

Streetproof your children: Rules to keep young people safe

- Ten percent of Canadian families will be confronted by sexual abuse.
- One out of every three females will be sexually molested before age 18.
- One out of every 10 boys will be sexually molested before age 18.
- More than 85% of abusers are known to the victim.

Most parents want to educate their children about sexual abuse, but they don't know how. These guidelines will help parents to teach their children how to keep safe. Remember, you can't tell a child too much; knowledge doesn't stimulate inappropriate behaviour — ignorance does. Parents who talk openly with their children will be "askable" parents, and children will feel free to bring their worries and concerns to them in the future.

1. An unattended child is a child at risk. Arrange with your child an alternative place to wait if you are delayed, especially in the darker winter evenings. Suggest a well-lit store or inside an arena or school.
2. Always, where possible, have children walk in pairs or groups.
3. Children should always travel the same way home.
4. Use a secret family code. Children should never go with anyone, not even a close family friend, unless they are able to give the child the code. Once the code has been used, it should be changed.
5. Don't allow your young child to go to a public washroom unattended.
6. Check your babysitter's credentials thoroughly. In your absence, they are guardians of a priceless treasure.
7. Tell your child it is not rude to ignore an adult who is asking directions on the street. Another adult could be asked for more accurate directions.
8. Tackle the subject of sexual abuse prevention with the same honest, matter-of-fact manner you would attach to road safety. Remember, the only time a child will ask you about sexual abuse is after it has happened. Open the subject and your child will remember that you are askable.
9. Introduce your child to the "Hot and Cold" game. Describe a situation which is "cool" — "imagine you are walking home from a friend's house..." then make it "tepid" — "you hear footsteps and think someone is following you..." Request the child to make the situation "cool" again and suggest that it would be appropriate to cross the street. Now make the situation warmer by indicating that the footsteps also have crossed the street. Suggest that the child cross back again, and explain that if the footsteps cross the street for a second time, then the situation is "hot". Ask for ways to "cool" down the situation. You might help with ideas such as going into a lighted store, going into a neighbour's house, looking quickly for a Block Parent, or because it is a "hot" situation, they might yell "fire" which will bring a quicker response than "help".
10. Discuss with your child the difference between fact and fancy, fact and fiction so that they may understand the nature of taking an oath. (This may be necessary for a court appearance).
11. If you suspect that an abuse has taken place:
 - DO encourage the child to talk about it.
 - DO establish in the child's mind that he/she is not to blame.
 - DO NOT correct the child's story; listen to the original words, even those which are babyish or family words.
 - DO NOT suggest or modify what the child is trying to say. Your ideas might confuse the truth.
 - DO NOT SHOW horror or anger; however, if caught by surprise and unable to control your emotions, be clear that your anger is meant for the offender, not the child.
12. When you are aware of an incident of sexual abuse, call the police or the child welfare authorities immediately. Ensure that a social worker, a police officer and someone supportive to the child is present when the evidence is given.

This information is a co-production of:

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