

Ask the Pediatrician: How should parents talk to their kids about abuse in sports?

November 28 2022, by Dr. Stacy W. Thomas and Dr. Michele LaBotz



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Q: My daughter is on a gymnastics team. How do I talk to her about the risks of sexual abuse in sports?

A: Getting involved in sports, clubs and other organized activities is good for kids. Children in activities get more exercise and have more [self-esteem](#), research shows, and are better able to manage their time and build relationships.

But with [news stories](#) about children, teens, and [young people](#) being sexually abused by [adults](#) involved in youth organizations, parents can naturally be frightened. Parents may wonder how to balance the risk and benefit.

Child [sexual abuse](#) can happen in any youth organization: sports, music, church, scouting, the list goes on. Unfortunately, people who mean harm to children may target settings with lots of children around.

Sexual offenders will often work to gain the trust and respect of parents and other adults in the organization before beginning the abuse. This process, known as "grooming," makes it harder for children to tell anyone about the abuse. They might think that other adults around them who have a good relationship with the abuser wouldn't believe that person would ever do something terrible.

Here are ways to talk to children and to help prevent abuse:

1. Speak with your children. Speak openly, in ways your child can understand, about private body parts, inappropriate touching, and respectful relationships. By starting this conversation, you create an environment in which children are comfortable talking about their bodies and sexuality. After all, how can a child who doesn't have appropriate language for sexual body parts possibly tell anybody that someone touched those body parts in a way that was uncomfortable?

If children understand the importance of personal boundaries and respect, they will be better prepared to recognize actions that are disrespectful, inappropriate, or criminal. With a basic understand of [sexual relationships](#), children are able to see how these relationships should not happen between adults and children. By encouraging conversation with your children about these subjects, you help them to know they can come to you with problems, and that they will have the language and knowledge needed to express themselves and get help.

2. Keep no secrets. Make sure your child knows that it is never OK for an adult or older child to tell them to keep a secret from you. Sexual abuse thrives in an environment of secrecy. Sexual offenders use secrecy as a way to groom a child and to make the child feel somehow responsible for their own abuse: "This is just our little secret, right?" This simple rule—no secrets—is one of the best ways to guard against abuse.

3. Explain that adults can help. Let your children know that you can handle anything they ever need to tell you. Many victims of child sexual abuse report that they did not tell about the abuse because they were afraid of how the information would make their mom or dad feel. Children must know that their caregivers are prepared, or know how to get help, for any problem they may face.

4. Know the risk. Yes, it's a tough topic. Yes, it's tempting to pretend it doesn't exist. But deciding not to think about the risk takes away your power to recognize and prevent it. Make sure you have that power, and that you equip your children with that same power.

5. Talk to your child's coaches, teachers and other mentors. Any youth-serving organization should have written policies and procedures for child safety. These policies must provide clear physical and behavior boundaries about how adults interact with children. Policies should

encourage staff to recognize and report suspicious behaviors.

6. Avoid one-on-one situations between children and unrelated adults. Any interaction that a child has with an adult who is not a parent should be visible to others. This one simple rule greatly reduces a child's risk for sexual abuse. Without privacy, an offender has fewer chances to abuse a [child](#). This rule also applies to physical examinations by medical care providers. Whenever possible, parents and other staff members, such as a nurse, should be in the room and able to observe what is taking place.

Children deserve nothing less than safe environments in which to learn, grow, play, compete, and worship. As adults, we all share a responsibility to protect [children](#) from [abuse](#).

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