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 Boy Scouts of America o ir a
www.scouting.org/pubs/ypt/pdf/46-072.pdf.

BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA®

Introduction

Our children are often faced with choices that affect their development and safety. As parents, we can 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, their friends, and many other features of our daily lives. Other things are 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. Perhaps the most important step parents can take to protect their children from abuse is to have open communication in the home. Research has shown that children whose parents talk to them about preventing abuse are more effective at fending off assaults. Your role is very important.

More than 3 million reports of child abuse are received each year, including half a million reports of *child sexual abuse.* As a major youth-serving organization, the Boy Scouts of America has a unique opportunity to help protect the youth of our nation. This booklet is designed to give you essential information that should help you teach your children how to protect themselves.

If your son is a new Boy Scout, this might be the first time that you have seen this *Parent's Guide.* If you have other sons in Scouting, or if your son has advanced in Boy Scouting, we hope that you are familiar with this guide and have discussed its contents with your children. In either case, we encourage you to make this information part of a continuing family effort that reinforces the concepts included in this guidebook.

We do not expect that your son will become a victim of child abuse. It is extremely important, however, that if he is ever confronted with an abusive situation, he will know 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 establish, or reinforce, open communication on this sensitive topic.

Section I. Information for Parents

Using This Booklet

This booklet is divided into two sections. The first section is for your information. It contains information about child abuse and provides some tips to help parents talk with their Boy Scout–age sons about child abuse. The second section is for you to share with your son. Some of the activities listed in the second section are requirements your son needs your help to complete before he can join his Boy Scout troop.

Youth Protection Joining Requirement: For your son to join a Boy Scout troop, he must complete the exercises included in Section II of this pamphlet.

It is important that you read the entire booklet before you and your son do any of the exercises together. You might be tempted to hand this booklet to your son and tell him to read it. We urge you to resist this temptation. Your son needs to know that he can openly discuss difficult topics with you.

Child Abuse: Basic Information for Parents

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 of a person responsible for the child's care. 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. Each state has its own definitions and laws concerning child abuse and child neglect.

Child abuse and neglect are serious problems for our society. The number of cases reported has increased each year since 1976, when statistics were first kept. Brief discussions of each form of abuse are presented below.

Neglect

A child is neglected if the persons this child 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 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 often stems from unreasonable punishment, or by punishment that is too harsh for the child. Sometimes it is the result of a caregiver's reaction to stress. Drinking and drug abuse by caretakers have become more common contributing factors in physical abuse cases.

Physical abuse injuries can include bruises, broken bones, burns, and abrasions. Children experience minor injuries as a normal part of childhood, usually in predictable places such as

the shins, knees, and elbows. When the injuries are in soft-tissue areas on the abdomen or back, or don't seem to be typical childhood injuries, physical abuse becomes a possibility.

Physical abuse happens to children of all age groups; however, youth ages 12 to 17 have the highest rate of injury from physical abuse. This is possibly due to increasing conflict between parents and children as children become more independent.

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 lead to developmental problems and speech disorders. A child suffers from emotional abuse when constantly ridiculed, rejected, blamed, or compared unfavorably with brothers or sisters or other children.

Expecting too much from the child in academics, athletics, or other areas is a common cause of emotional abuse by parents or other adults. When a child can't meet these expectations, the child feels that he or she is never quite good enough.

Sexual Abuse

When an adult or an older child uses his or her authority over a child to involve the child in sexual activity, it is sexual abuse, and that person is a child molester. The molester might use tricks, bribes, 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, including acts ranging from exposing his or her sex organs (exhibitionism), observing another's sex organs or sexual activity (voyeurism), to fondling and rape.

Here are a few facts you should know about child sexual abuse:

- Child sexual abuse occurs to as many as 25 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys before they reach 18 years of age.
- Boys and girls could be sexually abused at any age; however, most sexual abuse occurs between the ages of 7 and 13.
- Children are most likely to be molested by someone they know and trust.
- Eighty to 90 percent of sexually abused boys are molested by acquaintances who are nonfamily members.
- Females perform 20 percent of the sexual abuse of boys under age 14 (prepubescents).
- Few sexually abused children tell anyone that they have been abused. Children are usually told to keep the abuse secret. This could involve threats, bribes, or physical force.
- Children might feel responsible for the abuse and fear an angry reaction from their parents.

Preteen and teenage boys are especially at risk for sexual abuse. The physical and hormonal changes caused by puberty, and their natural curiosity about their new emotions and feelings, make these youth likely targets for child molesters. The normal desire of boys this age to show their independence from their parents' control adds to the risk. This combination might keep boys this age from asking their parents for help when faced with sexual abuse.

Sexual Molestation by Peers

Approximately one-third of sexual molestation occurs at the hands of 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 misconduct 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 were molesters as children and received no treatment, and continue to molest children as adults.

Parents and other adults who work with children need to distinguish between sexual behavior that is a normal part of growing up, and sexual behavior that is abusive. If you find your child has engaged in sexual behavior that might not be abusive, but which bothers you, use the opportunity to discuss the behavior and help your child understand *why* it bothers you.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

The best sign that a child has been sexually abused is his statement that he was. Children often do not report their abuse, so parents should be alert for other signs.
These are some signs to watch for:

- *Hints, indirect messages*—Refusing to go to a friend's or relative's home for no apparent reason; for example, "I just don't like him anymore."
- *Seductive or provocative behavior*—Acting out adult sexual behavior or using sexual language a child his age is unlikely to know.
- *Physical symptoms*—Irritation of genital or anal areas.

The following are common signs that children are upset. If present for more than a few days, these signs could indicate that something is wrong and your child needs help and parental support. They might also be signs that your child is being sexually abused:

- *Self-destructive behavior*—Using alcohol or drugs, deliberately harming himself, running away, attempting suicide, or sexual recklessness or promiscuity.
- *Unhappiness*—Undue anxiety and crying, sleep disturbances or loss of appetite.
- *Regression*—Behaving like a younger child, thumb sucking, or bed-wetting.
- *Difficulty at school*—Sudden drop in grades, behavioral problems, or truancy.

Preventing Child Abuse

Except for sexual abuse of boys, the great majority of child abuse occurs within families. Prevention efforts for emotional and physical abuse as well as neglect generally focus on helping abusers, often the parents, change their behavior.

Some physical and emotional abuses are reactions by parents to the stresses in their lives. By learning to recognize these stresses, and then taking a time-out when the pressures mount, we can avoid abusing those we love. The next page lists some alternatives to physical and emotional abuse for overstressed parents. These suggestions come from the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse.

In addition to the alternatives on the next page, parents and other child caregivers may want to think about the following questions* suggested by Douglas Besharov, the first director of the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, regarding the methods of discipline they use.

- Is the purpose of the punishment to educate the child or to vent the parent's anger?
- Is the child capable of understanding the relationship between his behavior and the punishment?
- Is the punishment appropriate and within the bounds of acceptable discipline?
- Is a less severe, but equally effective, punishment available?
- Is the punishment degrading, brutal, or extended beyond the limits of what the child can handle?
- If physical force is used, is it done carefully to avoid injury?

These questions help to define the boundaries between acceptable discipline and child abuse. Other causes of child abuse inside the family might be much more complex and require professional help to resolve.

Alternatives to Child Abuse

The next time everyday pressures build up to the point where you feel like lashing out—**Stop!** Try any of these simple alternatives. You'll feel better . . . and so will your child:

- Take a deep breath. And another. Then remember you are the adult.
- Close your eyes and imagine you're hearing what your child is about to hear.
- Press your lips together and count to 10; or, better yet, to 20.
- Put your child in a time-out chair. (Remember this rule: One time-out minute for each year of age.)
- Put yourself in a time-out chair. Think about why you are angry: Is it your child, or is your child simply a convenient target for your anger?
- Phone a friend.
- If someone can watch the children, go outside and take a walk.
- Splash cold water on your face.
- Hug a pillow.
- Turn on some music. Maybe even sing along.
- Pick up a pencil and write down as many *helpful* words as you can think of. Save the list.

Few parents mean to abuse their children. When parents take time out to get control of themselves before they grab hold of their children, everybody wins.

Talking With Your Child About Sexual Abuse

Some parents would almost rather have a tooth pulled than talk with their children about sexual abuse. This reluctance seems to increase with the age of the child. To help you in this regard, the information in Section II focuses on sexual abuse prevention.

The following information should help you and your child talk about sexual abuse prevention:

- *If you feel uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with your child, let him know.* When you feel uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with your children and try to hide your uneasiness, your children might misinterpret the anxiety and be less likely to approach you when they need help. You can use a simple statement like, "I wish we did not have to talk about this. I am uncomfortable because I don't like to think that 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 hurt you."
- *Children at this age are developing an awareness of their own sexuality and need parental help to sort out what is and is not exploitive.* Children at this age need specific permission to ask questions about relationships and feelings. Nonspecific "good touch, bad touch" warnings are insufficient, since most of the touching they experience might be "confusing touch." Adolescents also need parental help to set boundaries for their relationships with others—an awareness of when they are being controlling or abusive.

- *Many children at this age feel it is more important to be "cool" than it is to ask questions or seek parental assistance.* Your son might resist discussing the material in this booklet with you. He might be giggly, unfocused, or restless. He might tell you that he already knows about sexual abuse. That's all right. The point of discussing sexual abuse with him is to let him know that if and when he has questions or problems he can't handle by himself, you will help him. If he tells you he already knows about sexual abuse, you can ask him to tell you what he knows.

Today's teenagers and preteens receive a lot of misinformation about sexuality, relationships, and sexual abuse. Their role models are likely to be rock stars and other media personalities. As influential as these are, surveys of young people indicate that parents continue to be a strong influence in their lives.

When a Child Tells You About Abuse

If your child becomes a victim of abuse, your first reaction can be very important in helping him through the ordeal. The following guidelines may help you:

- ***Don't*** panic or overreact to the information your child tells you.
- ***Don't*** criticize your child or tell your child he 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 him that you appreciate being told about the incident and will help to make sure that 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 family doctor or other child abuse authority about the need for medical care or counseling for your child.

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

Finally, 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 a position of status—they go

to church, hold regular jobs, and are active in the community. Child molesters are sometimes very skilled at controlling children, often by giving excessive attention, gifts, and money.

Child molesters use their skills on parents and other adults, disguising their abusive behavior behind friendship and care for the child.

Resources

BSA Youth Protection Materials

A Time to Tell is a videotape produced by the BSA to educate boys 11 to 14 years of age about sexual abuse. This video introduces the "three Rs" of Youth Protection. Boy Scout troops are encouraged to view the video once each year. It is available from your BSA local council. A meeting guide supporting its use can be found in the *Scoutmaster Handbook*.

For Scouting's leaders and parents, the BSA has a videotaped training program, *Youth Protection Guidelines: Training for Volunteer Leaders and Parents.* This is available from your BSA local council, and regular training sessions are scheduled in most districts. It is also available online on your local council's Web site. It addresses many questions that Scout volunteers and parents ask regarding child sexual abuse.

In addition to these videotaped materials, the BSA sometimes 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
800-394-3366 or 703-385-7565
Fax: 703-385-3206
E-mail: nccanch@caliber.com
Web site: 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
Web site: www.preventchildabuse.org

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
699 Prince St.Alexandria, VA 22314-3175
800-843-5678
Fax: 703-274-2200
Web site: www.missingkids.org

Section II. Information for Youth

(Youth Protection Troop Joining Requirements)

The *Child's Bill of Rights* outlines some specific strategies your child can use to protect himself. You should discuss these and the "three Rs" of Youth Protection with your child before completing the Youth Protection joining requirements. These could provide the information that your son needs to help him respond to the situations in the exercises.

Child's Bill of Rights

When feeling threatened, you have the right to

- Trust your instincts or feelings.
- Expect privacy.
- Say no to unwanted touching or affection.
- Say no to an adult's inappropriate demands and requests.
- Withhold information that could jeopardize your safety.
- Refuse gifts.
- Be rude or unhelpful if the situation warrants.
- Run, scream, and make a scene.
- Physically fight off unwanted advances.
- Ask for help.

It's important to remember that these are protective actions that will give your son the power to protect himself.

The Boy Scouts of America bases the Youth Protection strategies it teaches its members on the "three Rs" of Youth Protection.

The "three Rs" of Youth Protection provide a useful tool for parents when they talk with their 11- to 14-year-old children about sexual abuse. Children of this age are less apt than younger children to respond to a list of child safety rules. They need to develop the problem-solving skills necessary to

"Three Rs" of Youth Protection

- **Recognize** that anyone could be a child molester and be aware of situations that could lead to abuse.
- **Resist** advances made by child molesters to avoid being abused.
- **Report** any molestation or attempted molestation to parents or other trusted adults.

evaluate situations and come up with their own responses. Parents need to help their children develop these skills.

You can help your children develop their personal safety skills. Read the following material with your son. Use the "three Rs" of Youth Protection and the *Child's Bill of Rights* as references.

Personal Protection Rules for Computer Online Services

When you're online, you are in a public place, among thousands of people who are online at the same time. Be safe by following these personal protection rules and you will have fun.

- Keep online conversations with strangers to public places, not in e-mail.
- Do not give anyone online your real last name, phone numbers at home or school, your parents' workplaces, or the name or location of your school or home address unless you have your parent's permission first. Never give your password to anyone but a parent or other adult in your family.
- If someone shows you e-mail with sayings that make you feel uncomfortable, trust your instincts. You are probably right to be wary. Do not respond. Tell a parent what happened.
- If somebody tells you to keep what's going on between the two of you secret, tell a parent.
- Be careful whom you talk to. Anyone who starts talking about subjects that make you feel uncomfortable is probably an adult posing as a kid.

- Pay attention if someone tells you things that don't fit together. One time an online friend will say he or she is 12, and another time will say he or she is 14. That is a warning that this person is lying and may be an adult posing as a kid.
- Unless you talk to a parent about it first, never talk to anybody by phone if you know that person only online. If someone asks you to call—even if it's collect or a toll-free, 800 number—that's a warning. That person can get your phone number this way, either from a phone bill or from caller ID.
- Never agree to meet someone you have met only online any place off-line, in the real world.
- Watch out if someone online starts talking about *hacking*, or breaking onto other people's or companies' computer systems; *phreaking* (the "ph"sounds like an "f"), the illegal use of long-distance services or cellular phones; or viruses, online programs that destroy or damage data when other people download these onto their computers.
- Promise your parent or an adult family member and yourself that you will honor any rules about how much time you are allowed to spend online and what you do and where you go while you are online.

1. Child Abuse and Being a Good Scout

When a boy joins the Scouting program, he assumes a duty to be faithful to the rules of Scouting as represented in the Scout Oath, Scout Law, Scout motto, and Scout slogan.

The rules of Scouting don't require a Scout to put himself in possibly dangerous situations—quite the contrary, we want Scouts to "be prepared" and to "do their best" to avoid these situations.

We hope that you will discuss these rules with your Scout and be sure that he understands that he should not risk his safety to follow the rules of Scouting.

The Scout Oath includes the phrase "To help other people at all times." The Scout Law says that "A Scout is helpful," and the Scout slogan is "Do a Good Turn Daily." There are many people who need help, and a Boy Scout should be willing to lend a hand when needed.

Sometimes people who really do not need help will ask for it in order to create an opportunity for abuse. Boy Scouts should be very familiar with the rules of safety so that they can recognize situations to be wary of. For example:

- It is one thing to stand on the sidewalk away from a car to give directions, and something else to get in the car with someone to show them the way. A Scout should never get into a car without his parent's permission.
- It may be OK for a Scout to help carry groceries to a person's house, but he should never enter the house unless he has permission from his parents.

The Scout Law also states that a Scout is obedient—but a Scout does not have to obey an adult when that person tells him to do something that the Scout feels is wrong or that makes the Scout feel uncomfortable. In these situations, the Scout should talk with his parent about his concerns.

2. Practicing the "Three Rs" of Youth Protection

The following stories will help your son understand how to use the "three Rs" of Youth Protection. These situations might be more detailed than you feel comfortable with; however, if children are going to learn about sexual abuse, they must be able to identify and discuss specific acts.

Jeff's Story

I am a 12-year-old boy in the sixth grade at my middle school. Every afternoon after school, I go to a recreation center until my mom gets home from work. One of the guys who works at the center has been spending a lot of time with me lately. He's really nice, and he told me that he would teach me how to wrestle. He said that wrestling would be a good sport for me because it has different weight classes and I'm so small I would be wrestling other kids my own size. I've got to admit that I like to wrestle. But there's something bothering me. This guy who's teaching me to wrestle wants me to come to the center on Sunday when no one else is there. He said that we would have the place to ourselves, and he could really teach me a lot. I'd like to, but I've been noticing that when he's teaching me, he holds me down and sometimes grabs me between the legs. He makes like it's a real funny joke, but I'm not so sure that I like it.

- *What is risky about this situation?*
  - History of unwanted touching of private parts.
  - Touching will probably become more serious if allowed to continue.
  - Individual coaching on Sunday would put Jeff alone at the center with a possible molester.
- *How would you resist?*
  - Tell the person to stop grabbing you and do not wrestle with him any longer.
  - Make sure that you are not alone with him, and if he grabs you yell "Stop that!" loud enough so that everyone will hear.
- *How would you report this situation?*
  - Tell the individual's supervisor and ask that someone else help you with wrestling.
  - Ask your parents to file a report with the police. What he is doing is abuse and it is illegal.

Mario's Story

I am a 13-year-old boy with a problem—my 17-year-old uncle, Joe. Joe stays with me when my parents go out of town. The last time, he started to act really strange. He wouldn't let me out of his sight. Even when I took a shower, he insisted that I keep the bathroom door open. When I turned around, Joe was taking a picture of me in the shower. He told me there wasn't any film in the camera and that it was a joke. I don't think it was funny, though. On the last night he was there, he told me to come into his bedroom and watch TV with him—only it wasn't TV, it was sex stuff. He told me not to tell anyone because if I did he would be in trouble *and so would I.*

- *Does the fact that Joe is a member of Mario's family and only 17 years old mean that he could not be a possible child molester?*
  - Remember that a child molester could be anyone. Most are family members or someone else the child knows.
  - Many child molesters begin molesting others when they are teenagers

- *Does the fact that Joe has not touched Mario mean that sexual abuse did not happen?*
  - Joe violated Mario's privacy by taking a picture that Mario did not want taken—this is one form of abuse.
  - Showing Mario pornographic videos is a form of sexual abuse and is usually a forerunner of sexual contact.
- *Should Mario get into trouble if he tells on Joe?*
  - Mario should not be blamed. He did nothing wrong.
  - Anytime that sexual abuse occurs, the abuser is the one who is responsible.

Steven's Story

My name is Steven. I go to junior high school and make pretty good grades, so I'm not stupid. But the other day something happened that made me feel really dumb. A group of guys decided that they wanted to start a secret club. Only a few kids would be able to join their club. It was a fun thing, and the only way that you could join was to be asked by one of the members of the club. Well, one of my friends belonged and asked me to join. I was really flattered, and I really wanted to join. He told me that the club was meeting in one of the storage buildings on campus and that we could get high and have some fun—then he grabbed my crotch and laughed.

- *What do you suppose Steven's friend meant when he said, "We could get high and have some fun," and then grabbed Steven's crotch?*
  - Secret clubs are often used by child molesters to gain access to unsuspecting boys.
  - Using drugs and alcohol to lower resistance to sexual abuse also is quite common.

- *Suppose that Steven went to the club meeting and ended up being sexually molested by one of the other guys there. How do you think he would feel?*
  - A lot of boys feel very embarrassed when they realize that they have been fooled. Often they are afraid that others will think that they are homosexual if they have been sexually abused by another guy.
  - Embarrassment might cause Steven and other boys in his situation to not report their abuse.

Family Meeting
(Not Part of Joining Requirement)

A child must feel comfortable telling his parent 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 able 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. The Youth Protection materials could be discussed in a family meeting.

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