Talking with Children About Body Safety, Boundaries and Consent

About This Guide

Talking with children about body safety, boundaries, consent, and uncomfortable experiences is an important part of helping them develop healthy relationships and navigate the world with confidence. These conversations can also feel difficult for parents. You might wonder when to begin, how much information to share, or how to help your child understand safety without creating unnecessary fear.

This guide offers practical, developmentally appropriate ways to talk with children about their bodies, feelings, relationships, boundaries, and safety, while fostering a family culture that values openness, self-trust, body autonomy, and consent.

All of the conversations discussed below are meant to be ongoing and cumulative. Rather than relying on one "big talk," the goal is to have many smaller, developmentally appropriate conversations over time that empower children with knowledge, confidence, and the understanding that they can always come to you with questions or concerns.

The age-based suggestions throughout this guide are intended as general starting points rather than rigid developmental expectations. Children vary in their understanding, communication styles, and developmental needs. Adapt these conversations to your child's individual abilities and experiences, using concrete language, visual supports, play, or other approaches that help them understand and participate.

Before Talking to Your Child

Parents inevitably bring their own histories, beliefs, and emotions into conversations with their children. Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in this guide, it's important to be aware of the way your own experiences, beliefs, and anxieties may influence how you show up to conversations with your children, and to do your best to engage on difficult subjects when you are prepared and regulated. If you find yourself triggered by a topic or unable to answer a question in the moment, it is always okay to tell your child you need to think about it more and that you'll get back to them later (and important that you then actually do so).

As you navigate these discussions with your children, you can be mindful of the following ways adults' own anxieties and discomfort can sometimes show up:

- Over-talking, giving too much information, lecturing
- Interrogating, asking too many questions, asking the same questions repeatedly
- Avoiding, not talking about these subjects at all, freezing up, going blank
- Scaremongering, trying to instill fear to shape behaviour, verbalizing anxiety for your own relief

Creating a Family Culture Where Children Talk

How we respond in the little moments sets the stage for our children to feel comfortable coming to us in the big ones. When a child tells you about something that they might feel guilty, embarrassed, worried, or confused about, respond with warmth and compassion. Over time, these everyday interactions teach children that they can come to you with difficult experiences without fear of criticism, judgment, or getting into trouble.

In addition to explicitly telling your child that they can always tell you about uncomfortable experiences, including those in which they feel they've made a mistake or been "bad", we must also teach them that this is the case by ensuring they have repeated experiences of being listened to, understood, and supported when they do. Thank your child for sharing, meet their questions with curiosity (for example, "What do you think about that?", "I wonder what that was like for you."), and avoid rushing immediately to correction or problem-solving.

We also show our children which topics are available for discussion by intentionally including those topics in our repertoire. By talking openly about bodies, boundaries, consent, uncomfortable feelings, and difficult experiences, we normalize these subjects and let children know that no question or topic that is meaningful to them is silly, too embarrassing, or off-limits.

What Parents Should Know

One of the most significant changes in body safety education since today's parents were children themselves is the shift away from an emphasis on "stranger danger." It is now understood that most children who are sexually abused are harmed by someone they know in some way, and that offenders often appear trustworthy both to children and the adults around them.

Because offenders often take efforts to isolate, coerce or manipulate children into staying silent or feeling responsible for their own abuse, creating a family culture of open communication is one of the most important protective measures parents can take. Children who regularly talk with trusted adults about their relationships, experiences, bodies, boundaries, and worries may be more likely to tell someone about situations in which they feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Offenders may also be less likely to target children they believe are likely to disclose inappropriate behaviour.

While thoughtful supervision and paying attention to children's relationships and environments are important, abuse can happen in many different settings, and there is no single strategy or rule that can eliminate all risk. The strongest protection comes from multiple layers of prevention, including developmentally appropriate supervision, open communication, teaching children about body safety and healthy relationships, and creating a family culture where children know they can always come to you.

Building Self-Trust

One of the most important things we can help children internalize is that their inner experiences (their emotions and bodily sensations) are worth paying attention to. We help children build this self-trust through how we respond to them and by modelling respectful attention to our own thoughts, feelings and bodies. When we help children become curious about what their emotions

and bodies might be telling them, they learn that these internal experiences matter. Over time, children learn that they are the experts on their own internal experiences. This foundation of checking in with and trusting themselves makes it more likely that children will be able to recognize when something doesn't feel right and to place enough importance on those gut feelings to speak up about them.

Early childhood (3-6 years)

• Validate children's emotions and experiences. ("That felt really disappointing.")

• Help children notice how different emotions feel in their bodies ("When I'm nervous, it feels like there are butterflies in my stomach. When I'm angry, my face gets very hot and my muscles get tight. I wonder what happens in your body.")

• Encourage children to make age-appropriate choices and listen to their own preferences when possible (e.g. instead of "Come on, don't be scared!", you might say "You'll know when you're ready.")

Middle childhood (7-11 years)

• Encourage children to reflect on how situations and relationships make them feel before offering your own interpretation.

• Praise children for speaking up when something doesn't feel right or when they need help.

• Reinforce that their thoughts, feelings, and observations are important, even if others experienced something differently.

Older childhood and adolescence (12+ years)

• Discuss how peer pressure, power dynamics, or the desire to fit in can make it difficult to listen to our instincts.

• Reinforce that feeling consistently anxious, pressured, uncomfortable or belittled in a relationship is worth paying attention to.

• Remind adolescents that they are allowed to change their mind, leave a situation, or ask for help at any time.

Body Safety

Conversations about bodies and body safety should begin in early childhood and continue throughout adolescence. As children mature, these discussions can become more detailed and nuanced to match their age, experiences, and understanding of the world.

Correct anatomical language

Using anatomically correct terms rather than nicknames for private body parts helps convey that these body parts are normal and accepted, just like any others, rather than embarrassing, shameful, or requiring euphemisms. When children sense our comfort in speaking about private body parts in calm, everyday language, they receive the message that the lines of communication on this topic are open, and we lay the foundation for future conversations about puberty, relationships, sexual health and body safety. If a child ever does need to describe a medical concern or disclose an uncomfortable or unsafe experience, knowing the correct anatomical terms can help them communicate clearly. Families may continue using commonly understood colloquial words like “bum”, but children also benefit from knowing the correct anatomical terms.

Correct Anatomical Terms

- Vulva
- Vagina
- Breasts
- Penis
- Testicles
- Anus

Private parts

A helpful rule to teach children is that their private parts are those that are covered by a swimsuit, as well as their mouth. As a general rule, no one should ask to look at or touch your private parts except when it is necessary for health or hygiene reasons, and you should never be asked to look at or touch someone else’s. When touching is necessary for medical care or hygiene, adults should explain what they are doing and why, and respect children’s privacy, comfort, and participation as much as possible.

Safe, unsafe, and confusing touch and interactions

Parents are encouraged to speak with their children about what constitutes safe and unsafe touch and interactions. Because this distinction is not always clear cut, parents may consider explicitly naming a third category of interactions and touch that are “confusing.” Children should be encouraged to listen to what their bodies are telling them if a situation does not feel right, and to tell a safe adult right away.

Safe touch and interactions help keep us healthy or safe (as in the case of medical care or assistance with hygiene for younger children), are wanted or consented to, and do not involve secrets, threats, or pressure.

Unsafe touch and interactions break body safety rules, continue after someone says “no”, involve private parts without a health or caretaking reason, and occur under threat, coercion, or in secrecy.

Confusing touch and interactions may start out feeling okay but then become uncomfortable. They might feel fun, exciting, or ticklish but also involve an adult asking you to keep it a secret, or involve touching and showing private parts. The person may describe it as a game or may say they are helping you in some way even though something feels wrong inside. These interactions might leave you feeling unsure or confused.

Not all sexual abuse involves physical touch. Someone may expose a child to sexual images, videos, or activities, ask them to touch themselves, or request sexual photos. Children should know that they can always tell a trusted adult if any interaction leaves them feeling uncomfortable, pressured or confused.

Consent

We can explain to children that everyone is in charge of their own body and gets to decide what happens to it. Someone gives their consent when they agree to what is happening without any pressure, manipulation, or threats. People can change their minds and withdraw consent at any time.

It is also important to help children understand that the absence of a "no" does not necessarily mean someone is comfortable or giving permission. We should pay attention to others' words, facial expressions, and body language, and always ask before touching someone or if we are unsure whether touch is still welcome.

Early childhood (3-6 years)

• Model asking for consent before physical interactions like hugs, tickles, or helping with personal care when possible.

• Help children respect others' "no" and "stop" by narrating what you notice and physically intervening if necessary ("Your friend said "stop." I'm going to help you move your body away.")

• Advocate for your child when they appear uncomfortable with or express that physical contact is unwanted ("It looks like Max wants some space, maybe you can high five instead.")

Middle childhood (7-11 years)

• Expand conversations beyond physical touch to include taking and sharing photos, sharing personal information, roughhousing, and tickling.

• Reinforce that someone can change their mind at any time, even if they said "yes" at first.

• Talk about non-verbal signs that someone is not comfortable, for example becoming quiet, looking away, or moving their body away.

• Discuss how feeling pressured or worried about disappointing someone can make it difficult for people to say what they really want.

Older childhood and adolescence (12+ years)

• Talk about consent in friendships and romantic relationships, emphasizing that it should be ongoing and free from pressure.

• Talk about situations where someone cannot freely give consent, such as when they are intoxicated, asleep, unconscious, or feel pressured because of a power imbalance.

• Use movies, TV shows, and song lyrics to talk about healthy relationships. Reinforce that healthy relationships respect boundaries, accept "no" without pressure, and don't involve guilt, pressure, or manipulation to get someone to agree.

Digital Safety

Digital safety is an important part of body safety. Many of the same body safety principles that apply offline also apply online. As children gain access to phones, computers, gaming platforms, and social media, conversations should expand to include online interactions. Encourage children to come to you if anyone asks them to keep online conversations secret, requests personal information or photos, or if any online interaction leaves them feeling uncomfortable, pressured, or confused.

Early childhood (3-6 years)

• Treat and explain the internet as a public space, much like a mall or neighbourhood, where young children should not be left to explore alone without supervision.

• Closely supervise children's use of connected devices, including apps like YouTube, which contain user-generated content and ads that may not always be appropriate.

Middle childhood (7-11 years)

• Continue to be involved in your child's online activities. Consider limiting use of devices to shared spaces, and regularly talking together about what they are doing and experiencing online.

• Talk about the concept of online anonymity - people may not be who they say they are online.

• Teach children not to share personal information, send or agree to receive photos without checking with a parent or trusted adult first.

• Reinforce that they never owe anyone online a response. If someone online asks them to keep a secret, share personal information or photos, or makes them feel uncomfortable, pressured, or confused, they should stop communicating and tell a safe adult.

Older childhood and adolescence (12+ years)

• Talk about how photos, messages, and personal information that are shared online can be saved and shared with others, even if they are later deleted.

• Talk about how personal information and photos can be used by others online to manipulate, pressure, or exploit young people online.

• Have open conversations about healthy relationships, intimacy, and the messages young people receive from media around gender roles, power, consent, and respect.

Recognizing Safe and Unsafe Behaviour

It's very protective for children to be able to identify safe adults they can turn to if they have an uncomfortable experience. Because sexual abuse can be perpetrated by adults in trusted positions (family members, coaches, authority figures), it's best to identify who is safe by looking at their behaviour rather than their role. We can talk to children about how safe people act, for example, safe people respect body boundaries, they listen when we say "no", they don't ask children to keep secrets, they don't make threats, they don't show us pictures that make us feel uncomfortable, touch our private parts, or ask us to look at or touch their or someone else's private parts.

Grooming

Offenders frequently use the process of "grooming" to gain access and influence over a child, reduce the likelihood that a child will disclose, and manipulate the child's (and sometimes close adults') perceptions of the situation. Parents can also be groomed in order to gain access to their children. Grooming is often a gradual process in which an offender builds trust, tests boundaries, and increasingly introduces inappropriate or abusive behaviour. Tactics may include gift-giving, affection and kindness, ingratiating themselves with a child's family, engaging in seemingly innocent physical contact like roughhousing or back rubs, or introducing sexual topics through teasing or jokes. While some of these behaviours are not necessarily concerning in isolation, patterns of boundary-testing, secrecy, manipulation, or attempts to create special relationships that exclude other trusted adults may be warning signs.

Secrets

Parents are encouraged to think carefully about the messages they want to communicate about secret-keeping within their family. Children should be taught that safe adults do not ask children to keep secrets from their parents, and should be clearly told both that they should always share right away if someone has asked them to keep a secret, and that they will never be in trouble for doing so. Some families also choose to adjust their language about withholding information. For example, you might consider differentiating between "secrets" and "surprises", or "speak secrets" (unsafe secrets you should tell an adult about right away, for example about uncomfortable experiences or unsafe/confusing touch) versus "keep secrets" (safe and harmless secrets, for example about a surprise party).

Early childhood (3-6 years)	**Middle childhood (7-11 years)**	**Older childhood and adolescence (12+ years)**
• Teach children that safe adults respect body boundaries, listen when someone says "no," and do not ask children to show or touch private body parts or keep	• Talk about behaviours that can be warning signs, such as asking children to keep secrets, saying something bad will happen if they don't go along, ignoring	• Discuss how manipulation, grooming, and abuse often develop gradually rather than all at once. Talk about warning signs such as pressure,

secrets about touching.

boundaries, or making jokes or comments that feel uncomfortable.

• Help children recognize that unsafe behaviour can come from someone they know and like, including another child or young person.

• Discuss that people can have many positive qualities while still making unsafe or harmful choices.

secrecy, guilt, attempts to isolate them from others, or repeated boundary crossing.

• Discuss common manipulation tactics such as guilt, flattery, creating a sense of obligation, or making someone feel responsible for another person's emotions.

Safety Planning

Assist your child in identifying several safe adults they can tell in the event of an unsafe or confusing interaction. Because sexual abuse is so often perpetrated by a known adult, it is important to reinforce for children that the safety of an adult is determined by that person's behaviour rather than by their role. A person should not be considered safe simply because they are a family member, authority figure, or otherwise closely involved in a child's life, but rather because they have demonstrated a pattern of respecting body boundaries, avoiding secrecy, and interacting in ways that feel safe.

Ensure that your child is familiar with a concrete set of steps they can take if they experience an unsafe or confusing interaction. In general, children should be taught to say "no" if they can, leave the situation when possible, and tell a safe adult right away. Remind your child that if the first adult they approach does not listen or help, they can keep telling other trusted adults until someone does. Children should also understand that if they are unable to say no or leave an unsafe situation, they have done nothing wrong and are never responsible for another person's abusive behaviour.

Early childhood (3-6 years)

• Talk about what to do if something doesn't feel right such as walking away or finding a safe adult.

Middle childhood (7-11 years)

• Talk about hypothetical "what if" scenarios. For example: "What would you do if someone wanted to play a game that made you uncomfortable when

Older childhood and adolescence (12+ years)

• Talk about strategies for leaving uncomfortable situations safely. For example, they might tell someone "I'm not feeling well", "my mom's on her way to pick

• Young children especially benefit from the opportunity to rehearse new skills. You might have them practice physically walking away from uncomfortable interactions as well as begin to practice assertive statements like “Stop that.” and “I don’t like that.”, “I need to go find my mom/dad.” in pretend scenarios or using dolls or stuffies.

you’re at a sleepover?”, “What would you do if someone started showing you a video that made you uncomfortable?”, “What would you do if an adult asked you to keep something a secret from your parents?”

• Talk about the importance of getting to safety, even if it means not being completely honest in the moment. For example, if a peer or adult asked them not to tell anyone about something, it is okay to say “okay” in the moment if it helps them leave safely. They can then get away from the situation and tell a trusted adult as soon as possible.

me up”, “my friend is waiting for me”, or join a larger group of people nearby.

• Consider establishing a code word your child can text or say at any time to signal they want to leave a situation. Agree in advance that, if they use the code word, you will come and get them without asking questions in the moment.

• Reinforce that they can always come to you if they need help, regardless of whether they’ve done something they know you wouldn’t want them to.

If You Are Concerned About Your Child or They Disclose Abuse

If you have reason to believe your child may have experienced abuse, it is natural to want to ask questions and find out exactly what happened. However, repeated or leading questions (such as “Did someone touch your private parts?”) can influence children's responses and make it more difficult for them to share their experiences in their own words. Instead, use open-ended invitations such as “Can you tell me more about that?” and avoid pressuring your child to provide details.

If your child tells you about an experience of sexual abuse, do your best to remain calm. Allow them to tell you what happened at their own pace and in their own words, without interrupting or asking repeated questions. Reassure them that they have done nothing wrong, thank them for telling you, and let them know that your job is to help keep them safe.

If your child discloses sexual abuse, or if you have reason to suspect they have been abused, promptly report your concerns to your local child protection agency. You do not need to establish exactly what happened before seeking guidance or making a report.

Final Thoughts

While no parent can eliminate every risk their child may encounter, there is much we can do to build protective relationships and environments. Through ongoing conversations about bodies, feelings, relationships, boundaries, consent, and safety, we help children develop the knowledge, self-trust, and confidence to recognize when something doesn't feel right and to seek support from trusted adults.

These conversations do not need to happen perfectly or follow a specific script. Instead, focus on building a family culture in which these topics can be discussed openly and repeatedly over time. Children benefit far more from many calm, imperfect conversations over the years than from one textbook response to a difficult question.



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Learning More

Canadian Centre for Child Protection - ProtectChildren.ca - Information for parents about child sexual abuse prevention, body safety, online safety, and talking with children.

ProtectKidsOnline.ca - Guidance for parents on children's online safety, gaming, and social media.

TeachingSexualHealth.ca - Age-specific information and guides around talking about bodies, consent, puberty, relationships, and sexual health.

Cybertip.ca - Information about online child sexual exploitation, online safety, and reporting.

If You Are Concerned About a Child

Children's Aid Society of Toronto - TorontoCAS.ca - Information about reporting concerns that a child may have experienced abuse or neglect.

Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies - https://www.oacas.org/