



# Keeping Your Jr/Sr High School Child Safe

## Introduction for Parents

It is well known that the problem of child sexual abuse is widespread in our society today. Statistics reveal that 1 of every 4 girls and 1 of every 6 boys in this country will be sexually abused by the time they are eighteen years of age. This is a frightening and sobering statistic! Parents do well to educate themselves about the issue and take an active role in educating their children/youth in personal safety.

Child sexual abuse can be defined as the use of a child for sexual purposes by an adult or by an older, more powerful person, such as an older child. It is a crime in all fifty states. This includes acts such as rape, incest, intercourse, sodomy and fondling a child's private parts. It also includes asking children to touch someone else's genitals, exposing oneself to a child, making obscene phone calls to a child, taking photos of a child for sexual purposes, communicating with a child in a sexual way via email or the internet or showing a child sexually explicit materials.



A large percentage of sexual abuse is perpetrated by a person the child knows and trusts, and most often abuse is committed by a family member or a relative. It is also committed by friends of the family and people who have access to children including teachers, coaches, religious and youth leaders. Child abusers often prey upon children who are vulnerable, those who may be "loners" with few friends, doing poorly in school or have a disruptive/broken family situation. Predators of children engage in a process called "grooming" in which they work hard to develop a relationship with the child and gain their trust. They offer gifts, travel, or focus on the interests of the child and often form trusting relationships with the family of the child. Offenders come from all walks of life and from all social and ethnic groups and are often known as "nice, friendly" folks. It is imperative that parents are aware of the adults that have access to their children and immediately investigate any behavior that seems indicative of such manipulation, such as excessive or expensive gift giving, excessive time spent with the child, etc.

Many children do not reveal abuse when it occurs. Studies indicate that only between 2 and 4 victims out of 10 actually report abuse to someone. Some of the reasons are: they are afraid of hurting someone's feelings, they have been taught to obey adults, they or their family have been threatened by the offender, they have been convinced that the abuse is normal and okay, they feel guilty because they feel that the abuse is their fault or they don't know the words to use to tell. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse and more often than not are simply afraid to tell.

It is the purpose of the following information to help you talk to your children/youth about personal safety and give them some tools to help prevent this terrible crime from happening to them. We also hope that this information will give our young people the permission and the words to tell an adult they trust if abuse does occur so that they may be helped and healed from this life-altering occurrence.

## Talking About Personal Safety with Junior High/Senior High Youth

The teen years are challenging for parents and teens alike. These years are all about change for the teens. They seek more independence; their bodies mature both physically and sexually. The curiosity about all these changes makes them even more vulnerable to sexual harassment, assault, date rape and abuse. The topic of personal safety remains high on the list of importance as a topic for discussion by parents; in the teen years, it becomes more complicated. It is still important for junior and senior high youth to be reminded that it is not permissible for adults to sexually use/abuse them in any way. Parents and teens alike only need to look at the papers or news stories to see reports every day of abuse of teens. Teens need to feel assured that they can come to their parents about any abuse issues involving adults. In

these teen years however, the issues become more complex as personal safety also involves paying attention to one's peers.



Dating violence, manipulation, and unhealthy relationships can plague the teen years. Talk to your teens about what constitutes good and healthy relationships: good communication, mutual trust and respect, having fun together, mutual support, lack of pressure to do something against the other's wishes, confidentiality, lack of jealousy, lack of manipulation, sharing, caring, loyalty, seeing the other person's side of things.

While it is beyond the scope of this document to discuss each of these qualities individually, it is important for teens to be involved in relationships that are healthy and life-giving and not physically, emotionally or psychologically abusive. Teens need to know that sexual violence in a relationship is never acceptable and never their fault and that they should come to their parents for help.

It is also imperative that parents talk with their teens about the dangers of internet use. The internet is a wonderful tool, but it also provides an unparalleled opportunity for predators to find victims online. Remind your teens not to give out or put personal information in any chat room or web site, i.e. My Space or Facebook. Predators are smart, manipulative and patient and can easily "groom" (or form a relationship with) a child online. Sexual abuse does include emailing and chatting in a sexual manner with minors, so keep an eye on your teen's computer use and establish rules for computer use, chat sites and text messaging. The ultimate danger of course is that a predator will discover a way to meet your teen or find your teen and many times the outcomes of those meetings are deadly. It is a fact that on-line predators actually have web sites as "support groups" where they share "tips" about how they lure their victims. When your child is surfing the net and chatting here and there with no supervision, it's akin to them inviting a stranger into your home while you're not there.

## Media Safety: Guidelines for Internet and Television Use

### Internet



The Internet is a wonderful tool. It makes information easily accessible from home and facilitates fast communication via email. In addition, it can be educational and fun.

But the Internet can also be dangerous. It hosts many forms of pornography, chat rooms where sex offenders pose as children, and countless commercial Web sites that use explicit sexual content to sell products. Children - especially teens - are at risk of coming across these inappropriate Web sites when they're online. Teens are naturally interested and curious about sexuality and may be tempted to explore sites with sexual content. Since teens seek more independence, they may participate in chat rooms as a way of getting to know people outside of their families, schools, and communities. Here are some tips to help safeguard your children when they use the Internet.

#### Follow these guidelines for Internet use.

- Spend time online with your children. Learn how they use the Internet and talk to them about their use.
- Keep the computer where everyone can see it, for example, in the living room or family room. This helps you monitor children's use.
- Monitor your children's involvement in chat rooms.
- Find out what online safety policies are in place at school. Lobby to have safeguards put in place if they don't exist.
- Survey the Internet sites your children have visited by clicking on your Internet server's history button.
- Consider getting a software or online filtering program that blocks sites that aren't suitable for children.

It can also be helpful to maintain access to your children's accounts so that if you become concerned about their online behavior, you can check their email now and again. Since this entails a privacy issue,

let your children know that you will do this to monitor their safety. Discuss the circumstances under which you would feel the need to check.

**Make explicit agreements with your children about Internet use.**

- Agree on which Web sites they are allowed to visit – and not allowed to visit.
- Agree on the length of time they can be online.
- Agree on a set of rules.
- Agree ahead of time to consequences for not following agreements and rules.

**Include the following basic rules in your agreement with your children.**

- Never give out personal information (name, age, address, phone) or use a credit card online without your permission.
- Never share their passwords with anyone, including friends.
- Never arrange to meet in person someone they met online unless you agree and go with them.
- Never reply to uncomfortable messages they receive. Always tell you when they receive any.
- Never download games without your permission.
- Never download pictures from an unknown source.
- Never open attachments from an unknown source.

It can be helpful to write down the agreement in the form of a contract and have each child sign it. It is also important to watch for the warning signs below.

**Teach your children about the dangers.**

When your children begin to use the Internet independently, especially chat rooms and email, they will need to understand the following:

- Online information is not private. Others can get access to any information shared online.
- People they meet online may not be who they say they are.
- What they learn online may or may not be true. They need to ask for your help in deciding whether a Web site is to be trusted.
- Computer sex offenders deliberately pose as children or teens. They seek to earn children's trust by showing interest and listening to their problems.
- Many Internet sites host pornographic materials. Children may come across these sites by accident. And since it is easy to gain access to these sites, they are also easy to find.

**Warning signs that a child may have been exposed to a computer sex-offender or inappropriate online activity:**

- Spends long periods of time online in the evenings.
- Has or hides pornography or suspicious sexual material on the computer.
- Receives phone calls from people you don't know, or makes calls to numbers you don't recognize.
- Frequently turns off the monitor or changes screens when you come in the room.
- Uses someone else's account.
- Withdraws from family life and interactions.

As with warning signs for sexual abuse, these behaviors don't necessarily mean that your child is in contact with an offender, but they are signs that you need to investigate and more closely monitor your child's online activity. If your child becomes a victim of online sexual abuse, it is important to remember that just as with other forms of sexual abuse, it is not his or her fault. If you come across suspicious online activity or child pornography—which is illegal—you can report it to the Cyber Tipline (see the Resource Guide).



## Television

Television offers many educational and entertaining programs. However, it's important to be aware that explicit sexual content is on the rise. Sexual imagery is used to attract viewers to products and programs. And sex is typically not depicted realistically or shown to be risky or have potentially negative consequences. Many television shows and commercials make it seem normal for young people to have sex, and television contributes to new, looser norms of sexual behavior, especially amongst teens. In addition, many programs—in particular music videos—reinforce a belief that sexual harassment and sexual violence against women are okay.

Young children may be viewing material on a daily basis that is inappropriate, and that they cannot understand or deal with. And teens may be watching programs that influence their behavior and attitudes in unhealthy ways. It is critical that parents be aware of their children's viewing habits and help them create healthy ones.

## Guidelines for healthy television watching

- Watch television with your children and discuss program content. Listen to your children's opinions without judgment and share your own values. Encourage children to question the behavior modeled and the values portrayed.
- Teach children to analyze commercials and to spot exaggeration and lies.
- Limit the amount of television your children watch. (The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends one to two hours per day.)
- Keep the television in a family room rather than in a child's room.
- Be clear about what programs they can and cannot watch.
- Help children plan their viewing time, make deliberate choices, and turn the television off rather than keep it on out of habit. Discourage channel surfing.
- Model healthy television habits with your own viewing.
- Model alternative activities for relaxation and fun.
- Do not use television as a babysitter.

In addition, express your opinions about likes and dislikes to networks, stations, and sponsors. Parental feedback can have a positive impact on television content. The Internet and television are powerful forces in your children's lives, for better or worse. Monitor their influence on your children in the same way you would a new acquaintance. Make sure that they are welcome, appropriate guests rather than uninvited, disturbing intruders.

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## What Parents Need to Know About Bullying

Bullies. Every classroom seems to have one. In another age, bullying was considered a rite of passage; but that was before the massacres at Columbine and Virginia Tech. We now know that bullying can have long-lasting effects, both for bullies and their victims. Children have even committed suicide as the result of bullying.

“Children who are bullied have higher rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and other mental health conditions. Children who are bullied are more likely to think about suicide, and some of these wounds may linger into adulthood,” warns the [Mayo Clinic](#) in a recent online report.

Almost half of all schoolchildren are bullied at some point, according to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. Bullying can happen to any child, but young children and those with few friends are the most at risk. Bullying need not be physical (punching, hitting, kicking or destruction of property); teasing, name-calling, racial slurs, gossip, malicious rumors, and other verbal abuse can be even more damaging. Internet and cell phone access has moved bullying out of the school yard and onto the Internet. Called cyberbullying, electronic harassment makes it easy for children to malign, embarrass or threaten their peers anonymously.

When the school year starts and as it proceeds, it's important for parents to tune in to their children and watch for the warning signs of bullying:

- Bruises, scrapes or other injuries
- Ripped or missing clothing or personal possessions
- Few friends or statements such as “nobody likes me”
- Headaches, stomachaches or other physical complaints
- Trouble eating
- Trouble sleeping or nightmares
- Anxiety when preparing for school or talking about school



- Fear of going to school or playing hooky
- Trouble concentrating on schoolwork; declining or failing grades
- Fighting or behavioral problems
- Depression, listlessness
- Suicidal statements such as “you’d be better off without me”

With the advent of cyberbullying through emails, instant messaging, Facebook and blogs, bullying has become so prevalent that the American Academy of Pediatrics is urging pediatricians to include signs of bullying in patient assessments.

<http://markspychiatry.com/what-parents-need-to-know-about-bullying/>

## What Parents Can Do About Bullying

Children who are bullied suffer higher rates of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem and are more likely to have suicidal thoughts than kids who aren’t victimized by classroom bullies, warns a recent Mayo Clinic report. With nearly half of all school-aged children subjected to bullying at some point during their school years, parents need to know how to deal with this ever-growing threat to their children’s physical and emotional health. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents take the following steps to protect their children from bullying:

### **If your child is the victim of bullying:**

- Teach your child to stand up for himself by saying things like “I don’t like what you are doing.” Teach him to stay calm and walk away from bullies.
- Tell your child when and how to ask for help. Suggest they find an adult and tell them about the problem if they are being bullied.
- Encourage your child to develop friendships with other children. Children who are socially isolated are more apt to be bullied.
- Support activities that interest your child.
- Alert school officials and teachers if your child complains about bullying. Be an advocate for your child and see that the situation is resolved.
- Ask other adults to watch out for your child’s safety when you cannot be present.

### **If your child is a bully:**

- Emphasize to your child that you are firmly against bullying.
- Be a positive role model for your child. Show him how to get what he wants without teasing, threatening or hurting another person.
- Set firm and consistent limits on aggressive behavior.
- Be clear in defining age-appropriate consequences for bullying behavior and be consistent in implementing those consequences.
- Use effective, nonphysical discipline such as loss of privileges.
- Work with school officials, teachers, counselors and the parents of victims to develop practical solutions.

Bullying can have a disastrous long-term impact on a child’s emotional development.

<http://markspychiatry.com/what-parents-can-do-about-bullying/>

## Resources

For more information on any of these topics, please go to:

<http://www.eriercd.org/pdf/resources.pdf>

or call the

Diocesan Office of Protection of Children and Youth

814-824-1222

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