

# Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

## Overview & Tips

Child sexual abuse is a significant problem in Maine and in the United States. In 2013, almost 50% of contacts with Maine's sexual assault support programs were from or about someone who experienced sexual violence under the age of 18. Because it is so underreported, we cannot determine the full extent of the impact of child sexual abuse. However, the way to prevent child sexual abuse is to take steps before children are harmed.

### Prevention - The Good News

The good news is that we know what works to address child sexual abuse. At the local level MECASA's member centers provide sexual violence prevention education to nearly 50,000 students per year. For the youngest grades, programming is geared toward supporting children's sense of body ownership, and giving them the skills to recognize and respond to confusing or potentially dangerous situations. Member centers base this programming on nationally-recognized best practices regarding language and delivery. Personal body safety education has been demonstrated to impart important concepts about body awareness to children, and those who participate in such education demonstrate protective behaviors significantly more often than children who don't have such programming (Finkelhor, 2009).

Still, despite what we know about the skills and behaviors that may protect children who are being abused, the evidence is also clear that programming directed at children does not necessarily prevent victimization (Finkelhor, 2009) - rather, it gives children the tools to respond if victimization occurs.

Only through community and cultural change, directed toward higher grade levels and with college and professional audiences, can we turn the tide of victimization.

### What You Can Do

**Set and respect family boundaries.** Everyone has rights to privacy in dressing, bathing, sleeping and other personal activities. If anyone does not respect these rights, an adult should clearly tell them the family rules.

**Demonstrate boundaries** by showing children how to say "no." Teach children that their "no" will be respected, whether it's in playing, tickling, hugging or kissing.

**Use the proper names of body parts.** Just as we teach children that a nose is a nose, they need to know what to call their genitals. This knowledge gives children correct language for understanding their bodies, for asking questions, and for telling about any behavior that could lead to sexual abuse.

**Be clear about the difference between okay and inappropriate touches.** For younger children, teach more concrete rules such as "talk with me if anyone - family, friend, or anyone else - touches your private parts." Also teach kids that it is unacceptable to use manipulation or control to touch someone else's body.

**Explain the difference between secrets and surprises.** Surprises are joyful and generate excitement in anticipation of being revealed after a short period of time. Secrets exclude others, often because the information will create upset or anger. When keeping secrets with just one person becomes routine, children are more vulnerable to abuse.

## Bibliography

Finkelhor, D. (2009). The prevention of child sexual abuse. *The Future of Children*, 19(2).

*Adapted with thanks from prevention ideas created by Stop It Now! which can be found at [http://www.stopitnow.org/dont\\_wait\\_everyday\\_prevention](http://www.stopitnow.org/dont_wait_everyday_prevention).*



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**Leading the way toward ending sexual violence in Maine**