

Protect your child from sexual abuse

ADULT ISSUES

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Parents are alarmed when they hear the word 'paedophile' (or pedophile) and read and learn about people who sexually abuse children. Adults who behave in a sexual way to children not only break the law but cause major distress to their victims that can effect them for the rest of their lives.

In Australia we are now more openly talking about paedophiles and the sexual abuse of children and how it causes great suffering to children. It is important to remember that children are more likely to be abused by someone they know and trust than by a stranger, but many people still find this hard to believe.

Children are not able to totally protect themselves from sexual abuse, so it is necessary for parents to do all they can to educate and protect their children from adults who may take advantage. A balanced approach is so important because children also need caring adults who take an interest in them and who can be a wonderful bonus to their lives.

What are paedophiles?

Paedophiles are people who sexually abuse children of either, or, of both sexes.

- They are usually men who are sexually attracted to children, knowingly seek them out and perform sexual acts for their own pleasure.
- Sometimes they believe that if they are not violent or openly forceful, then they are not being abusive.
- They often believe that if the child does not resist then the child is consenting (agreeing).
- They often believe there is nothing wrong with their behaviour.
- Most know they are breaking the law.
- They often abuse a large number of children over a lifetime.
- Paedophiles are called child molesters.

The word molest is used to mean all forms of sexual activity.

Sexual abuse includes sexual suggestions, showing pornography, fondling and touching private parts of the body, masturbating and sexual kissing, oral sex and penetration of the genital or anal areas with an object, penis or other part of the body.

What are paedophiles like?

It would really help us if we could identify paedophiles because they had a certain 'look'. We could then help children to know how to avoid them, but there isn't any one way to describe what they look like. People who molest children can be the respectable member of the community, the 'nice guy' down the street or a family member. It is easy to think that children are safe in the country. However, paedophiles come from all areas, not just the city.

Some things we do know about paedophiles:

- They are often in a position where they have power or authority over a child and use this to abuse or threaten the child. What does a child do when a teacher suggests he will be given low marks and kept in, or a coach won't give him a game, or a babysitter says that his pet might be killed, unless he does certain things (or as a threat to prevent him telling anyone)?
- They may win the child's or parents' trust over a period of time before they abuse. They may become the 'kind' person who supports and befriends a parent in order to gain access to the children. When they become trusted they may be a welcome visitor in the home, they may mind the child when parents go out, or offer to take the child on an outing.

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What are paedophiles like? *cont*

- They often have hobbies and interests that appeal, and usually 'hook in' children by showing a keen interest in what they like or by giving presents such as money or gifts.
- They often tell a child that theirs is a special relationship and what they do together should be a secret. It may be very confusing for a child if the activity is pleasurable.
- They can make a child feel 'special'. A paedophile may make a child feel loved and cared for. Children who have never had this sort of attention or who have been abused at home, may be more likely to respond to someone who shows them attention and affection.
- They often choose places to work at, or find ways to be near or involved where there is easy access to children, such as schools, youth groups, or sporting organisations.
- Paedophiles look for children in places where they are likely to be unsupervised, for example, parks, playgrounds, beaches and near schools. They go where parents may be distracted, such as sporting events, shopping centres, fetes and auctions.
- The use of on-line chat rooms (Internet) by paedophiles to 'get' children is widespread. They go into chat rooms often pretending to be another child to connect with children. They can quite quickly begin sexual conversations. They may develop a relationship and then arrange to meet the child without others knowing about it. Teenagers especially may think they have found a new friend and go to great lengths to keep the relationship private.

How can you protect your child?

We can do a lot to prepare our children for some of the dangers in life, but unfortunately, we cannot always stop bad things happening to them. We try to protect our children from being hit by a car and so we teach them road safety, (without scaring them with all the gory details and making them so frightened that they won't cross a road). In the same way we can try to protect our children from the dangers of paedophiles.

- Be suspicious if an adult seems more interested in spending time with your child than with you. It might be that he offers to look after your child, or wants to be alone with your child or take your child on a holiday.
- Be wary of people who are overly kind, affectionate or loving towards your child or who give your child lots of gifts. Remember, most people have good intentions, so don't jump to conclusions.

How can you protect your child? *cont*

- Be very choosy about leaving your children with others. Ask them how they feel about being cared for by that person. Try to work out what your child is saying with their behaviour—this is how very young children can tell us if they are afraid or upset.
- Teach your children about different parts of the body and which are their own private parts. Advise them to tell someone they trust if anyone, even someone they know very well, tries to touch their private parts or suggests something they don't want to do which makes them feel scared or bad.
- Children need to know it's important to keep on telling someone until they are taken seriously.
- Teach your children to try and get away as quickly as possible from any person who makes them feel uncomfortable or frightened and to then tell people they trust about what has happened.
- Teach your children never to keep secrets that make them feel uncomfortable or bad. Always listen to your children and trust what they say even if you are shocked by it. Act upon the information so your child feels supported by you.
- Teach your children that adults are not always right. This will help them if a paedophile tells them the abuse is okay and not to tell anyone.
- Teach your children about some of the dangers in using on-line chat rooms (Internet). Explain why you are concerned. Find out how you can have more control with your children's use of the Internet.
- Children should always go to and from school with their parents or other children if possible.
- Teach your children never to go into public toilets alone. It is also wise for children at school to go to school toilets during breaks rather than alone during a lesson.
- Teach children to always tell you where they are going. If they are followed or frightened they should knock on the nearest door and ask for the Police to be called. Many children have a mobile—make sure they have two or three adults' phone numbers if they can't get you.
- Always answer your children's questions honestly and at a level that they can understand, even if you are embarrassed.
- Things you teach your child will help, but they will not guarantee your child's protection. Children are not able to totally protect themselves. It is up to adults to do this.

Sexual abuse can affect children for the rest of their lives.

How do you know if your child has been sexually abused?

Sometimes it is very difficult to know and parents can blame themselves for not knowing. It does not necessarily mean that you are not a good parent or that there is something wrong with your relationship with your child.

It is important to remember that some of the behaviours listed below can also be caused by something else that is happening in your child's life. This is what makes it so hard to know if your child has been sexually abused.

- Children may show unusual sexual behaviour and knowledge of sexual behaviour that you would not expect for their age. They may be more interested in sexual activities than other children and in wanting to touch others in sexual ways.
- They may have unexplained redness or soreness around the genital areas.
- Younger children who have been sexually abused may become unusually withdrawn or unusually aggressive, have nightmares, start wetting the bed or acting out of character with their normal behaviour.
- Older children may become aggressive, have difficulty at school and even run away from home.
- Some children may become withdrawn and feel suicidal, hurt themselves, or take life threatening risks.
- Keep in mind that these behaviours are not necessarily connected to sexual abuse, but they do mean that something is going wrong for your child and that she needs help.
- All children need support and help if they are abused. It is important for you to provide love and reassurance to your child but also to get support from someone who specialises in helping sexually abused children.
- If you have serious concerns about these matters don't ignore your gut feeling, phone Care and Protection Services, or the Police.

Note: If you suspect or discover your child or another child has been abused, you need to notify Care and Protection Services 1300 556 729 and give them as much information as you can about what has happened or why you are suspicious.

Some common difficulties people face:

- the person who is sexually abusing your child is related to you or is a well-known, trusted person in the community
- you might not want to make the situation worse, with more stress and tension for the child or the family, especially if the abuser is within the family
- you might want to protect the child but not get the abuser into trouble with the law
- you just might not want to get involved at all—it's easier to do nothing
- you might be too shamed to talk about sexual abuse—it is difficult for most people
- you might have difficulty deciding on what is more important—protecting a child or protecting the abuser.

Sexual abuse can affect children for the rest of their lives.

You may be the one person who has the courage to speak out and do something for the child.

The most important thing is the child's right to be kept safe.

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Reminders

- Children are more likely to be sexually abused by someone they know than a stranger.
- It is especially difficult for parents to believe that a family member has sexually abused their child.
- Work on your relationship with your children so they find it easy to talk to you about their worries.
- Try to teach about being safe in a way that does not frighten your children or give them too many rules.
- Teach children the names of their sexual body parts so they know how to talk about them and feel okay talking about them to you.
- It is very hard for children to tell others if they have been abused. They have usually been told that something dreadful will happen to them or to others if they tell.
- Paedophiles often win over the trust of the parents and children before they abuse them.
- Children who are sexually abused need all your support.
- Children who are sexually abused are never to blame for what has happened.

Contacts

Care and Protection Services

To report suspected abuse or neglect of children or young people in the ACT 24-hour 1300 556 729

Kids Help Line

24-hour 1800 55 1800

NSW Department of Community Services

To report suspected abuse or neglect of children or young people in NSW 24-hour 132 111

Websites

www.csa.gov.au Free CD dealing with separation and other publications

www.cyh.com Parenting and child health information

www.parentlink.act.gov.au Other parenting guides

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