

# Protecting Our Children



Magenu Child Safety Institute was founded in 2012 to protect our children by promoting personal safety education that builds children's self-esteem and self-confidence while helping to keep them safe. Magenu's goal is to empower children to know how to respond to potentially dangerous situations as well as to educate parents, teachers, school administration, and community groups about implementing community-wide safety standards.

Magenu Child Safety Institute

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## An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Child sexual abuse is a difficult and complex problem.  
This booklet is designed to answer some of your basic questions.

It is not a substitute for more intricate training  
or for advice from professionals.

Taking small steps can help protect our children  
and create safer communities for all of us.

## What is child sexual abuse?

**Any sexual touching between an adult and a child is sexual abuse.** Sexual touching between children can also be sexual abuse when one exerts power over another. This can include when there is a significant age difference between the children (often defined as 3 or more years) or if the children are very different developmentally or size-wise. Forcing, coercing or persuading a child to engage in any type of sexual act is sexual abuse.

Non-contact acts can also be sexual abuse, such as exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, voyeurism and communicating in a sexual manner by phone or Internet.

## Is my child at risk of being a victim?

Sadly, research tells us that 1 in 10 children are victims of sexual abuse before their 18th birthday. Professionals that work within our Jewish communities confirm that these numbers are consistent with our children as well.

**The greatest risk to children doesn't come from strangers, but from people we know and trust.**

**90%** of children who are sexually abused know their abuser.

**60%** are abused by people the family trusts.

**40%** of children are abused by an older or larger youth, like a babysitter or cousin.

Only about 10% of children are abused by strangers.

This means that we need to face reality in order to implement safety rules for our children. It does not mean to suspect everyone of abuse; rather, we must trust but verify.

## How does this happen?

### **People who sexually abuse children often go out of their**

**way to appear trustworthy.** A predator will gain access to the child in a school, shul, sports team, chavrusa, family get-togethers, dance lessons, etc. and oftentimes they will move into a position of trust within the family. The predator zeroes in on a victim in a process that is often known as grooming. The predator will engage or "recruit" their victims in different ways. Many are charismatic and charming. They offer to play games, tutor, give rides, buy treats and gifts as a token of friendship. For older children they may offer alcohol or drugs, and they almost always offer undivided attention and an understanding ear for the child:

*"Your parents don't understand you, I do."*

*"Other kids make fun of you; I know what that's like."*

*"Your parents don't trust you; they don't want you to grow up."*

*"I trust you and respect you. I care about you more than anyone else does."*

*"I'm here for you."*

*"I love you."*

At some point the predator will introduce secrecy in the process. It may be something small, but it binds the victim to the predator:

*"Here's some candy. But don't tell your friends because they'll be jealous, and don't tell your mother because she won't like you eating so much candy."*

Later on the secrecy is joined with threats:

*"If you tell your mother what happened, she'll be really angry at you."*

*"I'll go to jail and my family will starve."*

*"I'll hurt you or your loved ones."*

Grooming forges an emotional bond that leads to physical contact. The predator breaks down a child's defenses. The first touches can be non-sexual, designed to identify limits: an "accidental" touch around the shoulder, or brushing the hair. These touches desensitize the child and break down their inhibitions that lead to the predator's ultimate goal.

## What can I do to protect my child?

More than 80% of sexual abuse incidents happen in isolated, one-on-one situations with a child. **Eliminate or reduce isolated one-on-one situations with your child.**

If a mentor, rebbe, morah, cousin, or uncle wants to spend one-on-one time with your child, choose a group activity instead. Ask the offering adult to take another kid as well. If it is a learning program or one-on-one type activity, make sure it is in an area that can be observed and interrupted. Remember, older youth should also not be in isolated one-on-one situations with younger children.

Ask your schools, camps, or any youth-serving organization these important questions:

- Did you conduct background checks?
- Did you conduct personal and professional reference checks?
- Do you have a code of conduct for staff and volunteers?
- Is there a policy for responding to disclosures and discoveries of abuse?
- Is there a policy for a breach in the code of conduct for inappropriate behavior?
- Does your staff have training for employees?

Remember, it is your child, you most precious neshama. The least we can do is ask questions and request answers to those who are in charge of their safety when they are not with us.

**Have open conversations with children about their bodies and boundaries.**

**Teach your child the proper names of their body parts.** If you are not comfortable with the actual biological terms, choose a name that means the private parts of the body in Hebrew or Yiddish. Using terms that are made-up words or “cutesy” terms puts a child in a more vulnerable position for a predator.

**Start talking about boundaries when children are young.** If you haven’t done that, take a deep breath. This is a conversation you will and should have more than once with different information as the child gets older.

**Tell a child that their body belongs to them. Be very clear that no one should be touching, looking at or speaking to them about the parts of their body covered by underwear or a bathing suit.**

**Teach children that they have the right to tell any person**

**“NO!” to a touch that is unwanted or makes them**

**uncomfortable.** Use different people in the child’s life when explaining this, such as, “Even if it’s your uncle, brother, aunt, counselor, babysitter, another child...” and “Sometimes a touch might feel uncomfortable, even if you like the person, it’s ok to say no.”

Explain that secrets can be dangerous and if someone asks them to keep a secret from you, they should tell you right away, because your job is to keep them safe.

Discuss specific situations your child will be in and who their trusted adults are in those situations. In school it may be the morah, rebbe, principal, social worker, or school nurse--as long as the child and you feel comfortable with that person.

Try to remain calm. Children may ask many questions that are difficult to answer or may stay silent, which can cause you, as the parent, to start panicking. Remember, speak in a calm voice and listen quietly. **It is very important that a child feel safe during these discussions.** You can always come back and fill something in that you forgot or did not answer the correct way.

**Explain to your child that private parts are never a game.**

Many predators convince children that they are just playing and therefore, it’s ok. Tell your child if it involves the private parts of the body it is never a game and they should tell you.

Most importantly tell your child, “Sometimes this type of touch happens to some children and they never tell because they are scared they will get into trouble or something bad will happen. I want you to know that even if you didn’t say ‘no’, even if you didn’t say ‘stop’, the most important thing you can do is to tell and I will not be mad at you. I will believe you and keep you safe.”

# What are the signs that a child may have been abused?

There can be different signs of sexual abuse and knowing them all can be overwhelming. One of the main things is to **know your child**. If there is a change in your child's behavior, a new fear of a specific person or place, a change in their dressing habits, pay attention. It may not be sexual abuse, but it is a sign that your child needs you to reach out and provide them help.

## Physical signs

- Bruising, redness, or bleeding, especially around the genitals
- Frequent urinary tract infections
- Discharge that is abnormal
- Wetting or soiling the bed
- Chronic stomach pain, headaches or other ailments that cannot be explained by a medical reason

## Emotional/behavioral signs

### (more common)

- Depression or withdrawal
- Anger or defiance
- Inability to concentrate
- Fear of situations or people
- Sexual behavior and language that are not age-appropriate
- Use of alcohol or drugs, especially at a young age
- Dressing all covered up even if not weather appropriate
- Dressing in revealing clothes
- A change in behavior



## Do children disclose when abuse happens?

**Unfortunately, most children do not disclose when abuse has occurred.** The reason for this can be a number of things.

- The abuser threatens the child or a family member of the child.
- The abuser convinces the child he or she is at fault and will get into trouble.
- The abuser tells the child it is a game and therefore it's okay.
- The abuser is someone the child loves and the child does not want to hurt that person.
- Some children who did not tell the first time it happens feel that they lost their chance when it happens again.

## What do I do if I suspect my child was abused or if my child discloses?

Many children will not disclose an abuse directly, but may be testing to see how you would react. Children may ask questions about bodies or boundary issues instead of talking directly about an experience they may have had. Children may tell parts of the story or pretend it happened to someone else.

If you respond emotionally or negatively ("It can't be." "Why would you go along with that?" "Is this another story of yours?") a child will shut down and not tell you anymore. In addition, the research shows that your initial reaction to a child's disclosure has the power to help heal the child or can increase the child's trauma in addition to the abuse.

**One of the best protections is open and honest communication and a good relationship with our children.**

If your child, chas v'shalom, discloses abuse, remember the child has already overcome so much: secrecy, fear, shame. They trust you and he or she deserves your empathy and belief.

*Handling a Disclosure*



**get support and guidance**

**stay calm**

control your emotions

**believe your child**

provide a safe and quiet place to talk

use child's language

**do not blame your child**

do not make promises you can't keep

reassure the child: "I am sorry this happened. I am glad you told me."

explain the process of keeping the child safe

be honest about what will happen

# So how do I handle the disclosure properly?

## **Believe the child.**

Take all reports of child abuse/neglect seriously. Immediately thank the child for trusting you and reassure him/her that steps will be taken to help him or her.

## **Provide a safe and quiet place to talk.**

Don't fill in the gaps, or rush to get to the bottom of it. Don't ask leading questions about details. Ask only open-ended questions like "What happened next?" or say, "It's okay to tell me more."

## **Tell the child he's done nothing wrong.**

"I am so proud of you."

"You are really brave."

"You did the right thing by telling me."

## **Don't make promises you can't keep.**

If a child says, "I have to tell you something but you have to promise not to tell anyone," don't make that promise. Chances are you may need to tell, and then you are betraying the child's trust. Instead you can say, "I can't make that promise, but I can promise you that I will tell you what I will do or who I will talk to prior to taking action. I will keep you in the loop the entire time."

## **Get support and guidance.**

It can be very difficult to deal with this topic. Contact the mental health professionals in your area, whether it is a community agency or private licensed therapist. Get your child the help he/she may need and get support for yourself and your family.

Remember, you are not alone.



For more helpful tips and tools on how to teach your children to be safe, check out our other products including a children's book, comic series and other educational materials.

 **Magenu.org**