



Teaching children assertiveness may prevent abuse

Lisa Michele Utzig  
August 6, 2007

True stories of sexual assault, rape, child molestation and child abduction are in the news almost every day. While it is important to increase education and awareness of these issues, constant exposure to horrifying stories can leave many parents terrified to let their children out of their sight.

Watching the news may make parents feel there is no way to protect their children from pedophiles. Families do not deserve to live in fear because of the actions of others. While there is no fool-proof plan to protect your child from assault or abduction, there are skills that parents can help their children develop to learn to keep themselves safe.

Three important rules that children need to know are: "Say no! Run away! Tell someone!"

Most children are raised to respect and listen to adults. They learn at young age to always listen to grown ups, do what they say, never talk back, and most of all, never say "no" to an adult.

These expectations can be very confusing to a child who is confronted with an adult who tries to touch his/her body in ways that make the child feel uncomfortable, or when an adult engages in other inappropriate activities in front of the child. Most child victims of sexual abuse are assaulted by someone familiar whom they trust, such as a family friend, coach, baby-sitter or member of the family.

Children need to know that their bodies belong to them, and that no one has the right to touch them in ways that make them feel uncomfortable. They need to be told that it is OK to say "no" to an adult if they feel uncomfortable in a situation. They also need to know that it is never their fault if an adult tries to touch their body, or if the child is asked to touch the adult's body.

Working with your child on developing positive self esteem, confidence and assertiveness are key factors in determining your child's reaction to a scary situation, whether it is attempted sexual abuse, peer pressure or bullying.

One of the best ways to teach your child assertive skills is to model assertiveness yourself. Many children worry about hurting an adult's feelings if they assert themselves, or children second-guess their own feelings. Reinforce with your child that feelings are not right or wrong, they just are. It is very important that both children and adults listen to their gut feelings and take action; instincts are primal reactions that help keep us safe and help keep us alive.

Spending quality time with your child and involving him or her in activities will also build self-esteem and confidence. Whether it's sports, art or music, studies show that children involved in activities learn cooperation, self-discipline, perseverance and social skills while having fun.

While involving your child in activities has benefits, it is equally important to set aside one-on-one time with

your child. Quality time with your son or daughter is a good opportunity to talk about your family's expectations and feelings regarding important subjects, such as personal boundaries, respect and morals. Opening up a dialogue with your child will establish communication and trust. A child who feels comfortable talking with his or her parent is more likely to tell the parent if something scary or confusing occurs.

For more information on healthy relationships or the Child Abuse Prevention program, please contact the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center at (530) 544-2118 or stop by our office at 2941 Lake Tahoe Blvd., across from South Tahoe Middle School. The Women's Center business office was financed through a low-cost loan from the Rural Community Assistance Corporation.

- Lisa Michele Utzig is the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center outreach coordinator.

---

[BACK](#) 