



The Catholic Diocese of  
*Victoria in Texas*

*Creating and Maintaining  
a Safe Environment  
for Children, Youth and Adults*



**How to Protect Children  
&  
Vulnerable Adults from Abuse**

**A Parent/Caretaker Guide**

*Provided to you by:  
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# HOW TO PROTECT CHILDREN/VULNERABLE ADULTS FROM ABUSE

*We are all deeply concerned about the general welfare of our children and/vulnerable adults. There are many challenges that confront today's youth and vulnerable adults. Abuse is one of these. Child/vulnerable adult abuse is a fact in our society and a matter of great concern for most parents. Fortunately, child/vulnerable adult abuse is preventable and parents/caregivers can help their loved ones master prevention strategies.*

## *The "3 R's"*

*Three underlying principles to effective youth/vulnerable adult protection strategies:*

- 1. **Recognize.** The child/vulnerable adult needs to be able to recognize situations that may result in abuse.*
- 2. **Resist.** The child needs to be able to assert the right to resist the abuser.*
- 3. **Report.** The child needs to be able to tell an adult when he or she has encountered abuse and to feel confident that the adult will take actions to prevent further abuse.*

## **Recognize Situations**

Traditionally, children have been told of the risks associated with strangers. As we have come to learn, child abuse is committed most often by a family member or person who is known to the child, often in a position of authority over the child. Therefore, if we teach only to be wary of strangers, we are not protecting our children as completely as we must. Children and youth need to understand that they have a right to refuse adults or persons in authority (i.e. baby-sitters, teachers, aunts, uncles) when they are touched on the private parts of their body or in ways which make them feel uncomfortable or frightened. The exercises in this booklet will help to prepare your child to identify situations requiring caution.

### ***Resist the Abuser***

Interviews with child molesters document that when children resist advances made by the molester, the molester will usually abandon further attempts with that child. A relatively low incidence of child molestation involves the use of physical force. Children need to be trained to say "NO" or "yell" and get away when inappropriately approached by anyone—friend, relative, or stranger.

### ***Tell an Adult***

Children and youth need to be taught to tell their parent, teacher, or other trusted adult whenever they encounter questionable situations or attempted abuse. Since adults do not always listen when a child talks to them, the child needs to be told to keep on telling until someone listens. Sometimes, a child may not be able to talk about what has happened, but will communicate in other ways. For example, the child may go out of the way to avoid being alone with a particular person, such as a babysitter. This is a kind of communication to which parents need to be sensitive as it may be an indicator of abuse.

### ***When a Child Discloses Abuse***

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

- ❖ Don't panic or overreact to the information disclosed by your child.
- ❖ Don't criticize your child or claim that your child 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 you believe him or her that he or she is not to blame for what happened. Tell the child that you appreciate being told about it and that you will help make sure it will not happen again.
- + Do report the incident to the police or Child Protective Services, and encourage your child to tell the proper authorities what happened. Try to avoid repeated interviews, which can be very stressful for the child.
- + Do consult your pediatrician or other child abuse authority about the need for counseling to assist your child.

Finally, if abuse happens to your child, do not blame yourself or your child. Individuals who victimize children are not readily identifiable; they come from all walks of life and all socioeconomic levels. Often, they present a nice image—they may even go to church and be active in the community. The molester is skilled at manipulating children, often by giving a child excessive attention, gifts, and money. Most abuse occurs in situations in which the child knows and trusts the adult.

## ***Teach Your Child to Be Assertive***

It is important that your child understands the right to react assertively when faced with a situation he or she perceives as dangerous. When teaching your child self protection skills, make it clear that although some of the basic strategies involved seem to contradict the sort of behavior you normally expect of your child, these strategies apply to a situation that is not normal. When feeling threatened, your child must feel free to exercise the right to:

- + trust his or her instincts or feelings
- + say "no" to unwanted touching or affection, say "no" to an adult's inappropriate demands and requests
- + withhold information that could jeopardize his or her 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 strategies designed to give youth the power to protect themselves.**

The following exercises will help to clarify when it is appropriate to apply these strategies.

### ***Exercise 1: What If...***

In this exercise the parent sets up situations that the child should recognize as potentially dangerous. Once the parent describes a situation, the child tells what he or she would do if ever confronted in such a way. Suggested actions are listed with each situation.

#### ***Situations and Suggested Actions for Each***

1. What if you are home alone and the telephone rings; a voice on the other end asks if your parents are home. What do you do?
  - a. Tell the caller your parents are busy and cannot come to the phone.
  - b. Take a message and the phone number of the caller.
  - c. If the message needs an immediate response, call your parent.
  - d. Do not tell the caller you are home alone.

2. What if an older child hangs around your school and tries to give pills to younger students. What do you do?
  - a. Tell your teacher.
  - b. Tell your parent even if you told the teacher.
  - c. Stay away from the person with the pills.
  
3. What if you are home alone (or with your brother or sister) and someone knocks on the door and asks to read the electric meter. This person is not wearing a uniform or identification. What do you do? (Alternate situation: If the person were wearing a uniform, would the responses be different? Probably not.)
  - a. Keep the front door or screen door locked.
  - b. Do not open the door to anyone without permission from a parent.
  - c. Tell the person to come back later when your parent can come to the door.  
Do not let the person know your parent is away.
  - d. Use the telephone to call a neighbor and ask for assistance.
  
4. What if someone comes to you and says that your parent is sick and you must go with him or her. What would you do?
  - a. If at school, go to the principal or your teacher for assistance and verification.
  - b. If at home or somewhere else, call the emergency number-parent's employer, neighbor, close relative-for assistance and verification.
  - c. Do not go anywhere without verification from someone in authority whom you have been told to trust.
  
5. What if you are in a public restroom and someone tries to touch you. What do you do?
  - a. Yell "STOP THAT" as loudly as you can.
  - b. Run out of the room as quickly as possible.
  - c. Tell your parent, a police officer, security guard, or other adult what happened.
  
6. What if you are walking to school in the rain. A car stops and the driver asks if you want a ride. What do you do?
  - a. Stay away from the car. You do not need to go close to the car to answer.
  - b. Unless you have your parent's permission to ride with the person, say "No, thank you"  
If the driver persists, say "No!"
  - c. Tell your teacher when you get to school and tell your parent when you get home.

7. What if you are playing on the playground and an adult comes up to you and asks you to help find his or her lost puppy. What do you do?
  - a. If you do not know the person, stay away and go directly home.
  - b. Even if you know the person, do not help. Adults should ask other adults for help. Before you assist, you must get your parent's permission.
  - c. Tell your parent what happened.
  
8. What if you are walking down the street and someone comes up to you and wants to take your picture. The person asks you to come to his or her house. What do you do?
  - a. Stay away from the person and say in a loud voice, "No, I don't want my picture taken!"
  - b. Do not ever go into anyone else's house without your parent's permission.
  - c. Tell your parent about the person.
  
9. What if an older child you know invites you to play a game, and to pretend that he or she is the doctor and you are the patient. This child tells you to take off your clothes so that the "doctor" can examine the "patient". What do you do?
  - a. Keep your clothes on.
  - b. If he or she persists, yell and get away.
  - c. Tell your parent.

### ***What-If Exercises for Older Children***

1. What if you get on a bus by yourself and a person sits down next to you and puts a hand on your thigh. What do you do?
  - a. State in a clear, loud, firm voice, "No. Take your hand off"
  - b. Move to the front of the bus near the driver.
  - c. Tell the driver and tell your parent when you get home.
  
2. What if, while collecting on your paper route, a customer offers you a beer, puts his or her arm around you, and says you have a fine body. What do you do?
  - a. Tell the customer, "I don't like that, take your arm off me" and get away.
  - b. Tell your parent when you get home.
  
3. What if a family friend offers you a ride home and, instead of taking you home, drives down a dead end street, parks, and starts rubbing your leg.
  - a. Tell the person "NO! STOP!" in a firm, loud voice.
  - b. Get out of the car, go to the nearest telephone (if you are too far away to walk home), and call your parent. Always carry enough money to make a phone call, or a cell phone.
  - c. Tell your parent what happened.

4. What if you are babysitting for a couple that your family does not know well and the couple returns home late at night. While driving you home, your employer makes suggestions that make you feel uncomfortable. What do you do?
- Refuse to comply. Ignore the driver.
  - If the driver stops the car and makes inappropriate advances, say "NO", get out, go to the nearest phone, and call your parent or the police department. Again, always carry enough money to make a phone call, or carry a cell phone.
  - Do not baby-sit for these people again. It is much safer to baby-sit for people known to you or your family.
  - Tell your parent what happened.

### ***Exercise 2: My Safety Notebook***

This exercise will help your child be prepared to avoid situations that could lead to abuse or molestation. The safety notebook can be a loose-leaf notebook or pages fastened together with staples for which your child has made an original cover.

The safety notebook provides a place where your child can list emergency telephone numbers, including parents' work numbers and a neighbor or friend's number to be contacted when parents are unavailable. In addition, your child can list the safety rules that you have discussed together. Encourage your child to decorate each page with pictures and drawings that illustrate some of the rules. He or she may also want to list other kinds of safety guidelines, such as rules for bicycle safety.

"My Safety Notebook" is intended to be a fun activity for getting across some serious concerns. It is a personalized reference that can reassure your child in how to respond when confronted by a potentially dangerous situation.

### ***Exercise 3: Child Abuse and Values***

While we teach children the core values of respect, kindness and helpfulness, we must make it very clear that no child is expected to place himself/herself in potentially perilous situations. In addition to teaching and modeling the values children need to be prepared to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations. A few reminders:

- If a teacher, coach, or other youth leader, ever asks a child to do something he thinks is bad, the child has the right to say "No!" and tell his parent.
- Sometimes people who really do not need help will ask for it in order to create an opportunity for abuse. Children should be aware of 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 and go with the person to show the way to go. A child should never get into a car without his parent's permission.
  - It may be okay for a child to help a person when there are other people around, but he should never go into another's house unless he has permission from his parents.
  - The child may be taught to be obedient, but a child does not have to obey an adult when that person tells him to do something that the child feels is wrong or that makes the child feel uncomfortable. In these situations, the child should talk with his parent or another trusted adult about his concerns.

#### ***Exercise 4: Family Meeting***

The most important step a parent can take to protect his or her child from abuse is to establish an atmosphere of open communication in the home. A child must feel comfortable in bringing to his or her parent any sensitive problems or relating experiences in which someone approached the child in an inappropriate manner or in a way that made the child feel uncomfortable. Studies have demonstrated that more than half of all incidents of child abuse are never reported because the victims are too afraid or too confused to report their experiences.

It is important that your children be allowed to talk freely about their likes and dislikes, their friends, and their true feelings. One way to create open communication is through family meetings at which safety issues can be addressed by the entire family. (The "What If ..." exercises could be done in the context of a family meeting, as could the development of the safety rules for "My Safety Notebook")

Modified, with permission, from How to Protect Your Children from Child Abuse and Drug Abuse. A Parent's Guide, Boy Scouts of America.

As we address the basic rules for child safety, it is important to stress that traditional cautions about "strangers" are not sufficient to protect our children. Child abusers are usually known to the child. Therefore, a more appropriate protection strategy is based upon teaching children to recognize harmful situations or actions. Discuss the following safety rules with your child:

- If you are in a public place and get separated from your parent (or authorized guardian), do not wander around looking for him or her. Go to a police officer, a checkout counter, the security office, or the lost-and-found area and quickly tell that you have been separated from your parent and need help.
- You should not get into a car or go anywhere with any person unless you have your parent's permission.
- If someone follows you on foot or in a car, stay away from him or her. You do not need to go near the car to talk to the person inside.
- Adults and older youth who are not in your family and who need help (such as finding an address or locating a lost pet) should not ask children for help; they should ask other adults.
- You should use the buddy system and never go anywhere alone.
- Always ask your parent's permission to go somewhere, especially into someone else's home.
- Never hitchhike.
- Never ride with anyone unless you have your parent's permission.

- No one should ask you to keep a special secret. If this happens, tell your parent or teacher.
- If someone wants to take your picture, tell your parent or teacher.
- No one has the right to touch you on the private parts of your body (parts which would be covered by a bathing suit,) nor should you touch anyone else in those areas. Your body is special and private.
- You have the right to say "No!" to someone who tries to take you somewhere, touches you, or makes you feel uncomfortable in any way.

These are some simple safety rules that can be approached in the same non-frightening manner in which you tell your child not to play with fire. They emphasize situations common to many child molestation cases.

## Computers and Child Abuse



If your child is alone with his computer - do not assume he is safe. Cyberspace can be dangerous. If your child uses a computer and talks on a network or bulletin board your child can be at risk of child abuse.

It is possible and often very easy for children to access pornographic pictures and stories on their computer. They can even download and print this material. Exposure to pornography is inappropriate for children of any age and can be harmful to their development.

Abusers are using the computer to reach children and make friends with them. When a child begins to feel comfortable with this new friend they may forget that their computer "buddy" is really a stranger. Abusers are very good at making friends with young children. While most computer users are trustworthy people, you cannot be certain who is on the information highway with your child.

You can prevent child abuse by computer if you caution your child not to give out any personal information over the network (such as full name or address). Tell them not to answer any personal questions about themselves. Instruct your child to inform you if someone requests personal information or makes comments that leave your child with uncomfortable feelings.

Know your child's friends, even their e-mail ones. If your child is going to meet someone face to face that they first met through a computer network - check it out. Go with your child. Be aware and supervise just as you would if they were meeting any other stranger.

Consider placing your home computer in a central location, such as the kitchen or family room so that the screen is openly visible. This aids in direct supervision of computer usage as well as deters a child from accessing inappropriate material.

Consider also limiting the amount of time your children and teenagers are allowed to spend solely with the computer. Psychologists warn us that children who spend excessive time with computer or video games may have increased difficulty in relationships with other persons. Pediatricians caution us that excessive sedentary time at computer and video based activities contributes to health and learning problems.



A word about reporting....

If you know or suspect that abuse has resulted from computer contact, you should immediately report it to your local police department. Because more than one geographical area may be involved, federal law enforcement authorities may also be contacted by the police. This new type of abuse requires special attention. Working together we can keep our kids safe.

### **Report Abuse or Neglect of children, the elderly, or people with disabilities.**

**1-800-252-5400**

- Child abuse and neglect are against the law in Texas, and so is failure to report it.\*
- If you suspect a child has been abused or mistreated, you are required to report it to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services or to a law enforcement agency.
- You are required to make a report within 48 hours of the time you suspected the child has been or may be abused or neglected.

#### **What is Abuse?**

Abuse is mental, emotional, physical, or sexual injury to a child/adult or failure to prevent such injury to a child/adult.

#### **What is Neglect?**

Neglect includes (1) failure to provide a child/vulnerable adult with food, clothing, shelter and/or medical care; and/or (2) leaving a child/vulnerable adult in a situation where the child/vulnerable adult is at risk of harm.

## **How do I make a report?**

1. Call the abuse and neglect hotline at 1-800-252-5400 or report to [www.txabusehotline.org](http://www.txabusehotline.org)
2. When you make a report, be specific. Tell exactly what happened and when. Be sure to record all injuries or incidents you have observed, including dates and time of day and keep this information secured.
3. Reports should be made as soon as possible but no later than 48 hours before bruises and marks start to fade. It is important for the investigators to be able to see the physical signs.
4. Give the agency person any information you have about the relationship between the child/vulnerable adult and the suspected abuser.
5. Please provide at least the following information in your report.
  - Name, age, and address of the child/vulnerable adult
  - Brief description of the child/vulnerable adult
  - Current injuries, medical problems, or behavioral problems
  - Parents names and names of siblings in the home

## **Will the person know I've reported him or her?**

Your report is confidential and is not subject to public release under the Open Records Act. The law provides for immunity from civil or criminal liabilities for innocent persons who report even unfounded suspicions, as long as your report is made in good faith. Your identity is kept confidential.

## **What if I'm not sure?**

If you have reason to suspect child/vulnerable adult abuse, but are not positive, make the report. If you have any doubts about whether or not it is abuse, call the hotline. They can advise you on whether the signs you have observed are abuse.