

Whole Hearted Parenting

Joyfully Parenting with Your Whole Heart!

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Empowering Children: Talking to Kids about Staying Safe

Things happen in our world, sometimes in our own communities, sometimes in our own families that are tough to talk about with children. When a situation involves an alleged incidence of inappropriate behavior by an adult with a child, it can be highly challenging to discuss.

On a daily basis we entrust the care of our children to other adults – from school teachers to troop leaders to dance instructors to family and friends. Children trust that we parents have chosen adults of integrity to care for them. We trust that the adults we have chosen are living what Stephen Covey, author of The Speed of Trust, terms “congruent” lives in which “there is no gap between intent and behavior. And it is congruence that will ultimately create credibility and trust.”

Recently we learned that someone we know had been arrested and charged with molestation. As a parent, this was disturbing to hear. For a child, it was even more distressing to hear this about a familiar and trusted adult – a teacher, an authority. One child learned about the arrest when she saw it on the evening news. She ran to her room and refused to come out. Her behavior showed the depth to which her need to belong was disrupted. The

adult was a part of the world to which this child felt a sense of belonging. We all have a need to belong, and when something like this occurs in our community or school, the way in which we belong is disturbed. We can feel disconnected.

It is important that parents create a space for children to express themselves, to freely ask questions, to learn how to handle themselves, to feel safe and protected and to pro-actively integrate the experience. It is easy to let fear drive us in these circumstances; however, fear creates victims and keeps us paralyzed in a powerless place. Instead, we can talk with children from a place of empowerment. We can teach children to take steps to prepare them, even at a very young age, to be self-protecting. These steps will help our children make healthy decisions whether we are present or not. These steps will help our children grow into adults who are inner-directed and who will effectively set limits. These steps will also help create a "Culture of Trust."

Making Your Conversation Positive

Here are six suggestions to help your conversation be clear and pro-active.

1. **Process Your Own Emotions First.** Be in a balanced place when you have this conversation. Avoid drama, labeling, pity, name-calling, and judgment. This may be especially challenging in these circumstances. If your emotions are running high, postpone the discussion until you are centered. Talk to a friend or relative. If additional support sounds good, talk to a counselor or therapist.
2. **Make Your Purpose to Connect, Educate and Listen.** This purpose is not fear-driven. It is supportive, informative and acknowledging. Be prepared to listen. Monitor your level of comfort. Take a break from the conversation if you find yourself feeling uncomfortable or fearful, and remind yourself of your purpose. Allow expression of all of your child's feelings. Keep in mind that you do not have to "happy up" your child or make everything OK. Just listen, answer questions, and encourage him to participate by saying "What else?" or "Tell me more." Share your own feelings.
3. **Be Truthful and Use Age-Appropriate Terms.** If the adult has been arrested, explain the difference between being accused and being found guilty. Teach older children about the process of justice and that one is

innocent until proven guilty. Truthfully talk about the charges using age-appropriate terms. Talk about emotional and physical boundaries as well as appropriate and inappropriate touch. If your child asks a question that you are not ready to answer or do not know how to answer, it is OK to respond with, "I don't know right now how to answer that. I'll figure it out and let you know."

4. **Keep the Doors of Communication Open.** As your children process their feelings, if they hear things from friends or if news is released, they may want to talk about the situation again. This can be an ongoing conversation as things are clarified and expressed. Be a resource and a refuge for your children, and they will come to you when they are unsure or if they feel unsafe.
5. **Teach Empathy.** This does not mean you condone inappropriate or illegal behavior. This does mean that you are sensitive to all parties and their families when talking with your child. This is a sad time for everyone, and their lives are far from normal. Look for the good that individuals have done and what they have contributed. Although it may feel ambiguous, avoid black and white explanations.
6. **Do Not Let Younger Children Watch the News While This Event is a Headline.** Issues like these are typically handled in a very sensationalistic way on television. There is no benefit for a young child to see his teacher in handcuffs being arraigned or to hear him being discussed with a scandalous tone.

Teaching Children to Stay Safe

Teaching children to stay safe can be incorporated into daily life. Here are four steps to help your child become aware and assertive.

1. **Permit Children to Say "No."** If children do not have the opportunity in their family to say no respectfully – particularly to an adult – where will they learn to set that boundary? It is revealing to take a moment and examine how often we say "yes" to a request followed almost immediately by our own internal dialogue of, "Why did I say that?" Children who are not permitted to say "no" grow into adults who do not say "no." A child needs to be clear that he can respectfully say "no" to anyone, including someone in authority.

2. **Do Not Force Children to Hug Adults or Other Children When They Do Not Want To.** Respect your child's physical space and his comfort level. Be sure that your child understands that he is in charge of who enters his "safety zone," the space the length of his arms surrounding his body.
3. **Give Children the Specific Words to Use.** Often we tell children, "Use your words" in confrontational situations; however, most children have no idea which words to use. The more useable information we provide, the more assertive our children will become. The words recommended by Dr. Becky Bailey, author of Conscious Discipline®, are "I am not for [hitting, biting, yelling at, pushing, teasing, etc]. Stop!" These words are said with a firm tone of voice. Parents can use daily events to help children practice this assertive approach. For example, when an 8-year-old girl born in China was taunted about her eyes, she firmly said, "I am not for teasing. Stop!" The teasing did stop, and she felt very capable and powerful.
4. **Teach Children to Trust Their Inner Guidance System.** We all have an inner guidance system that helps keep us safe. We may notice it as a twinge in the pit of our stomach or as a little voice that says, "Watch out over there." In 2006 when the news broke of Congressman Mark Foley's inappropriate E-mails and I-messages to Congressional pages, all who came forward said they felt uncomfortable. That was their inner guidance system. Encourage your child to trust his own inner guidance, and acknowledge his safe decisions. If he makes an unsafe choice, ask him, "Did you hear yourself questioning whether that choice was safe or not? Next time, I would like you to listen to and trust yourself." Trust your own inner guidance system as well.

Challenging conversations like these are where we truly model character and where our children develop theirs. I wish you well in your discussion.

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