

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COURAGE

Sexual assault is a difficult and uncomfortable topic, especially in the context of your children. Choosing to educate yourself takes courage. Learning about this topic is the first step toward helping create a safer world with reduced victimization where justice prevails.

This document is a guide to help you understand how to start a conversation with your children at any age about the realities of sexual assault. Understanding this issue requires a mindset of compassion. It can also take a mental toll on you. Take care of your mind and health with kindness toward yourself so you can offer that same compassion to your child.

HARMFUL RIPPLE EFFECTS

Sexual assault is a crime perpetrated by offenders who are motivated by their own entitlement, often inflicting serious trauma on the victim. Left untreated, trauma unconsciously produces countless, unpredictable negative effects in a victim's life.

Anyone can be a victim of sexual assault. You might have experienced the consequence of someone else's trauma without even realizing it, because trauma not only affects the victims of these crimes, it affects

their parents, siblings, classmates, and many others. The brain and body react to traumatic events in unpredictable ways ranging from fear, fight, flight, or freezing. Trauma often manifests in symptoms such as substance abuse, withdrawal, depression, and anger, among others. There is no universal response to trauma, so its effects can be misinterpreted.

The effects of child sexual abuse can be long-lasting and affect the victim's mental health.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE REALITY

There's no formula for predicting who is capable of committing sexual assault. Sometimes the offender is unknown to the victim, but most often children who are victims of sexual assault are abused by people known to them and oftentimes, by people known and trusted by you. These can include family members, coaches, daycare providers, or people in your church. **Of sexual abuse cases reported to law enforcement, 93% of juvenile victims knew the perpetrator.¹**

This can be a daunting realization for a parent. But arming yourself with information can help you protect your family. Though an offender can be anyone—rich or poor, any skin tone, any religion, any gender identity, and any sexual orientation—they often share key characteristics.

Offenders possess an underlying sense of entitlement. They believe they should be able to have what they want, even at the expense of others. They use power, control, and manipulation to take advantage of a person who is vulnerable in some way, such as a child. **Perpetrators often groom both parents and children, and may be intentional about winning your trust to gain unsupervised access to your child.**

Victims of childhood sexual abuse are 4 times more likely to develop symptoms of drug use or experience PTSD as adults, and are about 3 times more likely to experience a major depressive episode later in life.¹

Even though the harmful ripple effects of sexual

assault reverberate everywhere, the good news is that people like you can fight against them by creating your own ripple effects of awareness, compassion, and understanding. You already have that ability within you, and you can start a positive ripple effect from within your family.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT WITH YOUR CHILDREN

TEACH THEM ABOUT BEING A PERSON

Teach your children that being a human includes the physical dimension (the body), the mental aspect (the brain), and the emotional element (the heart). Share with them that they should respect those aspects in themselves and others. Tell them that if someone makes them feel uncomfortable or harms them, it is okay to tell a trusted adult. Offenders often coerce children into willfully participating in acts of abuse. They may convince the child that things that feel good are okay, and encourage them to participate. Your perception of a person may be different than your child's experience with them.

Example: "It's not ok to hurt someone and it's not ok for someone to hurt you. You should tell a trusted adult if something like that ever happens or if someone makes you feel uncomfortable. It is more important to be direct than to be polite."

LOOK FOR TEACHING MOMENTS

Life is full of opportunities to teach deeper concepts. Don't feel as though talking about sexual assault has to be a formal, one-time conversation. Instead, weave the core principles of bodily autonomy, consent, and making good choices into everyday moments. Emphasize that no one is allowed to touch them without their permission, and it's ok to say no and tell a trusted adult. Look for ways to give them choices and safe opportunities to say no,

which helps to build their identity and personhood. Allow them the choice, and do not force them to hug or kiss other people, even siblings or relatives. Teach them it's important to respect the choices and the "no" of other people, including you.

Example: "Your friend said they would rather play tomorrow instead of today. That's ok! It takes two to play together. Tomorrow you'll get to decide if you want to play or not."

SPEAK EARNESTLY AND BE COURAGEOUS

Use media, pop culture, or issues with friends or at school to ask about your child's opinion at an age-appropriate level. Share your own view and build trust by interacting with them without shame or judgment. Encourage them to think about what to say for themselves.

Consider that you may need to work through any trauma you have experienced so that you can be fully present and support your children the way they need as individuals. People who are loved and fully supported by at least one person in their life are much less likely to harm others or be vulnerable to harm from others. Choose to be that person for your child.

"What do you think about [specific media/pop culture/school/age-appropriate situation?]" Follow up with more specific questions.

IF YOUR CHILD IS HARMED BY SEXUAL ASSAULT

DO

- Do provide support, compassion, and assistance. Show your support by saying “I am sorry this happened to you.” Look for ways to help restore dignity, trust, and justice in their life. Listen to them with patience and empathy when they share their experience with you, and let them speak without interruption. Affirm to them that they do not deserve the suffering they’re experiencing.
- Do feel empowered to make a police report even if the offender is well-liked, has a good reputation, or is cared for by the victim. In the state of Kansas, children under the age of 16 are not legally able to consent to participate in sexual acts. So even if your child didn’t say “no” and was not physically hurt or injured, it is a crime that should be reported.
- Do report the crime to law enforcement on behalf of your child, and request the support of a Child Advocacy Center (CAC). CACs specialize in advocating for children and providing needed support and resources to families.
- If the assault was recent, do seek medical treatment for your child from a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE). SANEs are specially trained in performing sexual assault medical forensic exams that address emotional and medical needs while collecting evidence needed for prosecution of the offender.
- Do expect complexity. Trauma impacts individuals differently, which means there’s no standard list of reactions a victim may experience in response to the to the assault. Rational thought is impaired, so their reaction may not make sense to you.
- Do empower your child to regain confidence and trust in themselves by letting them make choices about how to meet their own needs. Continue to reinforce identity and bodily autonomy. Help them meet their needs when you can, in the way they choose.
- Do remember that the best way to offer support is by helping your child feel emotionally, mentally, and physically safe. The specifics of that will vary from person to person, so follow the your child’s lead to help them find safety in all ways.
- Do be aware that offenders are often charming, successful, and powerful in some way. Encourage your children to be vocal about people or situations that make them uncomfortable, even when the person is well known and cared about by your child. Understand that this factor can lead to fear and confusion about reporting the crime to to you and/or law enforcement.
- Do realize you may be hurting too. Remain aware of what’s going on within you and don’t let that negatively affect your ability to help your child. Seek support from someone you trust and obtain resources from Child Advocacy Centers and sexual assault victim advocacy programs.

IF YOUR CHILD IS HARMED BY SEXUAL ASSAULT

DON'T

- Don't place blame upon yourself or your child. Don't ask questions or use statements that imply the assault was their fault. Don't ask "why did you...?" or "why didn't you...?" Don't make statements such as "you should have..." or "you shouldn't have..." Most likely they are already blaming themselves and further blame only compounds to their trauma.
- Don't take justice into your own hands, minimize the assault or tell your child to forget it and move on.
- Don't place blame upon yourself or your child. Remember that the assault is not your fault, and it is not your child's fault.
- Don't assume that you can't provide support for your child unless you have received extensive training. The ability to act with genuine kindness and empathy is the only qualification you need to make a difference to your child who is hurting.
- Don't apply your own interpretation of the event onto your child or their situation. The significance of the assault is determined by the victim, not by our viewpoint. It is the meaning of the event to the person that is important. If they disclose something to you, do not be dismissive of the situation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kansas Sexual Assault Hotline: [1-888-363-2287](tel:1-888-363-2287)

Kansas Attorney General Victim Services Hotline: [1-800-828-9745](tel:1-800-828-9745)

National Sexual Assault Hotline: [1-800-656-4673](tel:1-800-656-4673)

Kansas victim advocacy programs: KCSDV.ORG

Kansas Child Advocacy Centers: KSCAC.ORG

Nationwide anti-sexual violence organization: RAINN.ORG