

Preventing the Sexual Exploitation of Children

The words **sexual exploitation** evoke a number of reactions and feelings. Perhaps one of the most devastating is silence — our inability or unwillingness as a society to speak about this horrific problem. This silence may impact a child who has been sexually exploited. Children may be frightened or intimidated into not telling. They may feel they won't be believed or what happened is their fault. All of these feelings may cause them to hide their pain.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) is working to bring sexual exploitation to the forefront; raise awareness about this issue; and help combat its negative, long-term effects. NCMEC wants to help families and communities support the courageous child victims who come forward so they may begin to heal and make more people aware of the problem so other children don't have to suffer in silence.

NCMEC wants people to know the sexual exploitation of one child results in multiple victims within that child's family and the effects may extend like tentacles into the community. Often people feel powerless to fight its insidious nature because the problem seems too huge and overwhelming. People may not want to confront the issue of who the perpetrator might be. They may not want to believe it could be a person in a position of trust or responsibility living in their own community.

But there are steps that need to be taken. When taken they could lead to a reduction in the incidence of sexual exploitation, an improvement in how we protect our children from this scourge, and caring and support for those children who have suffered at the hands of offenders. It's all about empowerment and giving children, parents, guardians, and communities the strength to overcome what they have lost, so they may live healthier and more productive lives.

What Families May Do

- Listen to your children. Pay attention if they tell you they don't want to be with someone or go somewhere.
- Take the time to talk with your children. Encourage open communication and learn how to be an active listener.
- Notice when someone shows one or all of your children a great deal of attention or begins giving them gifts. Talk to your children about the person, and find out why that person is acting in this way.
- Teach your children they have the right to say **NO** to any touch or actions by others that make them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused and to get out of those situations as quickly as possible. If avoidance is not an option, teach your children to kick, scream, and resist. When in such a situation, teach them to loudly yell, "This person is not my father/mother/guardian," and immediately tell you or another trusted adult. **Reassure them you're there to help and it is OK to tell you anything.**
- Be sensitive to any changes in your children's behavior or attitude. Encourage open communication, and learn how to be an active listener.
- Look and listen to small cues and clues indicating something may be troubling your children because children are not always comfortable disclosing disturbing events or feelings. Some children may not be able to tell because they have been told — by a child molester or exploiter — bad things will happen if they tell what has occurred. Some children may be coerced into activity they didn't at first understand to be inappropriate and/or don't know how to end. Children may be especially fearful of being punished, being embarrassed, or experiencing the loss of the love and respect of their family members and friends.
- If your children do confide in you about problems they may be having, strive to remain calm, reassuring, and nonjudgmental. Listen compassionately to their concern, and work **with them** to get the help they need to resolve the problem.
- Be sure to screen babysitters and caregivers. Most jurisdictions have a public registry. Access to and available information about criminal offenses and records varies. Visit www.nsopw.gov, your jurisdiction's registry, or your local law-enforcement agency for specific criteria. Check references with other families who have used the caregiver or babysitter. Once you have chosen the caregiver, drop in unexpectedly to see how your children are doing. Ask your children how the experience with the caregiver was, and carefully listen to the responses.
- Provide oversight and supervision of your children's use of computers and the Internet. Know who they're communicating with online and where they may have access to the Internet. Establish rules and guidelines for computer and Internet use for your children.
- Be involved in your children's activities. As an active participant you'll have a better opportunity to observe how the adults in charge interact with your children. If you are concerned about anyone's behavior, discuss your concerns with the sponsoring organization.

- Work with your children's schools to institute sound and effective child-safety programs as part of their curriculum.
- Practice basic safety skills with your children and discuss their safety openly and honestly. There is no substitute for your attention and supervision. Being available and taking time to really know and listen to your children helps build feelings of safety and security.

What Schools May Do

- Make sure teachers, volunteers, and others with access to children are properly screened and trained.
- Implement and enforce a policy for reporting child sexual exploitation and handling disclosures from children.
- Establish protocols and screening for school computer use. Provide training for students, parents, guardians, and teachers regarding the acceptable use of online computers.
- Choose or develop child-safety programs for the school that are based on accepted educational theories; are appropriate for the children's ages and levels of education and development; are designed to offer concepts to help children build self-confidence in order to better handle and protect themselves in all types of situations; use multiple program components repeated several years in a row; and use qualified presenters who include role-playing, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and active participation in presentations.
- Assess your environmental structure and take every possible step to help make it safer for children. Make certain children are properly supervised both in the classroom and around the campus.
- Make certain campus security is in place so all visitors are screened through the office and unusual incidents/visitors are properly handled.
- Provide programs and roles for parents and guardians to make them part of their children's safety and security at school and while going to and from school.

What Communities May Do

- Notify the public of the sex-offender registry and community-notification requirements. Schedule town meetings and community seminars to help raise awareness about these policies and issues.
- Support local law-enforcement efforts to establish neighborhood crime-watch programs. Report suspicious persons/activities to local law enforcement.
- Support aggressive prosecution of offenders who victimize children within local communities and have an action plan and protocol in place to alert the community and help address their concerns when a high-profile arrest is made.
- Mobilize community groups and child-serving organizations to help make your community more "child safe." Determine if available services and programs are adequate to address the needs of your community.
- Advocate use of Code Adam® in local retail stores to rapidly locate lost children by using standard protocols and procedures. An immediate response to a lost child minimizes the possibility the child will be taken from the store.
- Institute free child-identification programs in the community to help ensure all parents and guardians have a recent, clear, and readily available color photograph of their children.
- Advocate for meaningful legislative change with elected officials.

It is only through unified and diligent preparation and persistent prevention efforts that the sexual exploitation of children may be effectively addressed. For information regarding NCMEC's resources to help prevent the sexual exploitation of children, visit www.cybertipline.com or call 1-800-843-5678.

Information reprinted respectively from NCMEC's *Know the Rules...General Tips for Parents and Guardians to Help Keep Their Children Safer*; *Just in case...Guidelines in case your child might someday be the victim of sexual exploitation*, *KIDS AND COMPANY: TOGETHER FOR SAFETY*, and *Guidelines for Programs to Reduce Child Victimization: A Resource for Communities When Choosing a Program to Teach Personal Safety to Children*.

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