



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe series was created to help parents and primary caregivers learn concrete ways to keep children and teens safe from sexual abuse. The series introduces key concepts and age-appropriate ideas and activities for protecting the children you love and helping them learn and build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized

WHAT IS GROOMING?

Grooming is what experts call the intentional actions and behaviors sexual predators use to try to gain access to children they want to molest or sexually abuse. People often think predators pick their child victims at random, or that we only need to focus on "stranger danger." But most child sexual abusers know and have some sort of relationship with their victims. Predators often try to groom children, adults, and even whole communities so they can:

- Gain access to children they can abuse.
- Hide their actions.
- Decrease the risk they will be found out and stopped.
- This fact sheet is designed to help you learn to recognize and prevent some common tactics that child sexual predators use to groom and manipulate children, adults, and communities.
- Most people understand that predators groom children for abuse, manipulating them into situations where they can be abused or otherwise harmed. Fewer people understand that predators also groom adults, families, and communities as a way to help hide their abuse and decrease the risk of being found out and stopped.

HOW CAN YOU PREVENT GROOMING?

Knowing how to recognize the grooming methods a child sexual predator is using to manipulate your child, family, and community is vital to keeping your child safe and is discussed more in the other fact sheets in this series. This section discusses several steps you can take to help prevent grooming from happening at all.

Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets we have chosen to use the inclusive words *they*, *their*, and *them* as singular, nongendered pronouns.

We know that families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A family may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. Parents may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else. When we use the words *family* and *parent* in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.





Talk About Secrets

Talk to your child about how keeping some secrets can be fun and keeping others can be harmful. Explain that responsible adults won't ask children to keep secrets from their parents and that your child should tell you if someone asks them to keep a secret from you.

Help your child understand that a *surprise* isn't the same as a *secret*. For example, you could explain that a *surprise* is something you're waiting to share with another person, like planning a birthday event for a friend. Telling the friend about the party before it starts wouldn't make them as happy and excited as waiting to surprise them at the party. Then explain that a *secret* is something that you're not allowed to share with other people, ever.

Make sure your child knows that they won't get in trouble if they tell you something another adult told them to keep a secret from you, and that you'll support them no matter what. Then, if the occasion arises, be sure to follow through on that promise.

Listen, Listen & Listen Some More

It's easy for adults to **listen at** children instead of **listening to** them. That means really hearing them, not just listening on a surface level. Listening carefully to your child shows that you love, value, and respect them and their perspective, thoughts, opinions, and ideas. Communicate that respect by sitting down with them, making eye contact, and giving them your full attention when they want or need to talk with you.

Reflect back what you hear your child say; for example, "You sound pretty disappointed that Kiara took a book out of your locker again even after you asked her not to." Ask for clarification when you need it. This helps your child process what they are thinking and feeling and clarify what happened. If your child shares something that is particularly important to them, be sure to follow up with them later to see how they're feeling about the issue and whether they need your help with it.

Create spaces for open communication. When you listen and hear out your child without judgment—even if you don't like or you disagree with what they have to say—they learn that they can trust you with tough issues. Establishing that kind of trust with your child makes them more likely to come to you with problems both big and small. Be attentive and responsive. Depending on the situation, they may want or need help, advice, or just a listening ear.

Listen without judgement. When your child knows that you aren't going to judge, disrespect, or punish them, they're more likely to share personal information such as their struggles and concerns with you. Don't punish your child for openly sharing something just because it frightens or shocks you. If you need some time to compose yourself, tell your child that. You can say, "I appreciate that you came to me with this and I'm glad that you trust me enough to share this with me. I need some time to think about what you've told me. Can we talk about it some more tonight after dinner?"





Teach Your Child to Be Assertive

Encourage your child to use their voice to respectfully and clearly express their likes and dislikes and to say yes and no. As they are learning to express themselves, showing that you respect their opinions, likes, and dislikes will help them feel capable of standing up for themselves and empowered. Your child needs to know that sometimes it is okay to say no to adults. We all want children to respect and listen to adults, but when children are taught to blindly follow adults without being able to question them or say no, children may not feel empowered to protect themselves when adults put them in unsafe situations.

In teaching your child to be appropriately assertive, help them learn to say no or disagree respectfully. Tell your child that “No” is a complete sentence—they don’t have to justify or explain it. If they feel uncomfortable, if they feel unsafe or if they are unsure they can always say no, walk away, and come to you for help. Talk to your child about how to keep themselves safe in those situations. Review who they can call if they need a ride, need an excuse to get out of a situation, or need backup.



Let your child know that you will have their back if they say no to another adult. They need to know that you will support them and not punish or blame them if they set a boundary. It is necessary for you to approach these situations calmly, really listen to your child and understand the situation from their perspective. Finally, support them however they need to be supported.

Be Wary of Charmers

- Look out for people who are charming. Remember to think of the word *charming* as an action verb. Someone who seems charming could be putting on an act to try to charm you instead of their charm being a personality trait. When you find yourself thinking that someone is charming, tune in and pay attention. Do their behaviors match the situation? Do their words match up with their actions? Ask yourself, “Are they trying to charm me?” Notice and pay attention to their other behaviors and actions and be cautious of anyone who seems to want to charm you or your family members.
- Be Cautious of Physical Interactions
- Pay attention to how other people touch or engage in physical interactions with children. Where does a person sit or stand in relation to your child? Is the person constantly touching your child, squeezing their shoulders, encouraging your child to sit on their lap, or holding or carrying your child? Notice and be aware of touching and be cautious of adults who engage in repeated physical touch with your child.
- Look for Peer-Like Involvement From Adults
- When an adult is interacting with your child, look for signs that the adult is trying to play with your child as if they were same-age peers. This behavior is not an automatic red flag, particularly if the adult can and does step back into an adult role when necessary (such as when someone gets hurt or breaks a rule). Adults who continually seek out opportunities to act like peers with children may also have very specific youth-oriented interests, like owning multiple gaming systems or having lots of toys and games that appeal to young children. Be cautious of someone who says things like: “I’m just a big kid” or “I’m just a kid myself.”





Teach Your Child About Consent

Consent is the act of explicitly giving someone else permission to do a certain activity or for something to happen. When you go to the doctor's office, you may sign a consent form that gives medical personnel permission to perform a procedure on you. Similarly, in relationships both romantic and platonic, each individual has the right to give or deny consent. You may allow someone to hold your hand, hug, or kiss you, or you may decide not to do those things. Consent should be freely given, and should be given verbally as a clear and specific "Yes!" If it isn't a clear yes, then consent cannot be assumed. A person under the influence of alcohol or other drugs cannot give consent.

Every person has the right to deny consent at any time or to change their mind after they have given consent. Asking for and receiving affirmative consent is especially important when it comes to physical touching, especially in dating or romantic relationships. Conversations about consent are a critical component of parenting and will help your child learn about their right to set personal boundaries and the right to expect that others will honor those boundaries.



You can model consent by asking before you touch, hug, or kiss your child, and then respecting their wishes. Many tweens and teens are looking for ways to separate from their parents and other adults and to feel older and more independent. Respect your child's wishes when it comes to showing affection, while also expecting them to be respectful to you.

For example, don't force your child to hug you if they don't want to, but do expect them to acknowledge you in some other way. (They could say "good morning" to you first thing in the morning or make eye contact when the two of you are talking so you know they're listening.) You can model this boundary yourself by saying to your child, "I'm not going to hug you right now, but when I'm done making dinner I'll come find you for a hug."

Talk About Consent & Relationships

Talk with your child early and often about the concepts of *consent* and *respect* in romantic relationships even if they aren't yet dating or in a relationship. Discuss how to make sure someone is comfortable with holding hands, hugging, kissing, or engaging in any level of sexual activity and what to do if someone says or otherwise indicates that they aren't comfortable with such activity.

Talk with your child about situations you and your child see on television, in movies, online, and in real life. Encourage them to think critically and ask questions such as: "Did you see the person ask for consent?" "How did the person know whether they had consent?" "What could the character have done differently?" Talking openly with your child encourages them to come talk to you when they are concerned or confused, or when something happens to them that they feel unsure about.





Show Up Physically & Emotionally for Your Child

One of the best ways to protect your child is to show up for them both physically and emotionally. Showing up physically means being present in their lives—attending school conferences, recitals, practices, and games as often as you can. You may not be able to physically attend everything your child is involved in and that is okay. You do not have to show up to everything, but showing up when you can lets your child know that you care and that you are there to support them.

Showing up emotionally for your child involves providing a similar sense of presence in their life. Tune in and pay attention to how your child is feeling. Accept their feelings, no matter what they are. Even if their feelings make you uncomfortable, continue to listen and show that you respect your child's feelings.

Being present is more than tuning in and accepting your child. It is also about finding ways to be there for them emotionally and to help them work through problems. Help your child learn to trust you with their big emotions and problems by offering them support and guidance without telling them how to feel.

Be Involved in Your Child's Interactions With Others

It's important for you to know the adults and young people who interact with your child. Whether they're family or school friends, teachers or other school employees, coaches, store clerks, after-school care providers, bosses, medical professionals, faith leaders, neighbors, or the parents or siblings of your child's friends, you need to get to know them. Never leave your child alone with an unfamiliar older teen or adult, even if the person is somehow linked to someone you trust, such as someone who is a friend of your brother.

Do your homework. It is your right and your responsibility to know who is interacting with your child. When your child is interacting with someone new, consider checking out the person by:

- Running a background check.
- Searching for the person's name in the Michigan Public Sex Offender Registry (<https://bit.ly/2TbwkC5>).
- Asking the person to supply personal references.
- Speaking to people who know and have worked or interacted with that person.

Be present and engaged during your child's first several interactions with new teens or adults. Watch how the person interacts with your child, with other children, and with adults. Do the interactions seem positive or does something feel off? Does the person engage children while still maintaining adult boundaries and providing guidance or discipline when necessary? Is the person overly physical when interacting with children? Check in with your child occasionally by asking questions such as:

- How do you like your new job?
- Are your boss and the other employees nice to you?
- What do you talk about?
- Where do you sit when you're in a one-on-one meeting with your boss?

Make sure your child knows when and how to contact you by phone or text if they're concerned or alarmed about a person or situation. Reassure them that they can always contact you if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable about a situation. Make sure they know, too, how to contact another trusted adult if you aren't available, and to go to the school office, a neighbor's house, or another agreed-upon safe space.





Know Where Your Child Is

Think critically about where your child is and who they are with in settings such as camps, after-school activities, child care, field trips, and community activities. Request and read a copy of the child care procedural handbook. Be involved and ask questions such as:

- How often do field trip chaperones undergo background checks?
- What volunteer and staff screening procedures does the organization follow?
- Does the organization conduct volunteer and staff background checks? Interviews? Reference checks?
- How are staff and volunteers observed or supervised?
- Are adults ever left alone with children, even for a few moments?
- Are parents permitted to attend events or to drop in unannounced?

Pay close attention to how adults interact with children in these settings. Observe whether and how the adults are engaging with the children. Pay attention to whether adults are left alone with the children or whether there are always at least two adults with a child or group of children.

Talk to your child about their experiences. Ask them what they think of the adults around them. You can ask questions like:

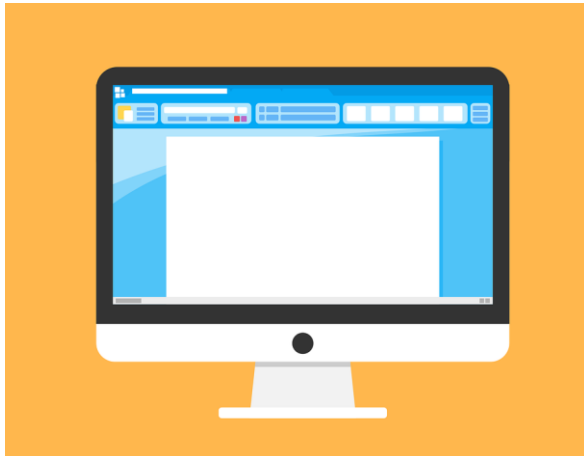
- Do you enjoy playing with Erica at camp? What kinds of things do you do together?
- It sounds like there are a lot of kids who like it when Erica leads arts and crafts at camp, right? Where does Erica sit when you do arts and crafts together?
- I've noticed that a lot of kids at camp do elbow bumps and fist bumps. How do you say "hello" and "goodbye" to your counselors at camp?
- Teach Your Child to Trust Their Gut Feelings
- Tell your child that sometimes a person feels an emotion but doesn't know why. Explain that such emotions are called *gut feelings*. Give examples such as being scared of a new neighbor without exactly knowing why or worrying about something that didn't scare us before.
- Teach your child that it's okay to listen to those gut feelings even if they don't know the reasons behind the feelings. Reassure them that they can always come to you and talk about these confusing feelings and you will help them figure out what to do.
- It is crucial that you don't force your child to go against their gut feelings. For example, if your child says they are very uncomfortable going to play at their friend's house or if they pretend to have a stomach ache so they can get out of going, don't make them go. Tell your child that they don't have to be polite if someone is making them uncomfortable. Give them permission to say no, to remove themselves from a situation, or to set boundaries.
- Trust Your Own Gut Feelings
- Just as it is important to teach your children to trust and follow their intuition if something does not feel right, it's crucial that you do the same. If a person or a situation does not feel right and you just cannot figure out why, follow your instincts. Give yourself permission to cancel the appointment, to not drop off your child, or to make other plans. Even if your intuition challenges social conventions or rules of etiquette or of politeness, following your intuition will help keep your child safe.





Tune In to Virtual Environments

Being involved in your child's interactions with others also refers to those that happen online and in other virtual settings. It's important to be aware of the risks involved with sharing information about your child and family virtually. Think about your own virtual presence as well as your child's access to the internet, games, and social media.



Ask yourself these questions:

- What information are my child and I sharing online?
- Who are we sharing the information with, intentionally or unintentionally?
- What privacy and security measures are in place to restrict access to this information?

Predators are skilled at using many different ways to gain access to children. They will use any and all information they find online or anywhere else to locate, try to connect with children, and pretend to know you or someone in your circle well enough to be trusted with your child.

Think Critically About the Information You Share About Your Child

You may share information about your child with the world without even thinking about it. We often do this because we're proud of what our children have accomplished and want others to know about it. For example, we post the news of our child's birth on social media. Later we tell coworkers about our child's latest achievement and put stickers on our car windows with representations of each family member doing something they're interested in—often complete with names!

Predators will leverage any and all information they can find when they're trying to gain access to children. For example, if your social media post about your child's first day of school includes their name, age, grade, favorite food, school name, and teacher's name, you've given a potential predator a wealth of information. Information they could use to convince your child they're trustworthy because they already know so much about your child. It's important to think critically about what information you are sharing about your child, how and where you share it, and who may have access to what you've shared.





Take Care of Your Family

One of the best ways for adults to keep children and families safe is to take care of your family's needs and prioritize the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of your children and family members. You can accomplish this in part by managing and responding to family stressors, developing a support system, and addressing any internal conflicts or stresses through family discussion. Sometimes stressors are too big for one person or for one family to manage on their own. Don't be afraid to seek outside help and support if your family needs it.

EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, be actively involved, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in protecting your child and helping them build the skills that will help them stay safe as they get older.

This doesn't mean that you have to prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. It's a reminder, instead, to use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. There are a lot of things you can do to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living fully and enjoying the world around you.

REFERENCES

Arévalo, E., Chavira, D., Cooper, B., & Smith, M. (2014). *SAFE (Screening applicants for effectiveness): Guidelines to prevent child molestation in mentoring and youth-serving organizations*. Friends for Youth Inc.

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Acknowledgments

Authors: Kylie Rymanowicz, Extension Educator in Child and Family Development, MSU Extension.

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FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out these other MSU Extension resources:

- **Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming and Fair Environments** (<https://bit.ly/36CwUk7>)—The Be SAFE curriculum is designed to help young people aged 11 to 14 and adults work in partnership to create environments that are physically and emotionally safe. It draws from extensive research from a variety of key disciplines, as well as from evidence-based bullying prevention programs. Be SAFE includes engaging activities that promote social and emotional learning and development, address and prevent bullying, and foster positive relationships with peers and adults. Designed for use in out-of-school time settings (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts and afterschool programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.
- **Keeping Kids Safe series** (<https://bit.ly/3iG8JFo>)—The fact sheets in this series are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; sharing about kids on social media; and recognizing and preventing grooming by child sexual predators. There are currently seven titles in the series:
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, and Communities
 - › Keeping Kids Safe: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators
- These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). *Family media plan*. <https://bit.ly/3iE9Wf1>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2011). *Preventing and identifying child sexual abuse—Tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics*. <https://bit.ly/3iENpyB>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2019). *Media and children communication toolkit*. <https://bit.ly/3iDaGku>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). *Resources*. <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *Preventing child sexual abuse resources*. <https://bit.ly/34zyAYW>

