

Safeguarding Our Children

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"And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea"
(Mark 9:42).

We can teach our children how to protect themselves from sexual abuse.

Introduction

The sexual abuse of children is a serious problem that occurs at all levels of society. Because such abuse is a sensitive subject that is not easily discussed, children who are sexually abused often do not receive the understanding and help they need to deal with their situations. Often abuse is not reported and children are left open to possible further abuse and perhaps future serious psychological problems. Sometimes even people that children know, love, and trust may abuse them. The true extent of child sexual abuse is unknown because there are so many factors that enter into the problem. Children often do not report such abuse to trusted adults because they fear that they might be blamed or that the abuser might harm them further. Very often children do not know the abuse is wrong because it involves someone they know and trust.

A ten-year-old girl became friends with an older couple who ran a feed store in a small community. On her way home from school, she would often stop and visit, and on weekends it was not uncommon for her to spend the night. She loved and trusted these friends so much that she called them Uncle George and Aunt Maggie. Uncle George and the girl were out feeding the ponies when he began making improper advances toward her. Not knowing for sure just what was happening, but somehow feeling that his actions were wrong, she ran into the house and called her parents to come and get her.

Similar things happen every day. The young girl had never been told that she might face such a situation, and, if she did, what she should do about it. Fortunately, she acted properly. Unfortunately, not all stories end as well as this one did. Many similar situations have far more serious results.

The sexual abuse of children ranges from fondling and exhibitionism to forcible rape and the use of children for prostitution or pornographic pictures and films. Child sexual abuse may be defined as contacts or interactions between a child and an adult, when the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or another person. Sexual abuse may also be committed by a person under the age of eighteen when that person is either significantly older than the victim or when he is in a position of power or control over another child.

No true Latter-day Saint parent, and especially no bearer of the holy priesthood, should ever neglect, injure, or harm one of his children. Child abuse in any form—whether it be verbal, physical, or sexual—is a great sin and will bring unhappiness, guilt, and misery to the one who so offends.

It is important for parents to inform their children about situations that may arise. They should do this in a calm and reassuring way. Children should not be frightened but prepared. Parents should teach children what measures they can take if and when such situations should happen.

Education Can Help a Child Avoid Sexual Abuse

One of the best ways to prevent sexual abuse is to keep communication open between parents and children. Children should feel free to talk to their parents about sexual matters. Parents can establish this open communication by teaching correct information to their children without making them feel fear or shame. In teaching their children how to avoid certain abuses, parents might make the following points:

1. Your physical body is unique; it houses your spiritual body, which our Heavenly Father created.
2. There is a physical difference between boys and girls, and everyone should respect that difference.
3. Each boy and girl has private and sacred body parts. Parents should correctly identify these parts so that children can understand and call the parts by their correct names. Children should be taught the sacred purposes of sex, including the reasons the Lord made it pleasurable.
4. You have the right to say no to anyone, even parents and other family members, who wants to see or touch the private parts of your body. Elder Boyd K. Packer said, "Never let anyone handle you or touch those very personal parts of your body which are an essential link in the ongoing of creation" (in Conference Report, Oct. 1976, p. 101). (However, parents must let children know that they should make an exception for a doctor's care.)

5. When children begin to develop modesty, parents should teach them to close the bathroom door when they bathe or use the toilet. Parents should not allow older brothers and sisters to bathe together. A parent and child bathing together should cease when the children are very young. Parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, or anyone else should not fondle another's body for the purpose of sexual stimulation. (This does not mean that we should stop normal and proper hugs and kisses, which are important expressions of love.) It is also important to remind all members of the family not to wander through the house undressed or in immodest clothing.

In a spirit of love and concern, parents should let children know that if anyone is fondling their bodies, or has ever done so, they should discuss this with their parents.

Before children can even recognize and know that sexual abuse is wrong, they must be taught what it is. Children need to feel that there are adults who respect and care about them enough to teach them these principles.

It is especially vital that a child be protected within his own family. He *must* feel free enough to report incest or any other sexual abuse, even if one of the parents is the guilty party. Deep and lasting psychological damage is more apt to occur if a father or mother is involved. In such a situation, the parent in whom the child has confided must seek *immediate* help for dealing with both the problem and the abuser. The bishop can suggest professional help. Unmentioned because of love or fear or embarrassment, the abuse of the child could continue.

Just warning a child not to talk to strangers is not enough. Statistics suggest that only 15 to 20 percent of child sex abusers are strangers to the victim. Parents can tell even quite young children that there are some adults—strangers, or even people they know—who may want to touch them in their private places or who may want to show them their own. If parents handle this subject well, stressing that the children are in charge of their own bodies, such discussions need not make the children fearful. In order to help children who are victims of sexual abuse and to prevent future abuse, parents must overcome their own fear of talking about the subject. Children must be taught by their parents what they can do to protect themselves. Parents should keep communication open and free with their children. If an unusual or uncomfortable situation arises, children should feel free to discuss it with their parents.

Teach Children Security Measures

Parents need to teach children safety measures that will help them avoid bad situations and perhaps protect them from abuse.

Children should be taught that while they are at home alone, they should keep all doors locked. They should not allow anyone they do not know or who has not been approved by their parents to enter the home. When children answer the telephone and their parents are not at home, they should tell the caller that their parents are unable to come to the phone right then. They should then try to take a message. A child should not tell a caller that his parents are not there.

It is more difficult to protect children when they are away from home. Parents should discuss with children different ways they might protect themselves when they are away from home. Children should not walk alone. A friend, brother, or sister should go along with them. If any person the children do not know attempts to talk to them, the children should continue on their way. They should never accept candy, money, promises, or anything else from someone they do not know. Parents should teach children that if anyone is trying to bother them, it is all right to get attention by screaming or running for help. Children should be cautioned against giving directions, especially if someone calls them to come over to his car.

Children should go directly to wherever they are going. They should not stop along the way or decide to do something else once they have told an adult where they are going. As an added safety measure, parents could point out homes in their area or locations such as stores, theaters, and telephones where children can get help. If a young person cares for children in another home, the young person's parents should know the name of the children's family, their address, and their telephone number. A baby-sitter should observe the same safety rules for answering the door and telephone that she would at home.

Children should know that it is always best to play with another child rather than alone. Also, they need to be told not to play in deserted buildings, alleys, or other areas where they cannot be easily seen.

Discussing these few, commonsense safety rules could alert children to dangerous situations and help them feel more in control if they ever have problems. It might also be helpful to teach a child how to observe people carefully so that a molester could be identified. A game could be played during family night where personal characteristics of others are described—"He's taller than Daddy" or "He wears glasses and has brown hair."

What to Do If Abuse Occurs

If a child is sexually assaulted, parents should reassure the child that he has done nothing wrong. They should also tell him that they will protect him from further abuse. It is important that parents seriously consider what the child says, even if the offender is a friend, relative, or neighbor. The child, as well as the parents, may need counseling. If the child is hurt physically, parents should take him to a doctor for examination. If he seems emotionally affected or behaves differently, he should also be seen by a doctor. Parents should contact the police for further instructions. (Their child may not be the only one affected.) Parents need to remain calm and reassuring for the child's sake. Each stake or district should have social services specialists who can give help. Bishops can provide the necessary information about them.

"A long-term effect of being an abused child is a tremendous feeling of guilt. . . . When children realize they are not to blame, they are able to let go of guilt, regain self-confidence, and eventually help others deal with similar problems" (Marilynn Smith, "Mormon Forum," *Church News*, 14 Sept. 1986, p. 15).

Conclusion

It is of utmost importance that parents teach children to protect themselves before anything unfortunate happens. It is equally important that parents do this teaching in a calm manner that will not arouse fear or undue apprehension in a child. Parents must be realistic and help their children to protect themselves. It is part of their stewardship.

Belle S. Spafford, former General President of the Relief Society, said: "Children should be cherished with the strongest bonds of affection. . . . No effort should be too much, no sacrifice too great to protect them from evil and preserve them in righteousness. . . . The love and the sanctity of the home should be zealously safeguarded" (quoted in Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1972], p. 119).

Suggestions for Teachers

1. Explain that sexual abuse of children is a subject that is not easily discussed. But it will not go away—it must be dealt with. Parents can learn to treat the subject in a rational manner and teach their children ways they can protect themselves.
2. Ask the sisters to share ways in which they have taught their children security measures for inside and outside the home. Share the ideas mentioned in the lesson. Ask: When and how

can these security measures be taught to children? Discuss how children should treat unusual or uncomfortable situations.

3. Remind the sisters of the importance of seriously considering any abuse that their children report. Discuss the serious consequences of lightly dismissing such reports without proper action. (Further abuse to that child as well as potential danger to others.)