How to Protect Your Children From Child Abuse: A Parent's Guide

Cómo Proteger a Sus Hijos del Abuso Infantil: Una Guía Para los Padres

Disponible en español en su oficina local de los Boy Scouts of America.

BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA®

Message to Parents

Our children are often faced with choices affecting their development and safety. As parents we do our best to provide education and guidance to prepare our children to make the best decisions. One way we do this is to talk with our children. Some subjects are easy to discuss with our children—sports, their grades in school, and many other features of their daily lives. Other things are much more difficult for us to discuss including child abuse—especially child sexual abuse.

Although discussing child abuse with your children may be difficult for you, it is very important. Research shows that children whose parents talk to them about preventing sexual abuse are more effective at fending off assaults. Discussing such topics with children is perhaps the most important step a parent can take to protect his or her child.

Open communication between parents and children about serious topics such as child sexual abuse offers children reassurance that no matter how frightening something may be, their parents will be there to help. Unfortunately, a significant threat to the safety of

children is adults who sexually molest children. A key to keeping children safe from these individuals is children's ability to seek help from trusted adults anytime they are hurt or feel scared or uncomfortable. We feel that parents are the preferred source of this help.

We do not expect that your son will become a victim of child abuse. It is extremely important, however, that if he ever faces an abusive situation, he knows that there are adults in his life who will listen and respond in a supportive manner. The purpose of this booklet is to help you and your son develop communication skills and improve his safety.

Using This Booklet

This booklet is divided into two sections. The first section contains information for parents about child abuse and some tips to help you talk with your Cub Scout–age sons about child abuse. The second section is for you to share with your son. It presents four simple rules that can help keep him safer. These are followed by a few exercises for you and him to complete together as part of his requirements for the Bobcat badge. The second section also contains some optional activities for him.

We strongly suggest that you read the entire booklet before you and your son do any of the exercises together. Once you are comfortable with the topics in this booklet, you will be able to present the information in ways he can understand. Feel free to reword an exercise to help your child gain a better understanding.

Basic Information About Child Abuse

An abused or neglected child is a child who is harmed or threatened with physical or mental harm by the acts or lack of action by a person responsible for the child's care. Each state has its own laws concerning child abuse and neglect. There are several forms of abuse: physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. Child neglect is a form of abuse that occurs when a person responsible for the care of a child is able but fails to provide necessary food, clothing, shelter, or care. A brief discussion of each form of abuse follows.

Neglect

A child is neglected when the persons he depends on do not provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, and supervision. When these basic needs are deliberately withheld, not because the parents or caregivers are poor, it is considered neglect. Often the parents or caregivers of neglected children are so overwhelmed by their own needs that they cannot recognize the needs of their children.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the deliberate injury of a child by a person responsible for the child's care. Physical abuse is often the result of unreasonable punishment, or punishment that is too harsh for the child. Sometimes, physical abuse is caused when caregivers react to stress. Drinking and drug abuse by caregivers are often contributing factors to physical abuse.

Physical abuse injuries can include bruises, broken bones, burns, and abrasions. Children experience minor injuries as a normal part of childhood, usually in places such as the shins, knees, and elbows. When the injuries are found in the soft-tissue areas on the abdomen or back, or don't seem to be typical childhood injuries, it is possible that the child has been abused.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is harder to recognize but is just as harmful to the child as other forms of abuse. Emotional abuse damages the child's self-esteem and, in extreme cases, can cause developmental problems and speech disorders. A child suffers from emotional abuse when constantly ridiculed, rejected, blamed, or compared unfavorably with brothers, sisters, or other children.

Unrealistic expectations in academic or athletic achievement are a common cause of emotional abuse by parents or other adults. When a child can't meet these expectations, he feels that he is never quite good enough. Emotional abuse is almost always present when other forms of abuse are identified.

Sexual Abuse

When an adult or older child uses his or her authority to involve the child in sexual activity, it is child sexual abuse, and that person is a child molester. The molester might use tricks, bribes, pressure, threats, or force to persuade the child to join in sexual activity. Sexual abuse includes ***any*** activity performed for the sexual satisfaction of the molester.

A common misconception about sexual abuse is that children are most likely to be molested by strangers when the fact is that a child molester is usually someone that the child knows and trusts. Child molesters are most often male, but females perform about one-fifth of the sexual abuse of boys under the age of 14.

Molestation by Peers

Approximately one-third of sexual molestations are committed by other children. If your child tells you about club initiations in which sexual activity is included, or if your child tells you about inappropriate or tricked, pressured, or forced sexual activity by other children, this is a form of sexual abuse and you need to take steps to stop the activity. This kind of sexual activity is serious and should not be ignored.

Children who molest other children need professional help. They are much more likely to respond to treatment when young than are adults who began molesting children in adolescence and received no treatment, continuing to molest into adulthood.

Parents and others who work with children need to distinguish between normal sexual behavior of children and abusive behavior. All children are curious about sexual behavior as a part of growing up. When sexual behavior is forced, when the person who initiates the behavior has more power, or when the sexual behavior lacks consent, it is abusive. When parents are concerned about their son's sexual behavior, they should try to talk with him and discuss their specific concerns.

How can I tell if my child has been abused?

The best indicator of abuse is a disclosure by your child that someone hurt him, scared him, or made him feel uncomfortable. Children frequently do not tell of their abuse, but there may be physical signs or behavioral changes that give parents and other caregivers clues that abuse may have occurred.

Abused children may show few, and sometimes no, outward signs of having been abused. Most abused and neglected children experience and demonstrate some signs of stress. For many children, stress causes unexplained behavioral changes such as unhappiness, bed-wetting, clinging behavior, acting out or aggressive behavior, crying for no apparent reason, inability to concentrate, changes in school performance, self-inflicted harm, and symptoms of illnesses.

It is important to note that there are many other events in a child's life that can also create stress, such as family turmoil, drug abuse by a parent, divorce, death of a close relative or a pet, and moving. As a parent, you may be able to identify and help your child cope with such unfortunate occurrences.

Other signs of abuse may include:

- **Unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes**
- **Injuries to or around the genitals**
- **Bruises or other marks in various stages of healing indicative of repeated beatings or physical assaults**
- **Refusing to go to a friend's or relative's home for no apparent reason, for example, "I just don't like him anymore."**
- **Acting out adult sexual behavior or sexually explicit language a young child is unlikely to know**

What should I do if I suspect that my child has been abused?

It is very important that parents remain as calm as possible. Explosive displays of emotion in front of your child may cause him to feel guilty—either responsible for the abuse or responsible for upsetting you. In either case, it will not be helpful to your child.

You should show real concern, but NOT alarm or anger, when questioning your child about possible child abuse.

If your suspicion of abuse is caused by something you observed—a change in behavior, unexplained injury, or avoidance of a particular person—ask your child about it. Use your unique knowledge of your child to select words that will encourage openness.

The first consideration should be the safety and well-being of your child. If there is an indicator of injury, your child should be seen by your family's doctor. You should also contact your local child protective services agency and report your suspicions.

What should I do if my child tells me he has been sexually abused?

- ***Don't*** panic or overreact to the information disclosed by your child.
- ***Don't*** criticize your child or claim that your child misunderstood what happened.
- ***Do*** respect your child's privacy and take your child to a place where the two of you can talk without interruptions or distractions.
- ***Do*** reassure your child that he is not to blame for what happened. Tell the child that you appreciate being told about the incident and will help make sure it won't happen again.
- ***Do*** encourage your child to tell the proper authorities what happened, but try to avoid repeated interviews that can be stressful to the child.

- *Do* consult your pediatrician or other child abuse authority about the need for medical care or counseling for your child.

If your child has been sexually abused, do not blame yourself or your child. People who victimize children are not easy to identify. They come from all walks of life and all socioeconomic levels. Often they have positions of status—they go to church, hold regular jobs, and are active in the community. Child molesters are sometimes very skilled at controlling and using children, often by giving them excessive attention, gifts, and money. They use their skills on parents and other adults, disguising their abusive behavior behind friendship and care for the child.

How can I tell if someone is a child molester?

Child molesters look and act quite normal except for their interest in children. They often establish relationships with children through organizations and then use those relationships to gain access to children outside the protective environment offered by the organization. You should be concerned about any adult or older youth who wants to spend an unusual amount time alone with your child.

How can I talk with my Cub Scout about sexual abuse?

Many parents find it difficult to talk with their children about child sexual abuse. The following points may help you and your child talk about sexual abuse prevention.

- ***If you are uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with your child, let him know.*** When parents who are uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with their children try to hide their uneasiness, the children may misinterpret the anxiety and be less likely to come to you when they need help. You can use a simple statement like, "I wish we didn't have to talk about this. I'm uncomfortable because I don't like to think this could happen to you. I want you to know that it's important and you can come to me whenever you have a question or if anybody ever tries to abuse you."
- ***Select words your child understands.*** One of the primary concerns of parents is finding words to explain sexual abuse. If you are uncomfortable using the names of body parts, use whatever terms your child understands.
- ***Provide an opportunity for your child to practice youth protection skills.*** Learning is more effective when children have a chance to practice the skills they are taught.

Many parents feel that teaching children about sexual abuse will take away the innocence of childhood. Many children are at risk of sexual abuse because they do not have the maturity to understand why a child molester would want to look at, touch, or otherwise violate them. This, in part, explains why children who are sexually abused at a young age do not realize they were abused until they are older. It also explains a child's confusion if parents or other adults respond emotionally when he discloses sexual abuse.

The following section has information for children. It states four simple rules that are the keys to your child's personal safety. It also has some "What if . . ." exercises showing how the rules may be applied to common situations. We ask that you review the rules and complete the exercises with your son as he begins his Cub Scout experience.

Information for Children

Personal Safety Rules for Children

Cub Scout–age children benefit from having concrete safety rules. It is important, however, to stress that traditional cautions about "strangers" are not sufficient to protect our children. It may be hard for a child to differentiate between a stranger and someone who is known but not considered a trusted adult. In addition, individuals who harm children are usually known to the child. Cub Scout–age children need to rely upon adult guidance to improve their safety.

Discuss the following safety rules with your child and then help your child apply them in the What if . . . exercises in the next section.

- ***Check first*** with a parent or other trusted adult before you change plans, go anywhere, or accept anything from anyone. Children need to understand that their safety is greater when parents or the adult responsible for caring for them knows where they are and what they are doing.

- ***Go with a friend*** in order to be safer and to have more fun. For Cub Scouts, the friend should be a parent, other trusted adult, or older child.
- ***It is your body and you have the right to say no to anyone who tries to touch you in places***

covered by your swimming suit or to do things that you think are wrong. Children need to be empowered to set personal limits and to resist anyone who fails to respect those limits.

- *Tell a trusted adult* anytime you are hurt, scared, or made to feel uncomfortable. Cub Scouts need help in recognizing whom they should trust. Parents are in the best position to help children identify the adults in their lives deserving this trust. You can also reassure your child that he or she will not be in trouble when they come to you for help. It's very important that children understand they are not at fault when an adult or older child harms them.

Personal Safety Rules for Online Users

Most Cub Scout–age children are learning to use the Internet for schoolwork and for the many fun things available for children on the Internet. Children need to learn that in addition to many acceptable uses, using the Internet can place them in danger if they don't follow the rules. The NetSmartz Studio, a subsidiary of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, suggests that Cub Scout–age children make the following pledge:

1. I will talk with my parents or guardian so we can set up rules for going online. The rules will include the time of day I may be online, the length of time I may be online, whom I may communicate with while online, and appropriate areas for me to visit while online. I will not break these rules or access other areas without their permission.

2. I will tell a trusted adult if I come across anything that makes me feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused. I will not download anything from anyone without permission from my parents or guardian.

3. I will never share personal information such as my address, my telephone number, my parents' or guardian's work address/telephone number, or the name and location of my school without my parents' or guardian's permission.

4. I will never respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel uncomfortable. If I do get a message like that, I will tell a trusted adult right away so he or she can contact the online service. And I will not send those kinds of messages.

5. I will never meet in person with anyone I have first "met" online without checking with my parents or guardian. If my parents or guardian agrees to the meeting, it will be in a public place and my parents or guardian must come along.

Bobcat Requirements

Helping your son learn to apply these personal safety rules can be approached in the same non-frightening way you teach him not to play with fire or to look both ways when he crosses the street. Discussing the following situations with your son offers an opportunity for you to help your child learn how to apply the rules and to complete a requirement for his Bobcat award—the first step in his Cub Scout advancement.

Fulfilling these requirements completes requirement 8 on the Bobcat trail.

"What if . . ." Situations and Applicable Safety Rules

What if you are playing in your yard and your neighbor asks you to help carry groceries into his house? What should you do?

- *Check first with a parent or other trusted adult before you change plans, go anywhere, or accept anything from anyone.*

What if you are camping with a relative and he suggests that you allow him to take your picture when you are not wearing clothes? What do you do?

- Tell your relative that you do not want to have your picture taken. *(It is your body and you have the right to say no to anyone who tries to touch you in places covered by your swimming suit or to do things that you think are wrong.)*
- Tell your parents when you return home what happened. *(Tell a trusted adult anytime you are hurt, scared, or made to feel uncomfortable.)*

What if you are playing at a friend's house and his older brother and some of his friends invite you to join a club? To join the club you are expected to take off all your clothes and wrestle with them. Your friend wants to join.

What do you do?

- Tell your friend it's time for you to go home; leave immediately. ***(It's your body and you have the right to say no to anyone who wants to touch you in places covered by your swimming suit or to do things that you think are wrong.)***
- When you get home, explain to your parents what happened. ***(Tell a trusted adult anytime you are hurt, scared, or made to feel uncomfortable.)***

What if a neighbor comes to you and says your mother is sick and you must go with him? This neighbor is not a person you have been told it's OK to go with. What would you do?

- ***Check first with a parent or other trusted adult before you change plans, go anywhere, or accept anything from anyone.***

  —If at school, go to the principal or your teacher for help and verification.

  —If at home or somewhere else, call the emergency number—parents' employers, close relative—for help and verification.

  —Don't go anywhere without checking with someone in authority whom you have been told to contact in this kind of situation.

What if you are in a public restroom and someone tries to touch your private parts? What do you do?

- Yell "STOP THAT" as loudly as you can and run out of the room as quickly as possible. ***(It's your body and you have the right to say no to anyone who tries to touch you in places covered by your swimming suit or to do things that you think are wrong.)***
- Tell your parent, a police officer, a security guard, or other adult (such as your teacher) what happened. ***(Tell a trusted adult anytime you are hurt, scared, or made to feel uncomfortable.)***

What if you are walking to school in the rain and a car stops and the driver asks if you want a ride? What do you do?

- Stay away from the car; you do not need to go close to the car to answer.
- Unless you have your parent's permission to ride with the person, say "No, thank you." If the driver persists, say "No!" ***(Check first with a parent or other trusted adult before you change plans, go anywhere, or accept anything from anyone.)***
- Tell your teacher when you get to school, and tell your parent when you get home. ***(Tell a trusted adult anytime you are hurt, scared, or made to feel uncomfortable.)***

What if you are playing on the playground and an adult comes up to you and asks you to help find his or her lost puppy? What do you do?

- Adults should ask other adults for help. Tell the person you have to ask for permission. ***(Check first with a parent or other trusted adult before you change plans, go anywhere, or accept anything from anyone.)***
- Tell your parent what happened. ***(Tell a trusted adult anytime you are hurt, scared, or made to feel uncomfortable.)***

What if your babysitter asks you to sit on her lap while she reads a story and shows you pictures of naked people?

- Tell her no. ***(You have the right to say no to anyone who wants you to do things that you think are wrong.)***
- Tell your parent what happened. ***(Tell a trusted adult anytime you are hurt, scared, or made to feel uncomfortable.)***

What if you're using the Internet and a pop-up asks you to fill out a form with your name, address, birth date, and telephone number to win a prize?

- Do not give out personal information on the Internet. You never can tell how it will be used or even who will get it. ***(Check first with a parent or other trusted adult before you change plans, go anywhere, or accept anything from anyone.)***

Other Youth Protection Activities

(Not Part of the Bobcat Requirements)

My Safety Notebook

This project offers your son an opportunity to reinforce his understanding of personal safety strategies by creating his own personal safety notebook. It may be a loose-leaf notebook or just a number of pages stapled together. He can decorate the cover with his own artwork and designs. In the notebook, he can list the personal safety rules and emergency contact information he should use, such as parents' telephone numbers (work and cellular) and neighbors or friends who have been approved by his parents as emergency contacts when a parent cannot be contacted. He may also list emergency police and fire department numbers (in most areas, 911). Some of these activities may partially meet Cub Scout advancement requirements for achievements or electives.

Your son may want to include other safety guidelines in his notebook, such as for bicycle, fire, and pedestrian safety. These too may be used to satisfy some of his advancement requirements.

Plays and Skits

Children learn youth protection strategies and are able to apply them better when they have an opportunity to practice these skills. Participating in plays and skits in which they demonstrate safety skills offers a fun way to practice these skills and demonstrate their understanding of them.

As a parent, you can guide the creation of the script so the situations reflect an understanding of the rules and offer an appropriate opportunity for practicing the skills. This kind of experience helps children develop confidence in their ability to be safer.

Family Meeting

A child must feel comfortable telling his parents about any sensitive problems or experiences in which someone approached him in an improper manner, or in a way that made him feel uncomfortable. Studies have shown that more than half of all child abuse incidents are never reported because the victims are too afraid or too confused to report their experiences.

Your children need to be allowed to talk freely about their likes and dislikes, their friends, and their true feelings. You can create open communication through family meetings where safety issues can be talked about by the entire family. Such meetings can satisfy requirements of the Webelos Scout Family Member activity badge.

Additional Resources

BSA Youth Protection Materials

Along with this booklet, the Boy Scouts of America has an educational video for use by Cub Scout packs or dens. This award-winning production provides age-appropriate information about sexual abuse of boys.

It Happened to Me is a video for Cub Scout–age boys that portrays common situations in which sexual abuse can occur. The video discusses how child molesters often resort to tricks for gaining access to their victims. It emphasizes that if a boy is sexually abused, he should talk to his parents or other trusted adults. The video also stresses that it is not the child's fault if he is sexually abused; it is the child molester who is responsible.

> *It Happened to Me* should be shown to boys 6 to 10 years of age ***only*** when a parent or responsible adult is present with the child.

This video is available from your local BSA council. The BSA encourages it to be viewed by each Cub Scout pack or den annually. A meeting guide supporting the video's use is found in the *Cub Scout Leader Book* and online at www.scouting.org/pubs/av/46-182 in both English and Spanish.

The Boy Scouts of America also has a series of comic books that address relevant youth protection issues such as bullies and Internet safety. The *Power Pack Pals* comics are available through your local council service center.

For Scouting's leaders and parents, the BSA has a video training session, *Youth Protection Guidelines: Training for Volunteer Leaders and Parents.* This is available from your local BSA council, with regular training sessions scheduled in most districts.

Youth Protection Guidelines: Training for Volunteer Leaders and Parents

Power Pack Pals

Boys' Life and *Scouting* magazines

In addition to the video-based training, Youth Protection training is available on the Internet through your local council's Web site. The training addresses many questions Scout volunteers and parents have regarding child sexual abuse.

In addition to these video and online materials, the BSA provides youth protection information to its members and families through *Boys' Life* and *Scouting* magazines.

Other Sources of Child Abuse Prevention Information

National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information

330 C St., SW
Washington, DC 20447
Phone: 800-394-3366 or 703-385-7565;
fax: 703-385-3206
E-mail: nccanch@caliber.com
http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov

Prevent Child Abuse America

200 South Michigan Ave., 17th Floor
Chicago, IL 60604-2404
312-663-3520; fax: 312-939-8962
www.preventchildabuse.org

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

699 Prince St.
Alexandria, VA 22314-3175
800-843-5678
www.missingkids.com
www.netsmartz.org

BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA
1325 West Walnut Hill Lane
P.O. Box 152079
Irving, Texas 75015 -2079
www.scouting.org

46-014A

2005 Printing