be provided with opportunities to identify adults who can help in various situations.

Caregivers can also set up family rules to protect each family member's right to privacy and control over his/her body. Caregivers can inform children that their bodies belong to them and that they can decide what makes them feel comfortable and uncomfortable. It is important for caregivers to provide information to children about how they can respond if someone makes them feel uncomfortable. Additionally, caregivers can be highly active in their children's daily lives, knowing with whom, where, and when they are spending their time. Through this close supervision, caregivers can minimize their children's contact with risky situations and individuals. Additionally, caregivers should be aware of appropriate boundaries and should speak up if they observe anyone potentially violating children's boundaries. It is also important for caregivers to intervene promptly when children initiate potential boundary violations with others.

**What can caregivers do if their child discloses sexual abuse or they learn of another child who has experienced sexual abuse?**

It is important for caregivers to provide support and validation to children when they disclose abuse and assure them that they did the right thing by telling. Furthermore, caregivers should communicate that they will provide the child with assistance in helping them to stay safe. Upon learning this information, caregivers should immediately respond by bringing the child to a safe location and notifying proper authorities (e.g., law enforcement, child protective services) and appropriate caregivers. Caregivers should consult with authorities regarding future discussions that they may wish to initiate with their child regarding the allegations to avoid interfering with investigations and to minimize any negative impact that the discussions may have on the child's well-being.

**What can caregivers do to ensure safety with technology (e.g., cable television, internet, cellular telephones)?**

Although there are many benefits to the use of technology, there are also risks associated with its use by children. These risks involve potential exposure of children to adult content, sharing of personal information and images, and involvement with dangerous individuals. As such, it is important for caregivers to develop guidelines for children using the various forms of technology in order to keep them safe. Caregivers can begin by letting children know that they will be monitoring their use of technology and discuss risky practices, including talking to strangers online using cellular telephones and web cameras for taking and sending inappropriate pictures/videos. Children can also be encouraged to inform caregivers of any potential risks that they come across.

In terms of cable television, caregivers can minimize children's exposure to adult content by contacting their service provider and restricting access to adult channels and pay-per-view. Caregivers can minimize risk associated with the internet and social media by discussing various online risks with their children and providing them with rules and regulations for different types of online activities (e.g., chat rooms, websites, interactive games). For additional computer safety, the family's computer can be put in a highly trafficked area enabling caregivers to easily observe their children's use. Children may also be asked to provide caregivers with usernames and passwords for email and social media websites. Furthermore, caregivers can require children to show them what sites they have been visiting or they can use various software programs to limit internet access and track their children's online behavior. These software programs can restrict access to certain websites, monitor children's internet usage (e.g., the content of children's email, search history, etc.), and alert caregivers to potential risks.