CRITICAL

CONVERSATIONS

Talking to Your Middle School Child about child abuse.

Conversation Starters

It's important to create a dialogue about topics like safety and abuse with your middle-schooler. Consider these prompts to engage them in conversation.

Use the media to make it relevant.

Ask your middle-schooler's opinion on something happening on social media, in the news, in a new movie, or on a popular TV show. You could even watch an episode with them and ask follow-up questions. Asking their opinion shows that you value their point of view and opens the door for more conversation.

Use your own experience to tell a safety story.

Sharing your own experiences can make these conversations relevant and feel more real to kids. If you don't have an experience you feel comfortable sharing, you can tell a story about someone you know.

Talk about caring for their friends — not just about their own behavior.

Talking about how to be a good friend can be a powerful way of expressing to a child that you trust them to do the right thing without sounding like you're targeting their personal behavior. It also gives you the chance to communicate safety practices that they may not otherwise be receptive to.

Talk about sexual abuse directly.

Most middle schoolers have some knowledge of terms associated with sexual abuse, but may also have misconceptions about what the terms actually mean. Often, the definitions of these concepts come from their peers or social media, which may not be accurate. Take time to teach your child about sexual abuse, and make sure to use real terms and definitions.

Have ongoing conversations about what healthy relationships look like.
Talk about mutual respect, boundaries, jealousy, control, and communication skills. Encourage your child(ren) to have happy, healthy, and safe relationships (including friendships).

Keep talking about online safety.
Online conversations, whether in messages, games or other apps, can pose a difficult decision point for your kids when it comes to information, images, and videos that might be shared. Consequences range from emotional to legal. Encourage your kids to think before creating or forwarding anything sexual through electronic means and to let a trusted adult know if they receive sexual content electronically.

Discuss grooming and how an abuser may exert power and control to abuse a minor.
Grooming is when someone builds a relationship, trust, and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit, and abuse them. Grooming by an abuser prepares kids and often families and the community to trust them. This trust creates opportunities for the abuser to lure a child into risky behavior. The child might struggle with conflicting feelings about the abuser, experiencing changes in their own behavior, and exhibiting self-blaming behavior.

Recognize the courage.
Recognize the courage it takes for a child to tell you about abuse.

Emphasize your unwavering support.
Emphasize your unwavering support, as it is the best indicator of the healing outcome for your child.