

The “Basics” of Sexual Violence

“The Basics of Sexual Violence” is part of a larger document that includes three types of sexual violence: Sexual harassment, Sexual abuse, and Sexual assault. Each type is briefly defined here. More detail, specific actions, and resources can be found in the complete document that is available on-line at:

www.icyd.org

Awareness

All families want their children to grow up to be safe, healthy, and successful. Preventing sexual violence is part of helping your child or youth grow up to be a confident and competent adult. This form of violence prevention can be addressed at an early age similar to the ways parents teach bicycle safety, protect children from poisoning, or prepare them to be good drivers. Here are some key points to keep in mind.

Sexual violence can happen to any child or youth and is much more common than we have believed.

It is hard to imagine that someone you love as dearly as your child could be hurt in such an awful way. The reality is, however, that one in ten Iowans will have a forced sexual experience sometime in their lives. Two-thirds of all sexual abuse happens to children under the age of 18, and 90 percent of reported victims know and trust their abuser. Boys and girls of all ages, races, and income levels are at risk, and every family should be aware so they can be prepared to address this serious issue.

Sexual violence in any form is harmful to children and can have long-lasting health effects.

When someone takes advantage of a child’s vulnerability and trust, that child is robbed of his/her innocence. People who were victims of sexual violence as children or teens may develop long-term physical and emotional problems. Some believe that a child can’t be hurt if s/he is too young to understand sexual activity. Others believe that children want this kind of

Preventing Child and Youth Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault

A Resource for Iowa’s Families



Preventing Child and Youth Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault

A Resource for Iowa's Families

attention. Both of these beliefs are wrong and may be part of an abuser's way to trick others into accepting the sexual violence as normal.

Your attitude is important.

Think about your own experiences, feelings, and beliefs about sexual violence. Your children's beliefs and behaviors will likely reflect the values and attitudes you have. If you believe that sexual violence can't happen to your child or don't know the signs of sexual violence, your child may not know what to do if someone approaches him/her inappropriately. If you are fearful about your child being a victim, your child may be too frightened to take any action. On the other hand, if you are willing to approach the subject in a matter-of-fact way with useful information, your child may feel much more prepared to deal with a situation if it arises.

Keep in mind that the values, beliefs, and traditions established by your family life will guide your children as they grow and begin to establish new relationships.

Prevention

Just as we want to prevent accidents from happening to our loved ones, we want to prevent sexual violence from happening to someone we love. Here are some basic prevention tips to help minimize a child's risk of sexual violence.

Open communication is good prevention.

Just as with other important topics such as alcohol use or smoking, *having a strong line of open communication with your children is critical.*

- **Let your children know you are interested and available to talk**, no matter what the topic. Discuss school life regularly with your child/youth including grades, sports, extracurricular activities, and friends.
- **Look for “teachable moments”** — daily opportunities that occur with your child/youth, such as when riding in the car, eating a meal together, etc. — to make it easy to share your messages and values.
- **Talk openly about body safety.** Teach your children, from an early age, to know that bad or secret touches to their private body parts should not happen. Teach them proper terms for private body parts and talk about appropriate boundaries in touching or being touched by others.

Support your child in developing interpersonal skills.

- **Promote self-confidence** by encouraging your child to speak up for her/himself so s/he can learn to reject unwanted advances.
- **Suggest participation in leadership training opportunities** to help your child gain the confidence needed to ward off sexual abuse and harassment.
- **Raise awareness of other people's feelings** to help prevent your child from hurting others in this way. Foster a sense of respect, empathy, and compassion.

Start talking *before* something happens.

It is important to introduce the idea of age-appropriate body safety early. Talk about touches that are good (such as hugs or petting a dog), touches that are hurtful (such as being hit, shoved, or pinched), and touches that may be confusing (being touched on your private parts, even if it feels good). Let them know when it is OK for private parts to be touched (such as changing a baby's diaper, during bath time, or at a doctor visit). Encourage your child to respect others' boundaries — and respect your child's boundaries. *Children of all ages need to know they have your permission to tell someone NO if they don't like the way they are being touched.*

Realize that sexual abusers control children through secrecy.

Since the majority of sexual violence occurs between people who know each other, a sexual abuser will use the child's trust to take advantage of her/him. An abuser may start by asking the child to do things that are fun or rewarding. Over time, they will test the child's boundaries by asking her/him to do more and more things. At some point, the child may realize that what the abuser is doing is wrong but may not believe they can stop it, or may think it is their fault. One of the best ways to confront the secrecy of abuse is to let your children know it is *always okay to tell* when they are confused or frightened about secret or sexual touching, and *that adults should never trick a child into touching their private parts.*

Intervention

As careful as we might be in our efforts to protect our children, we must realize that sexual abusers take advantage of a child or young adult's vulnerability. In spite of everything a person does right, accidents, injuries, or sexual violence can still happen. It's important to know that sexual violence is against the law and that each type of sexual violence requires a different approach to help the victim as well as the abuser.

Preventing Child and Youth Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault

A Resource for Iowa's Families

Preventing Child and Youth Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault

A Resource for Iowa's Families

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment consists of unwelcome visual, verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. It can also occur when a person in authority demands sexual favors or subjects a child/youth to sexual conduct that creates an offensive, hostile, or intimidating environment. Sexual harassment is illegal — Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination in schools, including sexual harassment.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse refers to coerced or forced sexual contact or activity that may be ongoing or occurs over time, often within a trusting relationship. Perpetrators are usually older than their victims and may trick or force them into gradually doing the sexual behavior. These behaviors may involve:

- Watching sexually explicit videos or acts;
- Being made to touch another's private parts;
- Being touched on the person's own private parts;
- Engaging or attempting to engage in sexual intercourse, or other sexual behavior.

The sexual behavior may not be violent and may even be pleasurable to the child (who doesn't necessarily know it is wrong). Perpetrators of ongoing sexual abuse control the child/youth through secrecy, shame, or threats.

Sexual Assault

Sexual assault usually refers to forced or unwanted sexual activity that occurs as a single incident — as opposed to ongoing sexual abuse that may continue over time. The assault may involve a similar range of behaviors, and the offender usually takes advantage of the victim's vulnerability. Anyone can perpetrate this type of abuse — a trusted friend or family member, a stranger, a casual acquaintance, or an intimate partner. Similar to other forms of sexual violence, sexual assault is not always reported to authorities. However, when cases are extreme or sensational, this form of violence tends to receive more public attention than other forms of sexual violence.

Regardless of age or circumstances, it is important for parents to talk with their children *before* they become victims or witnesses to any form of sexual abuse.

For more information on sexual violence go to:

www.icyd.org