

HELP for Parents & Caregivers

Children are highly vulnerable to dangers due to their innocent and trusting natures and youth are vulnerable due to their growing independence and decreased supervision. It's important as parents and caregivers that we do everything we can to keep them safe.

While there are some great programmes available in the community that provide first steps for your children, their ultimate safety remains largely in your hands. It's up to you to keep your children safe.

Minimising Risk

Learn how to minimise risk in your child's life as much as possible. Minimising Risks

Maintain clear rules about boundaries. This will help to reduce the chance that your child could be confused if someone touches them inappropriately. Maintain age-appropriate privacy and respect the child's control of their own body (ie: tickling stops when they say so.)

Take care who you let in your child's life. Help your child develop good relationships with other adults and don't leave your child alone with people who do not have a good and appropriate relationship with them. Know who your child spends time with and be watchful when there are new people in the house like boarders, babysitters or a newly formed blended family.

Formal childcare settings provide protection from abuse through police checks, staff training and policies and procedures to promote safe environments. No such protections exist with informal childcare arrangements, so it is up to you to put in place some basic precautions. Here are some things to think about...

Babysitting It is estimated that half of all sexual offending is done by teenagers and both boys and girls abuse. While babysitting time provides a prime opportunity, this doesn't mean that you can never go out and trust your child with one. Ask for references and spend some time watching the sitter interact with your child before you leave. Allowing them to bring other young people into your home while you are out increases the risks also.

If it is family members caring for your children, communicate your family touching and privacy rules and ask your child how they felt being cared for, listening well to what they tell you. If your family member has a partner or friend with them that you're not familiar with, make it clear that you expect them (the family member) to care for your child and not leave them alone with the other person.

Sleepovers Sleepovers are safest when your child can bath, toilet and dress themselves and ideally should be restricted to people you know best prior to this time. If your child is sleeping over somewhere, check out where they will be sleeping, who else will be there and what level of supervision they will have. Check that your child really does want to sleepover and let them know that they can phone you at any time, even in the middle of the night, if

they are worried about anything. Share your family privacy and touching rules with anyone else who will be caring for your child.

Take extra care when blending families. Bringing two families together should (and can be) a happy time, but there is also the potential for harm to children or young people, who face a higher risk of being sexually abused in these family situations as more people have access to them. A parent or sibling forms an attachment with a child in their care from birth that usually protects against sexual abuse, but the same is not always true for step-parents or siblings.

Some form of pain or loss, from a break-up or death of a parent, often follows into a blended family, making people vulnerable to abuse. Children can feel less special or have no sense of belonging, especially if they don't live there full-time; this can cause them to act out sexually towards other children, or be acted out upon.

In the emotional intimacy that adults feel for each other when forming a new family unit, it can be confusing for children as there's an expectation to feel close to someone that they have no real connection with yet. Allow your child time and space to get to know your new partner and their children. Encourage fun together, with appropriate boundaries.

When you are dating someone new, spend some time with their family and friends and find out what went wrong in their previous relationship. Consider how they get on with their own kids, or other children in general. Listen to how your child feels about your new partner. Make sure all children feel welcome, with a sense of belonging and equal opportunities and keep having one on one time with your children, so they know their relationship with you is still close and that they can rely on you and voice any worries.

Lastly, be open and explicit about privacy and touching rules, because you can't expect them to have just naturally evolved out of a family culture in the case of a blended family. Things like who can be in the room when someone is in the bath should be discussed so that everyone knows how to be with each other. These should also be communicated to all others who might be in the home. Rules will likely need to be kept quite tight for a while, until trust and intimacy build.

Providing a Safe Environment

Providing a safe place for your children is key to prevention. Sexual abuse (and abusers themselves) come in different shapes and forms. Understanding the nature of the problem is the first step to preventing it. Simply put, sexual abuse occurs when a person uses a child for their sexual purposes or pleasure; usually that person will be older or stronger and the abuse may involve touch or exposure to sexual talk, pictures or actions. While once thought to be rare, the statistics surrounding this kind of abuse are staggering and it can happen to children from all kinds of families, cultures and socio-economic groups.

Understanding Abusers and the Abuse Just like anyone can be abused, the abuse can also be done by anyone – adult, teenager, child, male, female, family, friend or stranger. Children are typically most at risk from those people who have access to them and who they trust, which is quite a contrast to the 'stranger danger' belief of who they should be most wary of. While there are cases where strangers commit sexually abusive behaviour, more often than not, the offender is known to the survivor and in a position of trust.

Some abusers have had similar problems in their childhood, or they may have trouble relating to adults and so spend a lot of time with children; this is not always the profile though. You cannot tell by looking at someone that they have sexually abused others; they do not look or dress in a certain way. Sexual offenders come from various ethnic, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

Typically abusers begin by being friendly and inviting trust before they move on to creating a 'special bond' with a particular child so that they will willingly be alone with them. The next move is often the violation of a small boundary, like inappropriate touch, which gradually increases if the child passes the test of not running off to tell. While we, as adults, know it is never the child's fault, they don't understand this yet and may believe they are to blame. Abusers of children are also masters of covering it up and many no longer believe they are even doing anything wrong.

Why It Can Be Hard to See Sexual Abuse Human nature means that it's natural to not want to think harmful things happen to us, or our families. When a child withdraws or becomes unhappy, sexual abuse is often not high on our list of reasons, despite the fact that it deserves to be. It's also, sadly, a myth that as parents we would 'just know'.

We often fall into the trap of expecting the signs to be as outrageous as we believe the act to be, but most children keep their pain inside and react not on a scale that would usually indicate something seriously wrong. There are many reasons why children don't tell, including loyalty to the perpetrator, obedience, fear of not being believed, confusion or self-blame, or sometimes because of communication difficulties arising from children just not having the words to articulate their distress or what was done to them. This is when the distressed behaviour arises in other forms.

What to Look Out For Unfortunately, signs of abuse are not always easy to see and can often be attributed to other problems. Few children will have direct physical impacts and still fewer may develop prematurely sexualised behaviour, so most indicators are expressions of the emotional harm that has been caused. No one reaction means that a child has been sexually abused, but it may mean that something distressing has happened that needs to be explored.

Emotional reactions may include changes in mood and the way they react to people, a reluctance to undress, increased anxiety, sleeping problems like nightmares or bed wetting, regression to a younger age, self-harming, persistent illness or indicating that they have worries or a secret which worries them.

Sexualisation signs may include sexual behaviour and language with other children, adults or toys that seem out of the ordinary. They may also have inappropriate sexual knowledge.

Physical reactions may include unexplained injuries or pain around the genitals, anus or mouth or sexually transmitted infections.

Have a Great Relationship With Your Child While this is important for many reasons, and doubtless is something that you are aspiring to anyway, there are a number of practical reasons why this can make a real difference in terms of sexual abuse.

1. *It reduces the likelihood that someone will choose your child to abuse. They're less likely to be approached if they don't need a 'new friend' and more likely to tell and be believed. Simply put, children who feel emotionally secure and well loved are less vulnerable.*
2. *You're more likely to be able to stop any abuse early because your child is more likely to tell you if they feel scared or uncomfortable and you will likely be more attuned to their feelings and changes in behaviour.*
3. *Your child will be more resilient if they do have a bad experience. Good relationships make them stronger so they can cope better when things go wrong.*

Children need warm; loving relationships with adults so they feel that they are loved and respected and that you will be available to them when they need you. Having fun together, being affectionate and consistently emotionally responsive builds good relationships and developing a family culture of listening and talking about thoughts and feelings is a great platform.

Children's Sexual Behaviour: What's normal and what's not?

Most behaviour is normal, but sometimes it isn't. Learn what to do.

Unsafe Adult Behaviour

Learn to identify questionable behaviour in adults that spend time with your children.

Keeping an Eye Out: Unsafe Adult Behaviour

Most adults behave safely around children, respecting their wishes and privacy and being open to comments if they do anything to cause concern. However, sometimes adult behaviour around children is troubling and unsafe.

Some of the signs, or things to be watchful of, include adults or teenagers who:

- Insist on hugging, touching, kissing, tickling, wrestling with or holding a child even when the child doesn't want the attention or affection.
- Ask lots of questions about the sexuality of a child or teenager, ie: repeatedly talking about their developing body or intruding on normal teenage dating.
- Create opportunities to get time alone with little opportunity for any other person to intrude or intervene.
- Spend most of their time with children or young teens and seem to have no interest in being with people of their own age.
- Repeatedly intrude on a child's privacy when it's not necessary.
- Make you feel 'shut out' as a parent, or isolate your child.

- Talk about inappropriate sexual behaviour in front of children or call them sexual names, even if done in a joking manner.
- Regularly offer to babysit lots of children for free or take them alone on overnight outings or holidays.
- Buy children or teens expensive gifts, or give them money for no apparent reason.
- Allow children or teenagers to consistently get away with inappropriate behaviours.
- Seem to demonstrate excessive control over a child, like not letting them make their own decisions or be involved in activities outside the home.
- Visit children's chat rooms online or download child pornography.
- Want their adult partner to dress like a child or role-play as one during sex.

If you know someone who behaves in any of these ways, they might have a problem. These signs could be serious, so if you see them, talk to someone that can help.

What If a Child Tells You?

Find out what to say and what action to take if a child tells you they have been abused.

What you do when a child discloses sexual abuse is crucial and will impact on their later recovery from the whole experience. Children need to feel listened to, believed, cared about and safe after they have told.

If a child chooses you as their 'safe person' and discloses abuse, the following guidelines might help:

- **Remain calm** – trust that you will be able to get yourself and the child the help you need to handle the situation.
- **Take responsibility for making sure the child is now kept safe.** This should be your priority and if you need help, call the Police or Child, Youth and Family.
- **Stay emotionally connected to the child** and their emotional needs, regardless of your own feelings at that moment. They may need more time cuddling or staying physically close to Mum to feel safe.
- **Keep your reactions to yourself**, because if you show anger, they might think that is directed at them and not tell you again.
- **Show your love concern and support.**

- **Listen to what the child is telling you and take it seriously.** Believe them and accept what they tell you. Say “Thank you for telling me, I believe you.”
- **Don’t interrogate or question too much** about what has happened, even though your parental instincts will mean you want to know every detail. Your child might withdraw in the face of such questioning. It is best to leave it for a trained expert to question them at a later time.
- **Praise** the child for their bravery in telling and reassure them that it is not their fault and that you will help them to make it better now.
- **Help** the child understand that there are people that you will need to talk to, in order to get help.

Children need to have what they say taken seriously and your reaction will have a big impact on their journey from this point. It is your role to take the responsibility for making sure they are safe now and keeping them safe. They may also need access to professional help if they have behavioural problems like high anxiety or distress.

Sometimes a child might offer what seems like a disclosure of abuse, but you’re not sure. If you need to ask more questions, make them as few and open-ended as you can and continue to express care and concern, as often children are driven by what they think an adult wants them to say.

Talk to your child in ways that preserve their self-worth. One of the best things that you can do for your child is to let them know that they are understood. Try to reflect a child’s feelings without criticism and show you understand these feelings. When children feel understood, hurt and distress start to disappear and more positive communication will begin. Disagreeing with your child’s feelings or perceptions of themselves may mean they choose not to share with you anymore.

Your child needs to have their life be as normal as possible, with the same routines, going to school and partaking in their usual daily activities. Try not to make too many changes or new rules and avoid stepping back from your normal parenting style as much as you can. You may understand why your child is acting the way they are, but as well as showing compassion, you can let them know when their behaviour is unacceptable and still instigate the appropriate consequence if they continue to cross the line.

Children may need extra emotional needs attended to – they might need more time cuddling with Mum, or need certain special comforts again. Continue to show your child your love and support and discuss ways to keep safe with other people with your children. Give your child ongoing opportunities to tell you if things are not ok, but also be respectful of their space and pace.

This might all seem like a big ask when you're still trying to get your head around it, so take time to get yourself calm if you need to, seek professional help for both yourself and the child. If it's too difficult to talk with friends and family, contact Southland Help for support.

What If a Teenager Tells You?

How you respond can make a huge difference in a teenage survivor's recovery. Learn what's helpful, and what's not.

It is common for survivors of sexual abuse to not want to talk to their parents or caregivers about it, for fear of their reaction, not wanting to upset the family, or a desire to 'forget' about it' and return to normality. And as a caregiver, it is an equally common reaction for you to want to know the details of what has happened to your daughter.

Hearing your daughter has been sexually abused can bring forward a range of responses: shock, anger, confusion, denial, fear and powerlessness. As a parent though, you have a significant influence on your daughter's journey as your reactions and management of the post-disclosure period will have a huge impact. She may watch how you respond and change the way she is coping, depending on how you react.

Part of *your role* is to navigate your family through this period and cushion the impact of the experience. However, no matter how well you take up this role, there's no guarantee of how smooth the path ahead may be. Don't be too hard on yourself. Although we suggest you process your personal responses away from your daughter, totally hiding your feelings and vulnerabilities may give the impression that what's happened is not important or even that you don't care.

Your first response (and an understandable parental reaction) is that you will want to know the whole story and all the details of what has happened, but your daughter may not be ready or able to talk with you yet. She may even want to protect you from the details, or feel she is to blame. Be careful not to pressure her, even if you feel there are information blanks, as it may cause a retreat or closing down, or even a retraction of the disclosure.

Try not to make too many changes or new rules – she probably wants life to go back to 'normal' as soon as possible. Allow her to go places she would have been allowed to go before, as long as she is safe. Sometimes the fear of doing more harm makes parents step back from their normal parenting style, but young people still need you to protect and guide them, to keep the boundaries. You can be understanding of why she is acting the way she is, but she will still need to know when her behaviour is unacceptable and incur an appropriate consequence.

If You Suspect Abuse

Always trust your instincts. Here's what to do if you suspect abuse.

Of all the indicators of abuse, a sexually transmitted infection is the only one delivering surety. In the presence of any other indicators, parents need to do what they would normally do when their child is behaving differently or is upset: talk to them, be patient, let them know that it is good to share feelings because parents can help to fix problems, and let

them know you love them and care about how they are feeling. A child may disclose with this questioning, or it could come seemingly out of the blue, as they tell you about someone touching them in a way they didn't like, or asking them to keep a secret about a new game.

If you think a child is at risk of being abused today – call 111 and speak to the Police

If you think a child has been abused, but is not at risk today – call Child, Youth and Family on 0508 326 459. If you don't know what to do, or want support or counselling for a child or family, contact Southland HELP.

How We Can HELP Your Child

Learn what help there is for children who have been abused. Child & Family Therapy

Southland HELP's Child and Family Therapy service integrates the child's healing process through psychotherapy and counselling, with caregiver support and counselling aimed at safeguarding the long term safety of the child. We can provide counselling to children who have been abused, alongside their non-offending caregivers, to help children recover from the experience of abuse and to assist families in developing an emotionally safe environment to aid your child's recovery and prevent any further abuse.

How We Can HELP Your Teenager

Find out about our Youth Therapy service. It might be exactly what your teen needs.

Some young women and men who have experienced sexual abuse feel overwhelmed at the prospect of finding and asking someone for ongoing help and support, especially when it is such a personal topic. Survivors don't have to cope with their experiences and feelings on their own – Southland HELP is here to support you through everything. Counselling offers a safe space for survivors to explore and understand their experiences, or other things they are wondering about, with a trained professional who is dedicated to working with survivors.

The therapy experience is very different for everyone and each person has their own way of being in the world and understanding things. Again, there is no "one way" or "right way". Each counsellor's style is unique and they will spend time with each survivor to figure out together how the counselling relationship might look. Southland HELP's counsellors have special training and skills to offer and what is said to them is confidential, unless someone is at risk of harm.

Sometimes people are nervous about starting counselling and worry that they will have to tell their counsellor all about the sexual assault or sexual abuse straight away. They don't. It's important that survivors feel safe and comfortable to talk about what happened in their own time and in their own way. Survivors can choose how much they say or don't say and a counsellor will support them in this – the survivor's voice is the most important!

Some clients require relatively brief interventions and may have only one or two, or up to 10, sessions with us. Others require longer term therapy. It depends on what survivors feel they need. They can always have a few sessions and then come back at a later time too.

Other websites that might be of use are:

www.sexrespect.co.nz

Prevention for All Ages

Learn more about programmes and resources available to proactively prevent sexual abuse.

Cyberspace Prevention

While the internet and mobile phones are extremely useful tools, they can be used for anti-social or even criminal behaviour and have changed the ways that offenders access the people they abuse.

It's a common fear of young people that the reporting of any inappropriate activity online will automatically lead to confiscation of phone or internet access, so they often don't tell. Helping children develop the critical thinking skills to question whoever and whatever they encounter online though, will help them to consider their actions before they share anything.

NetSafe

NetSafe actively works to keep Kiwi kids safer in Cyberspace. You can send a query to the NetSafe team if you have concerns about what your child is viewing. You can also contact your child's school to see if the Ministry of Education approved NetSafe Kit for Schools is in use.

Hector's World

Hector's World is an animated website for parents and teachers to help children learn about safe online practices. The site features seven animated episodes featuring Hector the dolphin and his friends, that are accessible to kids, as well as a range of strategies and advice for parents.