CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Talking to Your Elementary School Child about child abuse.

Start the Conversation Early

It can be stressful to plan a big safety talk about abuse with your kid. The good news is you don't have to. Conversations about abuse can be a part of the safety conversations you're already having, like knowing when to speak up, how to take care of friends, and listening to your gut. The key is to start these conversations when your kids are young and to have them often.

Teach young children the language they need to talk about their bodies and information about boundaries to help them understand what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. These lessons help them know when something isn't right and give them the power to speak up.

Teach children the names of their body parts.

When children have the words to describe their body parts, they may find it easier to ask questions and express concerns about them. Additionally, if they disclose inappropriate touching, it will be clear what they are talking about.

Some parts of the body are private.

As a general rule, areas covered by a bathing suit are private. Let children know that other people shouldn't touch or look at private parts, and they shouldn't see pictures or movies that show those areas. If a healthcare professional must examine these parts of the body, it's okay, but a caregiver should be present.

It's OK to say "no."

It's important to let children know they are allowed to say "no" to touches that make them uncomfortable. This message isn't obvious to children, who are often taught to be obedient and follow the rules. Support your child if they say no, even if it puts you in an uncomfortable position. For example, if your child doesn't want to hug someone at a family gathering, respect their decision to say "no" to this contact. This is the beginning of a conversation about consent and bodily autonomy.

Talk about the difference between secrets and surprises.

Secrets shouldn't be kept from safe adults, although there are times when we keep surprises. A surprise is something someone will find out later. For example, "We bought Dad a new grill for Father's Day. Don't tell him because it's a surprise." Secrets are things that someone never finds out. Perpetrators will often use secret-keeping to manipulate children. Let children know they can always talk to you, especially if they've been told to keep a secret. If they see someone touching another child, they shouldn't keep this secret, either.

Reassure them that they won't get in trouble.

Young children often fear getting in trouble or upsetting their parents by asking questions or talking about their experiences. Be a safe place for your child to share information about things that they have questions about or that make them uncomfortable. Remind them they won't be punished for sharing this information with you.

When they come to you, make time for them.

If your kid comes to you with something they feel is important, take the time to listen. Give them your undivided attention and let them know you take their concerns seriously. They will be more likely to come to you in the future if they know their voice will be heard.

Additional Subjects to Discuss

- Talk about "safe" and "unsafe" touching rather than "good" or "bad" touching. This removes guilt from the child and keeps them from having to make a moral distinction about what is and is not appropriate.
- Have your child name 5 people that they could talk to if someone were touching them in an unsafe way. Children are often afraid to tell their parents out of fear of punishment (or threats made by a perpetrator), so it's important for your child to know they can seek out other trusted adults to confide in. Instruct your child that they should keep telling until someone helps them.
- Revisit this safety talk often. Children learn through repetition. How many times do you remind children to look both ways before crossing the street?