



24 Hour Crisis/Information & Referral Line (253) 474-7273 or 1-800-756-7273

Questions asked by Parents

What do I look for when I suspect someone is abusing my child?

...Some children show changes in behavior such as, sudden acting out i.e. hitting/yelling; personality change, from social and outgoing to quiet and withdrawn; regression to previously acquired developmental stages i.e. baby-talk and bed wetting; pre-occupation with own genitals as well as others; sleeping (nightmares) and eating patterns may also be affected. Behaviors do not prove or disprove that sexual abuse or assault occurred. Other indicators may be physical and can be checked by a physician. These signs are bruises, bleeding, cuts, and child complaining or irritation, pain or injury in the genital area, painful urination, and genital discharge.

It is important to remember that not all children behave any differently following sexual assault or abuse. Not all children have physical signs either. This does not mean that a sexual assault did not occur.

How can I keep my children safe?

...**Short Answer:**

Talk to your children about all safety issues and concerns; communication is very important. This needs to be a family issue. Be real with them using age and developmentally appropriate language without horrifying them. Keep lines of communication open, explain that there are no 'out of limit questions' and that they should never feel embarrassed or ashamed to talk about safety. Explain that there may be questions that you may not know the answers to but will work with them on getting the right answers. Develop a safety plan with your children. Get to know your children's friends and their parents, where they live and phone numbers. Trust your intuition. If in any doubt contact the Sexual Assault Center of Pierce County.

...**Long Answer:**

1. Educate yourself. It is important to let the reality of sexual assault/abuse shape our efforts to protect our children. Many parents mistakenly focus almost all of their discussions with children about sexual abuse on a stranger, but statistics show that only 5% of sexual assaults of children happen by strangers. So, while it is important to talk to your children about being wary of strangers, the biggest risk (95%) comes from people your children may already know. This means you must be willing to seriously entertain the possibility that someone you know or will know could be a risk to your children. You must learn the ways that these offenders groom parents to gain access to their children and recognize signs that some people should have limited or no access to your children. Children rely on parents to protect them and while children can help with this task, particularly as they age, it is important that the parent have the primary responsibility. Perpetrators that know you and your children well are very good at manipulating children

into not disclosing the abuse or making it unlikely anyone will believe them if they do. Many parents mistakenly believe that their child will definitely tell them if they are being abused but often that is not the case. Encourage open, honest communication with your child, but do not hold them or yourself responsible if they are abused and do not tell you right away.

2. Teach children developmentally appropriate information about their body and ownership of it. From a very young age it is important to help your child and yourself feel as comfortable and natural as possible discussing bodies and their functions. This does not come easily for many parents, so get support from friends, family, professional resources and books. Children should have as much control as possible over who touches their body and in what way.

Clearly, there are times when caregivers and doctors must clean, examine etc. the child but the parent can help the child maintain a belief that their body is theirs and they get to decide what happens to it except for health, safety etc... Parents also reinforce the belief that the child has the right to say “no” about others touching their body and those healthy adults will respect this. If the child comes into contact with an adult who does not respect their “no” the child may recognize the potential danger sooner and realistically expect help from a trusted adult in setting that limit.

Take for example a situation where a family member or friend wants to kiss or hug the child or wants the child to kiss or hug him/her and the child hesitates or says no. This creates a great opportunity for the parent to teach the child they can say, “No thank you I’d rather not”. If the parent forces the child to kiss or hug someone they don’t want to, the parent runs the risk of teaching the child that if an adult wants to touch the child, he/she is obligated to provide it so they are not rude or disrespectful and that if they do not, the parent will be mad and force them to do so anyway.

Many of us were not raised to feel we had a right to say no to adults in these circumstances. It may be helpful to talk to family and friends about this approach so that they understand it is not a condemnation of them but rather a means to help keep your child safe and healthy.

3. We as parents can do a lot to drastically reduce our child’s risk of sexual assault/abuse. However, there is no discussion, no book, no class, and no set of “safety rules” that can vaccinate your child from the risk of being sexually assaulted or abused. Many parents understandably don’t like to think about it but it is important that we remain open to the potential risks that our children could face while continuing to lead happy, healthy, open lives. Just as riding in a car has some risk. We do what we can to make sure that we follow safety rules each time we get in the car and educate ourselves about safe driving but that does not mean that auto accidents don’t happen. Know that you may do all the “right things” and teach your child all the “right things” and if your child is sexually abused/assaulted it is not your fault or theirs but solely the perpetrators.