

Overview of Information on Preventing Sexual Abuse of Girls, Boys and Youth

As adults it is our responsibility to protect girls and boys from sexual abuse; this is also because we are able to provide children with diverse possibilities of action within such situations. That's why it's necessary to get informed about sexual abuse and preventative measures against it.

Almost over 90% of sexual abuse on girls and boys takes place within the family or is initiated by closer friends of the family. The majority of the perpetrators are male and the abusive situation always linked to secrecy, a vow "not to tell". The fact that an adult friend, a close relation or a loved one abuses their position of power in order to satisfy their own sexual wishes results in conflicting emotions for the girls and boys involved.

There is no such thing as a patented prescription against this type of exploitation of persons. Yet there are many different ways to support girls and boys and actively strengthen their self-assurance in their own awareness of situations and their feelings.

Prevention work is not about giving instructions, warnings or prohibitions, but more about one's attitude, on how one communicates openness, security and respect towards children. It is the responsibility of grown-ups to respect children's feelings, needs and boundaries, to take them seriously, to strengthen their self-confidence and to accept "no" as an answer. Strong, self-assured and well-informed girls and boys able to defend themselves are less likely to experience an assault and are more able to get help if they are assaulted.

The most important requirement for preventative action is that adult women and men rethink their own functions as role-models through listening to and articulating their own feelings.

Important points in preventative action against sexual abuse of girls and boys

Trusting your own feelings when interacting with others is THE decisive point in protecting yourself. Growing up does not mean getting over your own feelings, but being able to be conscious of and articulate all of your varying mixed and contradicting feelings. The main objective is to recognize and respect your own and other's feelings.

Girls and boys have the right to make their own decisions about their own body and to decide who, when and where their body is allowed to be touched. In working with children it is important to create an atmosphere in which they feel that their body is one-of-a-kind, worth being protected and that it is appreciated as such. Girls and boys need affection. But very often they are touched in a way one takes for granted that it is o.k. It is our responsibility as adults to prevent such unwanted touching.

Extensive sex education, for each age group accordingly, is important for girls and boys so that they can experience their bodies and sexualities as something positive, beautiful and tender. Children should have words for all of their body parts including their genitals. These words should not be embarrassing, their questions should be taken seriously and they should receive accurate answers.

There are many different kinds of touching that are nice and others that cause uncomfortable or "funny" feelings. Children are readily able to distinguish between these different feelings. It is necessary that they are supported in their ability to perceive these differences, because precisely these feelings of uneasiness due to "funny" types of touching (that can be confusing) are

very important in dealing with sexual assault. There are wonderful secrets that are fun to keep from others and there are oppressive, funny secrets that are scary and don't feel right. We can talk to children, and tell them that secrets that scare them and are bound to threats are not secrets, they are bribery; it must be made clear that talking about these instances is not "telling a secret" or tattle-tale-like.

All people have the right to set boundaries and to say "no" and to have this be accepted by others. As adults in a role-model position it is important to make one's own boundaries visible and audible, and if a dispute arises, to declare these boundaries clearly. In this way girls and boys learn through the model presented to them by adults, a model which offers them the possibility to say "no" and that their "no" will be heard.

It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help and support, as a matter of fact just the opposite is true. It is an important experience and important information for girls and boys that it is brave to ask for help and that they have the right to choose who they want to ask. It is good to talk about experiences with children; and in case no one believes them they should be encouraged to go to others for support. Furthermore, it is important for adults to accept that their child may prefer to go to someone else for help (rather to their own parents).

Children often feel guilty. Not only when adults fight or act unfairly, but also if something "funny", "secretive" or oppressive is in the air. It is the adults' responsibility to relieve children of their guilt in these situations, and to let them know that it is not their fault if someone is in a bad mood, if they are touched in a bad way, or if someone talks to them in a way they don't want to be spoken to.

Children are girls and boys. They learn from us adults, from the media, and from language and images which surround them. This includes typical patterns of behavior for certain roles, e.g. boys learn to take up more space; or girls are brought up to be more considerate. It is important that we remain conscious of our own images of roles and that we try to convey the full spectrum of emotions and scope of action as being possible for both girls and boys. Girls and boys who are dissatisfied with or rebel against so-called "normal" behavior are to be taken seriously. Girls who are pushed, sexualized or offended by boys of the same age group; and boys who don't want to play "Rambo" with the other boys and are made fun of, need our support. Because it takes a lot of courage and energy to forge one's own way through the existing norms and imbalanced circumstances of our society.