



Child Builders

Houston's Advocates for Mental Health in Children

Protecting your child from sexual abuse

By Julia Wolf, MA, LPC, LMFT

Although it's something none of us want to believe, child sexual abuse happens every day. To prevent your child from becoming a victim of sexual abuse, it's important to understand the steps molesters take to connect with children, and equally as important, to teach children what to look for and how to recognize signs of this inappropriate behavior.

The process of victimization of children, is often referred to as grooming.

Grooming is:

- when the molester, or sexual offender, "makes friends with" the child that he or she wants to involve in sexual behavior
- when the offender gradually draws the child into sexual behaviors, often through playing
- when the offender uses tools to keep the child from telling about the abuse

Offenders attract children in a variety of ways. They make them feel special, give them gifts or money, give them privileges, play games with them, wrestle with them, emotionally manipulate them (act hurt or disappointed in the child), or scare the child into doing what they want them to do.

This luring of children works because children have strong natural instincts to trust and obey adults, to play, and to avoid tattling or getting others into trouble. Children also fear "getting into trouble" and do not want adults to "be mad" at them.

Unfortunately, sexual offenders know this about children. They are experts in using children's natural instincts and weaknesses. They pretend to be trusted members of their "safe environment." He/she may be or become a member of the family, a scout, school or church leader, or any one that children would normally trust. When the line is crossed and the adult begins to perform sexual acts with a child, the child is often so far into the relationship that it is too hard for him/her to tell anyone about what is going on.

The biggest tragedy of grooming is that it works; it keeps children from telling. In therapy, as children finally begin to share their feelings and their experiences, we have heard directly from children reasons that grooming works. These are a sample of the tricks that have kept victims from telling:

"If you tell, I will say it was your fault."

"If you tell, you will go to foster care and we will never see you again."

"If you tell, your mom will be mad at you."

"If you tell, I will go to jail and it will be your fault."

Frequently young children don't realize that the behaviors should not be happening until they see a school program or

have a class discussion on safety. Then they understand the reality of their situation (that they have been victimized) and they don't know how to stop it.

Here are some ways that you can prevent your child from becoming a victim:

1. Every child needs to be taught about the private places on his/her own and others' bodies
2. Explain the ways in which someone might trick them into allowing those places to be touched.
3. Tell children the words that someone might say to keep them from telling, like making threats to them or blaming them for what will happen to the molester.
4. Teach children that their caregivers or doctors sometimes have to touch their private parts when they are sick, hurt, or just need help - and this is okay if it's not a secret.
5. Children need to know the difference between good and bad secrets.
6. Let your child know that sexual abuse is NEVER the child's fault.
7. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse, so believe your child if she/he tells you this has happened, and be sure to call Children's Protective Services at 1-800-252-5400 or your local law enforcement agency for help.

Most of all, teach children about grooming – it is a process of victimization that can happen to all of them, just because they are children.

Julia Wolf is the Director of Therapy Services at Children's Assessment Center. Ms. Wolf has shared this information about child sexual abuse. She hopes parents and teachers will share this information with all children, to help protect them, so she won't have to see them in therapy. To schedule a trained adult volunteer to come and speak to a group of children or adults about this topic, you may call the Mental Health Association at 713-523-8963 and ask for the WHO (We Help Ourselves) Program. Puppets and video scenarios are used in an age-appropriate manner to educate children about preventing abuse.

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ChildBuilders (formerly known as HAMIC), founded in 1974, is a non-profit organization that provides innovative programs to educate parents, children, teachers and the community about the emotional well-being of children and their families. www.childbuilders.org ChildBuilders Community Education.

For further information & referral
call your child's school counselor

DePelchin Children's Center	713-730-2335
ESCAPE Family Resource Center	713-942-9500
Harris County Psychiatric Center	713-741-5000
Jewish Family Service	713-667-9336
Mental Health Association	713-522-5161
MHMRA of Harris County	713-970-7070
NAMI Metro Houston	281-579-3750
United Way of Texas Gulf Coast	211 or 713-957-4357

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