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How to Talk With Kids About Personal Safety and Sexual Abuse

A Committee for Children campaign teaches parents how to talk with their children about online abuse

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER)

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PHOTO: Credit: Jhon David, Unsplash

Most parents, especially those of younger children, try to limit their kids' [screen time](https://www.parentmap.com/article/how-much-screen-time-too-much-kids) (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/how-much-screen-time-too-much-kids>). But an unexpected side effect of the pandemic is the scramble to enhance kids' access to digital resources. And once your first-grader knows how to set up their own Zoom meetings, there's no closing Pandora's electronic box. Now parents need to start teaching their kids about online safety much sooner than they may have planned. In fact, the FBI has even released a [warning to parents](https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation) (<https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation>) that school closures present an increased risk for online exploitation. The [Committee for Children](https://www.cfchildren.org/) (<https://www.cfchildren.org/>) has

developed resources to help parents navigate the murky waters of online safety education.

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Online is real life

If your child's sudden plunge into the deep end of digital education has you feeling unprepared, take heart.

"Our understanding from the research is that it's important for parents to have open communication with kids," says Tia Kim, Ph.D. Kim is the vice president of education, research and impact at the Committee for Children, a global social and emotional learning nonprofit with roots in child protection.

Research has shown that the [most effective \(https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1524838020916257?journalCode=tvaa&\)](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1524838020916257?journalCode=tvaa&) online safety efforts dovetail with regular safety education. Having frank and frequent conversations with your children and teaching your kids about body safety and boundaries are the basis for safety in both the physical world and online.

Notice risks and red flags

Overall, child sex abuse impacts 1 in 20 boys and 1 in 4 girls. A recent study of Americans between ages 10 and 18 found that from 2 to 3 percent had received unwanted solicitations online.

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There are some sketchy apps out there, and Zoom bombing is a real thing. But 90 percent of sexually abused children know their abuser. "Parents tend to think of creepy strangers [as abusers]," says Kim, "but many of the interactions that happen online start offline first, then move into the digital space."

Abusers often use technology as a tool to build trust with kids who are vulnerable in terms of wanting flattery or attention. Some red flags to watch for in kids include secretive behavior, withdrawal from family life and angry outbursts or nightmares.

"Those are behaviors that you might see with any high-stress situation," says Kim. So, how can parents distinguish online exploitation from [COVID-19 anxiety \(https://www.parentmap.com/article/manage-family-anxiety-coronavirus-covid-19\)](https://www.parentmap.com/article/manage-family-anxiety-coronavirus-covid-19)?

Have a 'Hot Chocolate Talk'

"That's why it's really important to have conversations and build rapport with your kids from an early age. Because then, hopefully, they are more able to come talk to you about any situation that's creating stress for them," says Kim.

But for many parents, it's not so easy to bring up uncomfortable subjects. And a lot of us put off conversations we know we should be having.

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“Parents just don’t know what to say or how to start. So, we created the Hot Chocolate Talk campaign,” says Kim. “We named it the ‘Hot Chocolate Talk’ because we wanted to connote imagery of a comfortable or cozy situation, to hopefully make the conversation easier.”

Hot Chocolate Talk’s free [downloadable resources \(https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/child-abuse-prevention/\)](https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/child-abuse-prevention/) offer conversation guides for each age group, presenting word-for-word messages that parents can use. Parents might sit their kids down for a chat with a cup of cocoa, but they can also find quick moments in daily life – such as when setting up an account on a new digital platform or checking in after an online class session – to bring these messages into a conversation.

Overcome resistance

“I don’t think it’s ever too late to start [the conversation]. It’s about teaching your kids how to make the right decisions and understand healthy relationships,” says Kim. “And I think it’s important that you have these conversations often and not just once.”

If your kids aren’t used to talking about these things with you, they may be resistant at first.

“Keep trying,” says Kim. “Start the conversation, ask questions and be an active listener. Kids really differ in their communication styles. Some kids want to talk a lot and some kids don’t. It’s important to not get angry and just show that you are willing to talk to them and listen.”

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Establish digital ground rules

The most important thing is to make sure your kids feel safe talking to you. But it’s still a good idea to set digital ground rules.

“Every family has different safety rules. It’s really important to define what your online rules are,” says Kim. Help your kids understand what sort of activity is appropriate for each platform – what’s okay on Snapchat is different from what is okay in the chat function of their chemistry class. But regardless of what kind of [parental controls \(https://www.parentmap.com/article/evolution-parental-controls\)](https://www.parentmap.com/article/evolution-parental-controls) and privacy settings you have in place, teach kids to consider everything they do online as public and permanent.

And what if your kids do experience something inappropriate online?

“I think of the three R’s: recognize, refuse and report. Those are the things that we should be teaching our kids to do,” says Kim.

Resources for Talking With Kids About Personal Safety and Sexual Abuse

Hot Chocolate Talk How-To

Find [overall guidelines \(https://www.cfchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/child-abuse-prevention/docs/all-ages-sexual-abuse-prevention-conversation-guide.pdf\)](https://www.cfchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/child-abuse-prevention/docs/all-ages-sexual-abuse-prevention-conversation-guide.pdf) for initiating Hot Chocolate Talks, [guides \(https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/child-abuse-prevention/\)](https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/child-abuse-prevention/) for age-specific talking points and information about why these talks are valuable at the [Committee for Children website \(https://www.cfchildren.org/\)](https://www.cfchildren.org/).

National Child Abuse Hotline

Access resources and information about abuse, or call the free hotline to contact trained counselors who can help with reporting abuse.

Web: [childhelp.org \(https://www.childhelp.org/\)](https://www.childhelp.org/)

Toll-free: 1-800-4-A-CHILD

TDD: 1-800-2-A-CHILD

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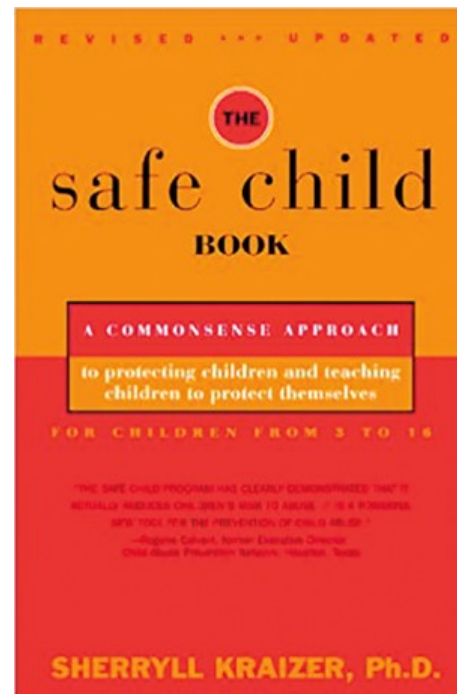
[“The Safe Child Book: A Commonsense Approach to Protecting Children and Teaching Children to Protect Themselves \(https://www.amazon.com/Safe-Child-Book-Commonsense-Protecting/dp/0684814234?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20\)”](https://www.amazon.com/Safe-Child-Book-Commonsense-Protecting/dp/0684814234?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20) by Sherryll Kerns Kraizer

“The Safe Child Book” gives parents effective and nonthreatening techniques for teaching children how to protect themselves, with chapters on abuse, bullying, staying safe online and choosing child-care providers.

[“Out of Harm’s Way: A Parent’s Guide to Protecting Young Children From Sexual Abuse \(https://www.amazon.com/Out-Harms-Way-Protecting-Children-ebook/dp/B00VDHHA6Q?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20\)”](https://www.amazon.com/Out-Harms-Way-Protecting-Children-ebook/dp/B00VDHHA6Q?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20) by Sandy K. Wurtele

This 30-page booklet is an excellent starting point for gathering information about how to prevent child sexual abuse.

[“Off Limits: A Parent’s Guide to Keeping Kids Safe From Sexual Abuse \(https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1884444830?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20\)”](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1884444830?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20) by Sandy K. Wurtele and Feather Berkower



This title presents 32 safety tips for how parents, communities and children themselves can prevent child sexual abuse.

“Trauma-Proofing Your Kids: A Parents’ Guide for Instilling Confidence, Joy and Resilience (<https://www.amazon.com/Trauma-Proofing-Your-Kids-Instilling-Confidence-ebook/dp/BOOLDPLELK?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20>)” by Peter A. Levine and Maggie Kline

This guide explores how to build resiliency in children and how to restore it in those who have suffered a traumatic experience.

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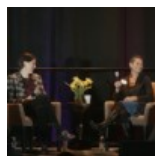
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Seattle-based freelance writer Gemma Alexander focuses on the intersection of parenting and the arts. When she's not writing for "ParentMap," she blogs at gemmadeealexander.com (<https://gemmadeealexander.com/>) and tweets at @gemmadeetweet.

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