



**Stop It Now!®**

*Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children*

351 Pleasant St., Suite B-319  
Northampton, MA 01060  
413.587.3500

HELPLINE: 1.888.PREVENT  
[www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)  
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## Do Children Sexually Abuse Other Children?

Preventing sexual abuse among children and youth

New Mexico Coalition of  
Sexual Assault Programs, Inc.  
3909 Juan Tabo NE, Suite 6  
Albuquerque, NM 87111  
(505) 883-8020 (within the Albuquerque Area)  
(888) 883-8020 (outside of the Albuquerque Area)  
e-mail: [nmcsap@swcp.com](mailto:nmcsap@swcp.com)  
Web site: [www.swcp.com/nmcsap](http://www.swcp.com/nmcsap)  
**NMCSAP is a member of the Stop It Now! network.**

To order additional copies, contact:  
The Safer Society Press  
P.O. Box 340  
Brandon, VT 05733-0340  
802.247.3132

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**Stop It Now!®**

## PREVENTION, TREATMENT AND RECOVERY RESOURCES



Our children are our future. We all have a responsibility to protect them. Take action if you are worried that your child, or a child you know, may be sexually hurting someone. You are not alone. Help is available. Call the Stop It Now!® Helpline at 1.888.PREVENT to talk confidentially with professionals who have experience working with individuals and families with similar situations.

Special thanks to our colleagues at Stop It Now! UK & Ireland, for permission to use copyrighted material.

This is the third edition of this brochure. The two previous versions were *Do Children Sexually Abuse Other Children?* published by Stop It Now! in 1999 and *Child's Play? Preventing Abuse Among Children and Young People* published by Stop It Now! UK & Ireland in 2003.

### Stop It Now!®

351 Pleasant St., Suite 319, Northampton, MA 01060  
Office: 413.587.3500  
Helpline: 1.888.PREVENT (1.888.773.8368)  
Email: [helpline@stopitnow.org](mailto:helpline@stopitnow.org)  
Website: [www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)

In collaboration with our network of community-based programs, we reach out to adults who are concerned about their own or others' sexualized behavior toward children. Through our website and Helpline, we provide support, information and resources that enable individuals and families to keep children safe and create healthier communities. Contact our confidential, national toll-free Helpline 1.888.PREVENT (1.888.773.8368) M–F, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET.

### The Safer Society Foundation

P.O. Box 340, Brandon, VT 05733-0340  
Office: 802.247.3132 Fax: 802.247.4233  
Website: [www.safersociety.org](http://www.safersociety.org)

Call for a referral to a local treatment provider for a child, adolescent or adult with sexual behavior concerns. (M–F, 9–4:30 p.m. ET). Also provides publications for youth or adults with sexual behavior problems, their families, survivors, treatment providers, and mandated reporters. Call for a free catalogue.

### Child Molestation Research and Prevention Institute

P.O. Box 7593, Atlanta, GA 30357  
Office: 404.872.5152  
Website: [www.childmolestationprevention.org](http://www.childmolestationprevention.org)

Online directory for sex-specific therapists for evaluation and treatment. Extensive reading lists for parents of children with sexual behavior problems and parents of victims, for professionals, adults with sexual behavior concerns, adults molested as children and their partners.

### The New England Adolescent Research Institute (NEARI)

70 North Summer St., Holyoke, MA 01040  
Office: 413.540.0712  
Website: [www.neari.com](http://www.neari.com)

Catalogue of publications for professionals and families addressing treatment and recovery for sexually aggressive youth and youth with sexual behavior problems.

### The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA)

4900 SW Griffith Drive, Suite 274, Beaverton, OR 97005  
Office: 503.643.1023 Fax: 503.643.5084  
Email: [atsa@atsa.com](mailto:atsa@atsa.com)  
Website: [www.atsa.com](http://www.atsa.com)

A national organization developing and disseminating professional standards and practices in the field of sex offender research, evaluation, and treatment. Call or email for a referral to a local treatment provider.

### National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth

940 N.E. 13th St., 3B-3406, Oklahoma City, OK 73104  
Office: 405.271.8858  
Website: [www.ncsby.org](http://www.ncsby.org)

Information concerning sexual development and youth with sexual behavior problems.

### National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC)

2000 M St., NW, Suite 480, Washington, DC 20036  
Office: 202.467.8700 Fax: 202.467.8701  
Toll-free: 1.800.FYI.CALL (1.800.394.2255)  
TDD: 1.800.211.7996  
Email: [webmaster@ncvc.org](mailto:webmaster@ncvc.org) or [gethelp@ncvc.org](mailto:gethelp@ncvc.org)  
Website: [www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org)

An information and referral center for victims. Through its database of over 30,000 organizations, NCVC refers callers to services including crisis intervention, research information, assistance with the criminal justice process, counseling, support groups, and referrals to local attorneys in victim-related cases.

### Childhelp USA

National Child Abuse Hotline: 1.800.4.A.CHILD  
(1.800.422.4453)  
Website: [www.childhelpusa.org](http://www.childhelpusa.org)

Provides a broad continuum of programs that directly serve abused children and their families. Adults and children can request local telephone numbers to report cases of abuse or access crisis intervention, information, literature, and referrals to thousands of emergency, social service, and support resources. All calls are anonymous and confidential.

### The Child Welfare Information Gateway

Children's Bureau/ACYF  
1250 Maryland Ave., SW, 8th Floor  
Washington, DC 20024  
Office: 703.385.7565 or 800.394.3366  
Website: [www.childwelfare.gov/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/)

A resource and clearinghouse that collects, stores, organizes and disseminates information on all aspects of child maltreatment.

## TAKE ACTION

If you are unsure or worried about the behavior of someone you know (whether they are an adult or a child), we have information that can help you consider your possible next steps. With guidance from our professional Helpline staff, adults can learn about sexual abuse; identify specialized treatment options for themselves or someone they care about; develop a safety plan; find language for an effective conversation when they have concerns, and learn how to report those concerns to authorities when appropriate.

CONTACT  
**Stop It Now!®**  
Helpline  
1.888.PREVENT

EMAIL  
[helpline@stopitnow.org](mailto:helpline@stopitnow.org)

VISIT  
our website at  
[www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)



## INTRODUCTION

As parents and caregivers, we want to do all we can to protect our children, while giving them the freedom they need to develop and become healthy adults. Sometimes, the world can feel full of risks, many of them obvious, and others more confusing. In order to strike the right balance between protection and independence for our children, we adults need the best possible information.

This guide is for everyone involved in bringing up children. It explains that some children do sexually abuse other children, describes how we can recognize the warning signs, and outlines some actions we adults can take to prevent sexual abuse.



## DO CHILDREN SEXUALLY ABUSE OTHER CHILDREN?

“I didn’t have the words to tell my parents what was going on. I said I didn’t want to be left alone with kids. I wish they had listened to me.”

### AN ADOLESCENT WITH SEXUAL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS



Most people already are aware of the risk of sexual abuse that some adults present to our children. There is growing understanding that the vast majority of children who are sexually abused, are abused by someone they know, and often trust. Unfortunately, very few adults recognize that children and adolescents also can present a risk to other children. In fact, over a third of all sexual abuse of children is committed by someone under the age of 18.

This can be a difficult issue to address, partly because it is often challenging for adults to think of the children or adolescents we know as capable of sexually abusing others. Also, it is not always easy to tell the difference between natural sexual curiosity and potentially abusive behaviors. Children, particularly younger children, may engage in inappropriate interactions without understanding the hurtful impact it has on others. For this reason, it may be more helpful to talk about a child’s sexually “harmful” behavior rather than sexually “abusive” behavior.

It is essential that all adults have the information needed to recognize potentially harmful activities at an early stage and to seek help so the behaviors can be stopped. Every adult who cares about children has an opportunity, as both teacher and role model, to show children how to interact without harming others, either while they are still children, or later, as adults. Adults have the added responsibility of ensuring that all children who have been involved in a harmful sexual situation, whatever their role, are given the help they need to live healthy productive lives.

### 3. Get support for everyone.

Whatever is revealed, reassure them that you love them and that you are committed to helping them. Children will look to adults for reassurance that they will be all right. Keep reminding yourself that healing for everyone is possible. Children and adolescents frequently respond best to specialized, sex-specific treatment when it is offered early and with the support of trusted adults. Sexual abuse affects all members of a family or group. The entire family, including the adults, are likely to need support.

### 4. Be prepared to report.

Reporting the abuse to authorities is an upsetting prospect for many families. Yet, filing a report can be a first step to accessing support services. Children who are abused and their families need help to recover from their trauma. Anyone who is harming a child sexually also needs help and support to stop the behavior.

Sometimes, in the most serious cases and depending upon the age of the child or adolescent, reporting may



result in legal consequences. Although this can be a difficult process for everyone involved, when combined with specialized treatment, it may be the best way to prevent further harm and even harsher future consequences.

### 5. Make use of valuable lessons learned.

If you have been involved in helping a child cope with harmful sexual behaviors, your experience and knowledge about abuse and treatment may be extremely valuable to others. The opportunity to prevent sexual abuse does not end with the discovery of abuse. Use the lessons you have learned to educate others about prevention and to support other families facing similar concerns.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR CHILD IS SEXUALLY HARMING ANOTHER CHILD OR THINKING ABOUT DOING SO?

It is very disturbing to suspect that your child, or a child you know, may be sexually harming someone. It is so much easier to dismiss such thoughts or to think you're overreacting. You may also be worried about the possible consequences of taking action.

Help is available. It is much better to talk over the situation with someone than to discover later that you were right to be concerned and did nothing.

Remember, you are not alone. Every year thousands of people grapple with situations where someone in their family or circle of friends is suspected of inappropriate sexual behavior. Stop It Now!'s *Parenttalk* newsletter offers



insights written by and for parents of children and teens with sexual behavior problems. [www.stopitnow.org/parenttalk](http://www.stopitnow.org/parenttalk).

### 1. Act quickly. Action is prevention.

If you are worried that your son or daughter may be sexually harming another child, or if you suspect that your child is being abused, act now! Get help from a professional therapist immediately and develop a safety plan addressing the concerning behaviors. Prompt intervention also can get the sexually abusing youth the treatment needed to stop abusing and to grow up as a safe member of our community.

### 2. Stay steady.

When speaking to children about your concerns, remember to stay calm and ask simple and direct questions. Listen carefully to the responses without suggesting answers. It may be useful to practice with someone else first and get support to help keep your own emotions in check.

Recognize that confusion, guilt, and shame about abuse can make the conversation difficult, both for you and for the child. Acknowledge the child's discomfort and offer praise for his or her courage to talk about a confusing experience. Remember that if it's difficult for you to discuss your concerns, it is likely to be much more difficult for the child.

## WHAT IS HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT?

Most adults understand that children pass through different stages of development as they grow. Sometimes, adults have more difficulty acknowledging that, from birth, children are sexual beings. Like other areas of a child's development, it is normal for children's awareness and curiosity about their own sexual feelings to change as they pass from infancy into childhood, and then through puberty to adolescence.

- Each child is an individual and will develop in his or her own way. However, there is a generally accepted range of behaviors linked to children's changing age and developmental stages. These behaviors may include exploration with other children of similar power or stature—by virtue of age, size, ability or social status. Sometimes, it can be difficult to tell the difference between sexual exploration that is appropriate to a developmental stage and interactions that are warning signs of harmful behavior.
- Occasionally, adults may need to set limits when children engage in behaviors we consider inappropriate, even if the children may be unaware of potential harm. This is a chance to talk with them about keeping themselves and others safe, and to let them know that you are someone they can talk to when they have

questions. Adults can help children be comfortable with their sexual development and understand appropriate sexual boundaries, for example, adults can model appropriate, respectful behavior.

- Children with disabilities or developmental challenges benefit from special attention to their safety. Depending on the nature of their disability, they may develop at different rates, which can make them more vulnerable to being abused. They may also inadvertently harm another child without understanding the hurtful impact of their actions. For example, children with disabilities sometimes behave sexually in ways that are out of step with their age. Particular care may be needed to help children understand their sexual development and to ensure that these children and their caregivers can communicate effectively about any questions or worries they have.

It is important to recognize that, while people from various backgrounds have different expectations about what is acceptable behavior for children, sexual abuse is present across all ethnic groups, cultures and religious beliefs.

## WHAT IS AGE-APPROPRIATE OR DEVELOPMENTALLY-EXPECTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR?

While learning about their bodies and sexuality, children may behave in ways that seem out of sync with their age or developmental stage. Many minor factors—for example, having an older sibling—may increase a child's awareness of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of an older age group. Usually, unexpected behavior can be redirected with a simple instruction. Of particular concern are behaviors involving another child, in which either child seems unable to control the behavior after being asked to stop.

### Preschool (0 to 5 yrs.)

**Common:** Sexual language relating to differences in body parts, bathroom talk, pregnancy and birth. Self stimulation at home and in public. Showing and looking at private body parts.

**Uncommon:** Discussion of specific sexual acts or explicit sexual language. Adult-like sexual contact with other children.

### School-Age Children (6 to 12 years)

May include both pre-pubescent children and children who have already entered puberty, when hormonal changes are likely to trigger an increase in sexual awareness and interest.

#### PRE-PUBESCENT CHILDREN:

**Common:** Questions about relationships and sexual behavior, menstruation

and pregnancy. Experimentation with same-age children, often during games, kissing, touching, exhibitionism and role-playing. Private self stimulation.

**Uncommon:** Adult-like sexual interactions, discussing specific sexual acts or public self stimulation.

#### AFTER PUBERTY BEGINS:

**Common:** Increased curiosity about sexual materials and information, questions about relationships and sexual behavior, using sexual words and discussing sexual acts, particularly with peers. Increased experimenting including open-mouthed kissing, body-rubbing, fondling. Masturbating in private.

**Uncommon:** Consistent adult-like sexual behavior, including oral/genital contact and intercourse. Masturbating in public.

### Adolescence (13 to 16)

**Common:** Questions about decision making, social relationships, and sexual customs. Masturbation in private. Experimenting between adolescents of the same age, including open-mouthed kissing, fondling and body rubbing, oral/genital contact. Also, voyeuristic behaviors are common. Intercourse occurs in approximately on third of this age group.

**Uncommon:** Masturbating in public and sexual interest directed toward much younger children.

fears and concerns and letting them know they should not worry about telling you anything. It is important to talk with them about sexuality, offer accurate answers to their questions, and to be comfortable using correct terms for parts of the body.

#### 6. Set clear guidelines and keep a careful eye on children's Internet and video game use and the TV shows and movies they watch.

Explain to children the risks associated with using the Internet, restrict access to sites that are not age-appropriate, and ask them to tell you if they receive messages or emails containing suggestive or sexually explicit material. Keep your computer in a public place so you can easily monitor their use.

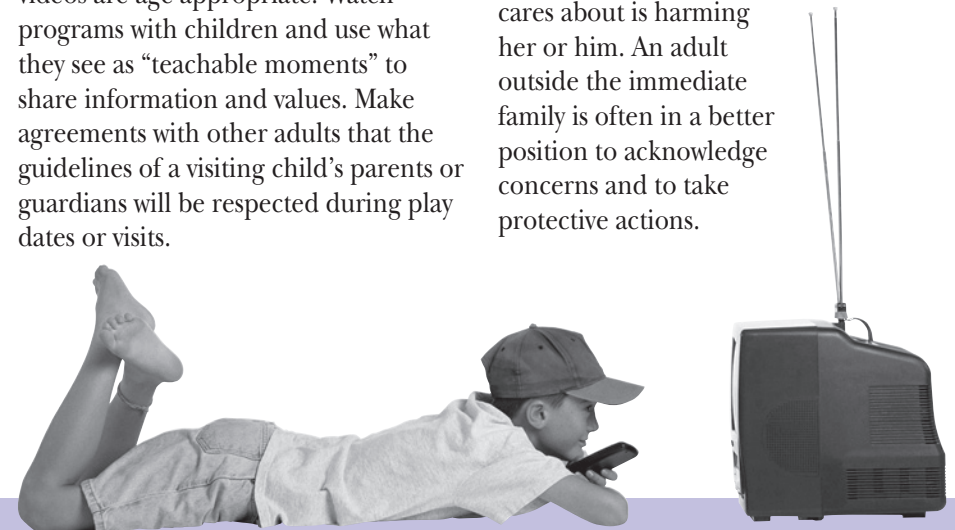
Check that TV shows, films and videos are age-appropriate. Watch programs with children and use what they see as "teachable moments" to share information and values. Make agreements with other adults that the guidelines of a visiting child's parents or guardians will be respected during play dates or visits.

#### 7. Take sensible precautions about whom you choose to take care of your children.

Be thoughtful about whom you choose to care for your children. Find out as much as you can about baby-sitters and don't leave your child with anyone you have doubts about. If your child is unhappy about spending time with a particular person, talk to the child about his or her concerns.

#### 8. Regularly remind children of other trusted adults whom they can talk to.

Sometimes the child or young person whose behavior concerns us is a close family member or the son or daughter of a friend. In those situations, it may be especially painful for us, as parents and caregivers, to admit what may be happening. It may be even harder for a child to tell that someone the family cares about is harming her or him. An adult outside the immediate family is often in a better position to acknowledge concerns and to take protective actions.



## WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT ADULTS CAN DO TO HELP PREVENT SEXUALLY HARMFUL BEHAVIOR BETWEEN CHILDREN?

### 1. Set and respect physical boundaries.

Make sure that all members of the family have rights to privacy in dressing, bathing, sleeping, and other personal activities. As adults we are responsible for modeling the boundaries we want our children to honor. Even young children should be respected and their preferences accommodated when possible.

### 2. Encourage children to also respect themselves and others.

Much of what young people see in the adult world ignores or even ridicules the importance of treating others respectfully and of demanding the same for oneself. Highly-sexualized images in advertising, music lyrics, video games and films can sometimes make it difficult for adolescents—or even young children—to distinguish between innocent experimentation and sexually harmful behaviors.

Teach children to value respectful interactions—including sexual interactions. Create environments at home and in your social groups where children will see that emotionally or sexually aggressive behaviors are not tolerated and that hurtful behaviors are challenged.

### 3. Demonstrate to children that it is all right to say “no” and that they need to accept “no” from others.

Teach children when it is okay to say “no”—for example when they do not want to play, or be tickled, hugged or kissed. Help them understand what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Encourage them to always speak up if someone acts in a way that makes them uncomfortable, even if they were unable to object or to say “no” at the time. Teach children that they must listen to and accept others’ limits as well.

### 4. Stay aware of how children are interacting with one another.

Be alert to the warning signs that your child, or another child or young person, may be acting in ways that make it difficult for other children to set a limit, or in ways that are sexually aggressive or abusive. Seek information and help as soon as you feel uncomfortable. Don’t keep it a secret.

### 5. Talk with children, and listen to what they have to say.

Adults and adolescents who sexually abuse children usually rely on secrecy. They often try to silence children and to build trust with adults, counting on them to be silent if they are confused. The first step to breaking through this secrecy is to develop an open and trusting relationship with your children. This means listening carefully to their

## WHAT IS SEXUALLY HARMFUL BEHAVIOR?

Sexually harmful behavior by children and young people may range from experimentation that has gone too far to serious sexual assault.

It is important for adults to recognize that many children will engage in some forms of sexual exploration with children of a similar age, size, social status or power. Sometimes a child or young person may engage in sexual play with a much younger or more vulnerable child, or use force, tricks or bribery to involve someone in sexual activity. While such manipulation may be a cause for concern, it is critical to realize that manipulation may not, in itself, indicate a tendency toward sexual aggression. Professional help and advice is needed to determine the best way to support a child in managing any concerning impulses.

### Keep in mind:

- Children as young as 4 or 5 may unknowingly engage in sexually harmful behavior, although more often those who sexually harm children are adolescents.
- Usually, but not always, the child or young person causing the harm is older than the victim.
- Often the child being harmed is uncomfortable or confused about what is happening, but may feel that he or she is willingly involved or to blame for being in the situation.
- Many times, one or both children do not understand that the behavior is harmful.

The chart shows some examples of common sexual behavior that we might anticipate seeing in our children as they pass through different stages of development from pre-school to adolescence. Remember that each child develops at his or her own pace. Not every child will show all these behaviors at the same stages, or necessarily experience specific behaviors at all.

The chart also describes kinds of behavior that are less common in a given developmental stage, and which may give cause for concern. If you feel uneasy or have any questions or concerns about a child you know, talk to someone you trust, like a friend, family member, your healthcare provider, a counselor, or call the Stop It Now! Helpline at 1.888. PREVENT.

For a more complete list or if you have any question or concerns about sexual behaviors of a child in your life, please call the confidential, national toll-free Stop It Now! Helpline at 1.888. PREVENT.

*Adapted from Wurtele, S.K. and Miller-Perrin, C.L. Preventing Sexual Abuse. University of Nebraska Press. Lincoln, NE. 1992.*

## WHAT ABOUT SEXUALLY ABUSIVE IMAGES OF CHILDREN—CHILD PRONOGRAPHY?

Interactions involving both direct contact and non-touching behaviors may cause harm. Examples range from unwelcome repeated touching, to brief touching of genitals to actual intercourse, sexually-charged verbal or emotional aggression, photographing a child in sexual poses or exposing a child to sexual acts or images.



There is a growing problem of sexual images of children being available for viewing and downloading on the Internet. Adults need to supervise children's use of the Internet, provide children with clear information about our expectations and teach them how to make safe choices.

### We must educate young people about the risks:

- Viewing abusive images of children may make harmful sexual interactions with children seem normal or acceptable.
- Viewing sexually abusive images of children hurts those children and others by creating a demand for additional images.
- Downloading child pornography is a criminal offense.

We adults must also remain aware of the risks of developing technology and of how to access resources when a child does engage in harmful online activities. Social networking sites, text messaging and photo-capable cell phones are just a few examples of evolving methods of communication that attract young people, but also can create unanticipated vulnerabilities. For more information and links about safe use of the Internet, visit the Stop It Now! website: [www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org).

## HOW CAN WE PROTECT OUR CHILDREN?



There are many things adults can do to prevent the sexual abuse of children: setting clear standards for what is considered appropriate, respectful behavior; staying alert for situations where those expectations are broken; and speaking up promptly to address any concerns are the cornerstones of any effective effort to protect children.

Communication is key. Talking to children about their activities, hopes and anxieties on a daily basis increases the likelihood that a child, who is worried about his or her own behavior, will be able to tell someone. The sooner adults recognize potentially concerning situations, the better protected children will be.



"I can see now that there was a lot of secrecy in our son's life that we thought was normal, but now we know what he was hiding. If someone had told us that it was OK to talk to our son about these things, or showed us how to do it, maybe this wouldn't have happened."

**MOTHER OF AN ADOLESCENT  
WITH SEXUAL BEHAVIOR PROBELMS**

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON MAY BE BEING SEXUALLY ABUSED?

## WHY DO SOME CHILDREN SEXUALLY HARM OTHERS?

### Do you notice some of the following behaviors in a child you know...

- Nightmares, sleep problems, extreme fears without an obvious explanation
- Sudden or unexplained personality changes; seems withdrawn, angry, moody, clingy, “checked-out,” or shows significant changes in eating habits.
- An older child behaving like a younger child, e.g. bedwetting or thumb-sucking
- Develops fear of particular places or resists being alone with particular child or young person for unknown reasons
- Shows resistance to routine bathing, toileting or removing clothes even in appropriate situations
- Play, writing, drawings or dreams include sexual or frightening images
- Refuses to talk about a secret he/she has with an adult or older child
- Stomach aches or illness, often with no identifiable reason
- Leaves clues that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues
- Uses new or adult words for body parts; engages in adult-like sexual activities with toys, objects or other children
- Develops special relationship with older friend that may include unexplained money, gifts or privileges
- Intentionally harming himself or herself, i.e. drug/alcohol use, cutting, burning, running away, sexual promiscuity
- Develops physical symptoms, e.g. unexplained soreness, pain or bruises around genital or mouth; sexually-transmitted disease; pregnancy

Any of these signs may be caused by other factors and changes in a child's life. If you would like to talk with someone further about concerns, please call our Helpline at 1.888.PREVENT (1.888.773.8368).

“The best way to keep your family safe is to educate yourself about child sexual abuse. The earlier we can see what is happening, the earlier we can do something to stop the abuse.”

### MOTHER OF AN ADOLESCENT WITH SEXUAL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

The reasons children sexually harm others are complicated, varied and not always obvious. Some of them may have been emotionally, sexually or physically abused themselves, while others may have witnessed physical or emotional violence at home. Some may have come in contact with sexually explicit movies, video games, or materials that are confusing to them. In some instances, a child or adolescent may act on a passing impulse with no harmful intent, but may still cause harm to themselves or to other children.

Whatever the reason, without help, some sexually-abusing youth will go on to abuse children as adults. It is important to seek advice and help promptly whenever there is any concern or question about a child or adolescent.

## HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS OF SEXUALLY HARMFUL BEHAVIOR?

One of the most difficult discoveries a parent can make is to learn that your child may have sexually harmed or abused another child. Denial, shock and anger are common reactions. Because a quick and sensitive response can help diminish the harmful effects on the whole family, it is important to get professional advice about what to do as soon as you become aware of warning signs.

The good news is that positive, supportive help for the child or young

person and his or her family can make a real difference. Evidence shows that the earlier children get help, the more able they are to learn the skills they need to control their behavior. If you are in this situation, remember that you are not alone. Many other parents who have been through similar experiences found that by taking action the child and family got the help they needed and were able to avoid future abuse. The first step is to recognize the value of talking it over with someone else.

## WHAT ARE WARNING SIGNS OF SEXUALLY HARMFUL OR ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR?

### Behaviors that may indicate increased risk include...

- Regularly minimizing, justifying, or denying the impact of inappropriate behaviors on others.
- Making others uncomfortable by consistently missing or ignoring social cues about others' personal or sexual limits and boundaries.
- Preferring to spend time with younger children rather than peers.
- Insisting on physical contact with a child even when that child resists.
- Responding sexually to typical gestures of friendliness or affection.
- Reluctance to be alone with a particular child; becoming anxious when a particular child is coming to visit.
- Offering alcohol/drugs, sexual material or inappropriate "privileges" to younger child.

### Stronger indicators of risk for abusive behavior include...

- Linking sexuality and aggression in language or behavior; engaging in sexually harassing behavior online or in person; and forcing any sexual interaction.
- Turning to younger or less powerful children rather than peers to explore natural sexual curiosity.
- The inability to control inappropriate sexual behaviors involving another child after being told to stop.
- Taking younger children to "secret" places or hideaways to play "special" undressing or touching games.

While any single behavior may suggest that a child needs help, these behaviors do not, in themselves, indicate that a child is likely to engage in ongoing, sexually-harmful behaviors. For more information about concerning behaviors or about resources to get help, please call our confidential Helpline at 1.888.PREVENT (1.888.773.8368).

## WHY DON'T CHILDREN TELL?

There are many reasons why children may find it very difficult to tell anyone that they are being abused, whether by an adult or by another child. Most children do not tell anyone about sexual abuse before they become adults themselves. Some common reasons why children do not tell include:

- Children may not understand that the behavior is inappropriate or harmful.
- Sometimes they want to protect the other child or youth, whom they may care about, or they do not want to upset the adults with troubling information.
- Children may feel guilty or that they are to blame for the interaction.
- A child may hope that if he or she is "good enough," the harmful behavior will stop on its own.

"We couldn't understand at first why he hadn't told us. Now we know how confused he was.

He felt that it was his fault, even though he hadn't wanted it to happen."

**PARENTS OF TEENAGE BOY  
WHO WAS SEXUALLY ABUSED  
BY TWO FRIENDS**

- Children may feel obligated to remain silent, having received a combination of gifts, treats, and threats about what will happen if they say "no" or tell someone. Threats may include physical harm to the victim, a relative or a pet, or breakup of the family.
- Children may feel embarrassment about what is happening or fear that they will not be believed.
- Sometimes, a child may be confused by suggestions that they enjoyed the sexual interaction and wanted it to happen.
- The child who is harmed may be confused about his or her feelings and be persuaded that what is happening is "okay" or that "everyone is doing it," particularly if another child or adolescent initiates the sexual behaviors.
- Very young or disabled children may not have the words or means of communication to let people know what is going on.

For these reasons, maintaining open communications—talking with and listening carefully to children—is an important part of preventing child sexual abuse. Because children often find it so hard to tell us in words, it is important to be alert to the behavioral warning signs that they may be being abused, and then act to learn more.



**Stop It Now!®**

*Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children*

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[info@stopitnow.org](mailto:info@stopitnow.org)

## Do Children Sexually Abuse Other Children?

Preventing sexual abuse among children and youth

New Mexico Coalition of  
Sexual Assault Programs, Inc.  
3909 Juan Tabo NE, Suite 6  
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