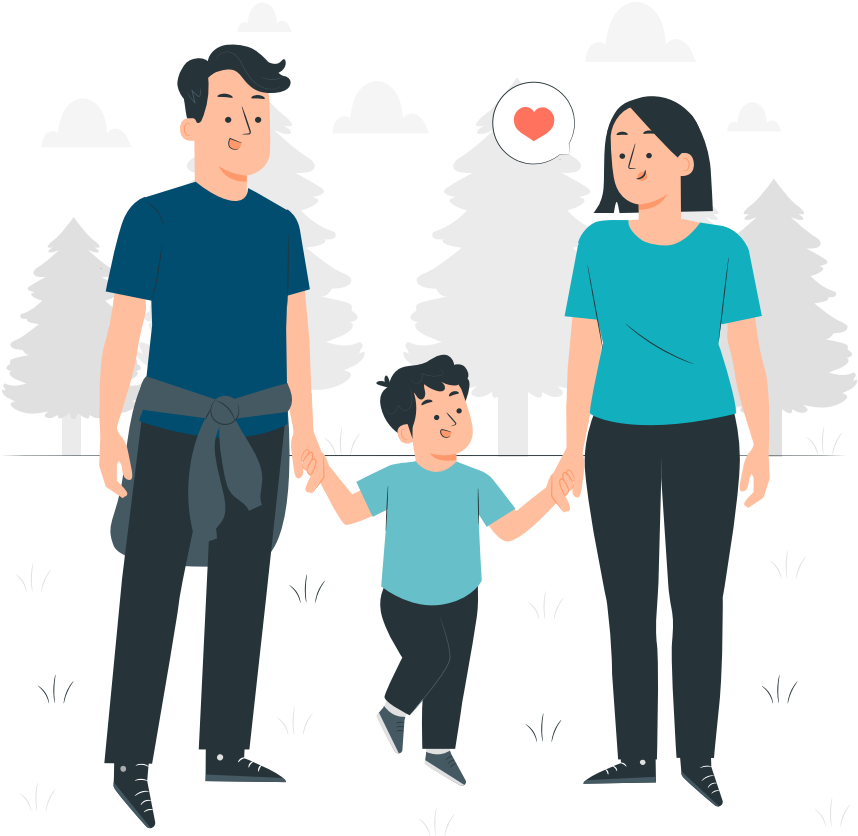
Conversation Guide for Caregivers:

Talking to Your Child About Body Safety



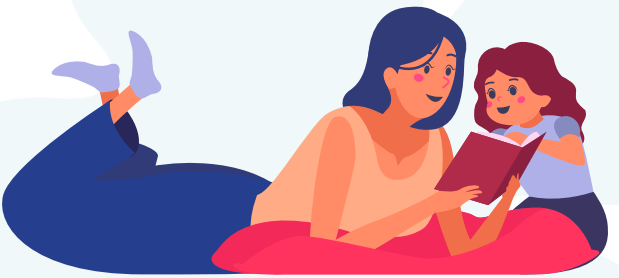
Get Comfy

Bring a sense of warmth, comfort, and normalcy to personal safety conversations so your child feels comfortable coming to you with questions and concerns.

Anytime is the right time to talk with your child, but it helps to feel calm and relaxed.

Look for opportunities in your daily routine that allow some privacy, like bedtime or in the car, because your child may not want to open up about a sensitive topic in a public place.

Be ready to respond appropriately if your child tells you about any inappropriate behavior.



Best Practice

Listen actively and watch for signs of abuse, such as physical discomfort or behavior. If your child discloses abuse, stay calm. Then with care, not denial or anger, assure them that you believe them and that you'll keep them safe. Don't rush them or insist on details.

What you can say:

- "It took a lot of courage to tell me about this."
- "I believe you."
- "Everything will be okay. I can help keep you safe because you told me."
- "Tell me more. What happened next?"

What the Research Says

Children who are informed about their bodies and who feel comfortable talking openly with a caring adult are less likely to be abused and more likely to disclose abuse if it happens (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995).

Many parents are reluctant to educate their children about sexual abuse because they view it as an uncomfortable topic to discuss (Wurtele & Kenny, 2010).

In about 90 percent of sexual abuse cases, children know their offender. Often, it's someone the family knows and likes, which is why many children are afraid to tell. (Snyder, 2000).

If your child discloses abuse, stay calm and believe them; children rarely lie about abuse. (Summit & Kyrso, 1978).

1. Start with General Safety

- **Opening the Conversation**
"Let's talk about ways to keep you safe, just like how we stay safe by looking both ways before crossing the street or wearing helmets when biking."

- **Why It's Important**
"Knowing about your body and safety helps you understand what to do if you're feeling uncomfortable or if someone is doing something that makes you feel not okay."

2. Discuss Boundaries

- **What are Boundaries?**
"Boundaries are like invisible lines that help protect you. Everyone has the right to decide who touches them and how."

- **Explain Different Types of Boundaries**
"For example, you might like hugs from family but not from strangers, and that's okay! You get to decide."

- **Sample Dialogue**
"Your body belongs to you. If someone makes you uncomfortable or touches you in a way you don't like, it's okay to say 'no' or 'stop.' And it's important to tell someone you trust."

3. Okay vs. Not Okay Touches

•Explaining the Difference
"There are okay touches, like hugs from someone you love or high-fives from a friend. But not okay touches are those that make you feel confused, sad, or scared."

•Use Clear Examples
"An okay touch might be a hug from a parent when you're feeling sad. A not okay touch is when someone touches a private part of your body—these are the parts covered by your swimsuit."

•Encouragement to Speak Up
"If someone touches you in a way that feels not okay, you can always tell me, another adult you trust, or your teacher. We are here to help keep you safe."

4. Secrets vs. Surprises

•Distinguishing the Two
"Surprises are fun things like birthday presents or parties, and it's okay to keep them a secret for a little while until the right time."

•Explaining Harmful Secrets
"But sometimes people might ask you to keep secrets that don't feel right. Secrets about touches or things that make you feel sad or uncomfortable should never be kept."

•Encourage Open Communication
"You should always tell me or another trusted adult about any secret that makes you feel bad. No one should ever ask you to keep a secret that hurts or makes you feel uncomfortable."

5. Understanding Child Sexual Abuse

- **Introduce the Topic Gently**
"There are some people who might do things that aren't safe or appropriate with children. It's important for you to know what to do if this ever happens."

- **Explain in Simple Terms**
"If someone tries to touch the private parts of your body or asks you to touch theirs, that's not okay. Even if they say it's a game, a secret, or that you'll get in trouble if you tell."

- **Provide Reassurance**
"You will never be in trouble for telling about something like this. I will always believe you, and I am here to keep you safe."

- **Remind Them of Trusted Adults**
"If someone makes you feel uncomfortable, always tell me, a teacher, or another trusted adult. It's our job to protect you."

6. Reinforcing the Message

- **Ongoing Conversations**
"We'll keep talking about this as you grow up. It's okay to ask me any questions you have, even if you feel embarrassed or confused."

- **Encouraging Confidence**
"Remember, you are in charge of your body. You have the right to feel safe and comfortable."

- **End with Reassurance**
"No matter what, I am always here to listen and help."

Talking Tips by Age

0-5 Years Old

Keep conversations short and simple with toddlers and young children. Focus on teaching basic personal safety rules, the correct names for all the body parts, and how to refuse unwanted touches.

- "A bigger person should **NEVER** touch your private parts."
- "You can always say 'No' or 'Stop' if you don't like something."
- "Never keep secrets about touching. The only safe secrets are those that eventually can be shared, like birthday surprises."

6-8 Years Old

Be more specific with the rules and continue to regularly remind your child of the personal safety rules. It should feel just as normal to say,
“Look both ways before crossing the street” as it would to say,
“Remember: No one should ever touch your private body parts except to keep you healthy.”

- “Safe touches make you feel well-cared for and loved, like a hug from a parent. They’re good for you. Unsafe touches make you feel uncomfortable and might even hurt.”
- “Pay attention to different feelings in your body, like butterflies in your tummy, sweaty palms, or a fast heartbeat. That might mean a situation is not okay.”

9-10 Years Old

Review family safety rules and go into more detail about privacy, different types of touches, and how to recognize behavior that makes them uncomfortable. At this age, your child may spend more time away from you at friends' homes or activities, and they may also spend more time online without your supervision. Know who your child spends time with, including coaches, music instructors, and friends' older siblings.

- "Not all abuse involves touching. It's not okay for someone to show you their private body parts or ask to see yours, in person or online."
- "No one should take photos of your private body parts or show you photos of other people's private parts."

11+ Years Old

Many of the same safety rules apply to older kids but might need to be framed in a way that's more open-ended. Rather than giving a one-sided talk about safe choices that your child may tune out, focus on open, honest, and ongoing dialogue. Build trust and comfort over time and adapt your conversations to be more informative and nuanced as they age.

- "I noticed you hanging out with some new kids at the basketball games. I'd love to hear more about them."
- "Being in a relationship can sometimes get complicated. Let me know if you ever want to chat about how things are going."
- "I know you have strong feelings for your girlfriend, so even though it may seem awkward, we need to talk about safety and consent."
- "It's always okay to change your mind and stop sexual activity at any time, even if you've already said 'Yes.' Your feelings and safety come first."
- "It's never okay for someone to use sex or your feelings to try to control you. If that happens, tell them it's not okay, and then tell me so we can talk about it."
- "It's important to watch out for your friends. If you see something inappropriate, say something."

Simple Safety Rules

How you communicate the following safety rules and how much detail you include may vary depending on your family values and child's developmental stage. Make sure to keep safety rules simple so they're easy to understand and remember, and repeat them frequently, particularly for younger children.

- "Never keep secrets about touching."
- "Always ask the adult in charge if it's okay for another adult to give you something or take you somewhere."
- "You can always say 'No' to unwanted touches."
- "It's never your fault if someone sexually abuses you."
- "Tell a safe adult if someone ever makes you feel uncomfortable and keep telling until someone believes you."
- "It's never too late to tell."

TIP:

Create a family safety plan
with your child to help them identify safe adults and how to contact them in an emergency.

IF YOU SUSPECT ABUSE OR NEED HELP

Alberta Child Abuse Hotline
1-800-387-5437 (KIDS) (24 hour support 7 days a week)

Dragonfly Centre
1-866-300-4325 (HEAL)

Wellness Hotline
1-855-242-3310 (in Cree, Ojibwe & Inuktitut languages)

Alberta's One Line
1-866-403-8000

Central Alberta Sexual Assault Centre
1-866-956-1099 (24 hour support, 7 days a week)