

BREAKING THE SILENCE

...to stop the Cycle of pain

Child Abuse in America Lecture Supplement: Parenting for Prevention of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Step #1 Realizing who Abuses Children

=> It is not the slimy stranger with candy, nor is it the Internet predator, who poses the greatest threat to our children. Although both exist, they are truly rare. Yet, such cases are by and large the only cases that the media covers due to their highly sensational nature. The reality is, in more than 9 out of 10 cases of child abuse, the perpetrator is somebody in the child's circle of trust. The people who are charged with loving, nurturing, and protecting the children are the very people who are hurting them. Child molesters are all around us and, until we recognize this reality, we cannot effectively equip our children to be safe from them. All child molesters are predators who rely on the ignorance of their prey.

=> Most abusers were, themselves, abused. 100% of all adult child molesters were molested when they were children. This does not mean that all abused children grow up to become perpetrators. It does mean that a history of abuse in childhood drastically increases the likelihood that an adult will be abusive. In fact, statistics show that 1 out of every 4 children who are sexually abused will be child molesters when they are adults. However, of the other 3 out of 4, the vast majority grow up to be the silent partners of abusers. This is how the cycle of abuse continues.

Step #2 Improving Ourselves

=> It is extremely important that adult survivors of child abuse heal their own wounds from childhood. Across the board the statistics show time and time again that when we do not do the work to heal from our own abuse we are far more likely to continue the cycle of abuse into the next generation, whether directly or indirectly, and often with increasing severity. While healing is not a guarantee that we will not continue the cycle, it drastically improves the possibility we will be able to stop it.

=> Parenting education is another important component to parenting for prevention of child abuse. Many of us, whether we grew up in an abusive environment or not, did not have healthy and effective parenting skills modeled for us. Therefore, if we do not seek to learn parenting skills as adults, we will not necessarily be adequately equipped to raise healthy and empowered children. There are many valid forms of parenting education

available, just as children have many different kinds of personalities. All forms of parenting education have the potential to provide us with crucial tools for our parenting toolbox.

Step #3 Empowering Children with Information

FACT #1: Child molesters do not look like child molesters. They look like parents and family members, they look like neighbors, they look like teachers and bus drivers, and they look like police officers. Most people have a stereotype in their mind of what a child molester looks like, often placed there by the media. However, since we cannot accurately assume that we will spot child molesters and be able to protect our children from them, because they look like normal people, we must empower our children with the information they may need to protect themselves.

FACT #2: There is no such thing as a one time child molester... all child molesters are serial child molesters. Most experts say that most child molesters, by the time they die, will have molested in excess of 400 different children in their lifetime. There is also no such thing as a reformed child molester. Once a child molester, always a child molester. Rehabilitation, at its best, means teaching the child molester that they must stay away from children to keep from offending again.

FACT #3: Child molesters groom their victims, and most are quite skilled at it due to their years of experience and practice. They usually begin, if they are not already known and trusted, by gaining the trust of the parent. This is often a crucial first step, because our children look to us for assessments of others' trustworthiness. Once the child molester has gained the trust of the parent, they begin the process of grooming their victims. The grooming process can appear very innocent to start, and actually assists the child molester in gaining more and more trust.

FACT #4: Uninformed children make the perfect victims because they lack the very information that could protect them from being the predator's prey. If we have not empowered our children with information, the child molester will gladly educate them for us with a warped curriculum.

=> NAMING ALL OF THE PARTS <=

We teach children many things about their bodies from birth, by the games that we play with them as well as the ways that we speak to them. When we do this, we give them the vocabulary for their anatomy that they will carry into adulthood. Sadly, although we usually do an excellent job of giving them the proper names for "neutral" body parts (such as nose, belly button, and toes), we often fail miserably at giving them an accurate vocabulary for their "private" body parts (such as penis, testicles, and scrotum or vulva, vagina, and nipples). Instead, we assign private body parts with names that feel more comfortable to us.

Unfortunately, whether we do this because we are uncomfortable with the proper anatomical terms, or simply because it is the way that we were taught, this practice does our children an enormous disservice. For one thing, by giving them nicknames for private body parts, we are teaching them to be ashamed of those parts of their bodies. It may not be our intention, but it is how children's minds will usually translate our behavior.

Even more importantly, if a child is molested, this practice can inadvertently set them up to be re-victimized by the justice system. The reality in our system is, if a molested child cannot give proper anatomical terms when describing what happened to them, it is highly probable that they will not be able to get justice and their abuser will not have consequences. The reason for this is simply because district attorneys usually will not prosecute cases of child molestation in which the child cannot provide their own anatomically accurate description of the abuse. Our system errs on the side of perpetrators, but we can often avoid this practice simply by giving our children accurate vocabulary for all of their parts.

=> DIFFERENT TYPES OF TOUCH <=

As I already pointed out, child molesters groom their victims. Children are literally a blank slate waiting to be filled with information about life. Therefore, if we do not educate our children about types of touch, the child molester may very well do it for us... because that is a significant part of the process by which they groom their victims.

SAFE TOUCH: Safe touch makes a person feel good, as long as it is wanted. This type of touch includes hugging, hand-holding, pats on the back, and high fives.

UNSAFE TOUCH: Unsafe touch makes a person feel discomfort or even pain. This type of touch includes slapping, hitting, kicking, pinching, biting, and tripping.

SECRET TOUCH: Secret touch is when an adult or older person touches a child's private parts and/or somehow makes the child touch their private parts.

=> FREEDOM TO CHOOSE TOUCH <=

In one version or another, many of us have seen the following scenario time and time again...

The family has gathered for a holiday, birthday, anniversary, or reunion, and the event is coming to an end. A child (let's call him Johnny) is being told to give a close friend or family member (let's call her Aunt Susie) a hug or a kiss. Johnny protests, and his protests are being met with more insistence that he comply. Johnny is ultimately forced to give Aunt Susie a hug or a kiss in spite of the fact that he doesn't want to.

It seems innocent enough. Hugs and kisses are, after all, usually in the category of safe touch. However, they are only safe touch when they are wanted - and that is the key here.

The first question in this situation should be: "Why doesn't Johnny want to hug or kiss Aunt Susie?" It could be that Johnny is trying to tell us that Aunt Susie is a child molester, and we are missing an important chance to hear and help him by failing to ask a simple "Why?" However, it could just be that Aunt Susie smells funny, or she does the annoying cheek pinching thing, or Johnny does not want to be touched at that moment.

Regardless of the reason Johnny does not want that hug or kiss, if we force him to do it anyway we are giving him a very powerful message. That message is that he does not own his own body and does not have the freedom to choose touch.

Many adults have a serious lack of good and healthy boundaries about touch, because they were given these kinds of messages when they were children. Some of them become victims as adults because of their lack of healthy boundaries. Some of them have difficulties understanding healthy boundaries when they run across someone who has them and suffer relationship difficulties as a result. Some of them were victims of child sexual abuse who have now become child molesters... who will use these messages against our children.

=> SAYING NO TO AUTHORITY <=

Although the details probably vary situation to situation, the following scenario is also likely to be familiar...

The parent is dropping the child off at a neighbor's house, the daycare, or even a family member's house. The parent's last words before leaving are "Be good honey!"

Of course we want our children to be good. We are their parents, and their behavior is a reflection on our parenting skills. We want people to see that we are good parents. But beyond that, we also want our children to be able to function as upstanding members of society. It just makes sense that we would tell them to be good.

The problem is, it is another setup. If that neighbor, daycare worker, or family member is a child molester they will use our very words against our child. Maybe not verbatim, but they will tell our children something along the lines of: "I am an adult, you are a child, and your parent told you to be good... so you have to do what I say." There are many other ways to remind our children to "mind their manners" in our absence, ways which do not set them up for child molesters.

Furthermore, we need to teach our children that they have the right and the responsibility to say "NO" to people in authority over them, when those people are telling them to do something that they know to be wrong. If we don't tell them, they don't know... because we do teach them to respect and obey people in authority in general. We get this concept very well when it comes to teaching them to say no to drugs, yet we tend to leave it out of the conversation when we talk to them about sexual abuse... if we talk to them about sexual abuse at all.

=> GOOD SECRETS VS BAD SECRETS <=

The concept of secrets catches on very fast with children, although some of them have a harder time “keeping” secrets than others. It is important, from an empowerment standpoint, to make a distinction for them between good and bad secrets.

GOOD SECRETS: While they may be difficult to hold, good secrets are distinct because they feel good. Also, they have a time limit... they are never permanent or forever. Good secrets include plans for a surprise party for grandma, what a sibling is getting for Christmas, or a trip to surprise someone special.

BAD SECRETS: In contrast to good secrets, bad secrets often feel bad to hold and they have no time limit. They come with words or phrases like “never” and “don’t ever.” Furthermore, they often will come with threats meant to maintain the secrecy. The threats can be extreme, and are usually very effective at buying the silence of an uninformed child. Secret touch is always in the category of bad secrets. Children need to be taught that they should never hold bad secrets.

=> TELLING UNTIL HEARD <=

No amount of empowerment education is going to absolutely guarantee our children’s safety. That is why it is equally important to tell them that if something happens they should tell somebody safe. It is not enough to tell them to tell us. It is very hard for a parent to hear that someone has hurt their child. Although we probably think we could hear and help them, we might not be able to if the time came... because denial is a powerful coping mechanism. Therefore, it is extremely important to teach them to tell, and keep telling, until somebody hears and helps them.