



What Parents Need To Know To Keep Children Safe

By James Breig

Parents used to worry about having the “birds and bees” talk with their children. Now, they have to fret over adding the words “abusers” and “predators” to their vocabulary.

Womazetta Jones has some suggestions for how adults can proceed. She is director of the Safe Environment Office in the Office for the Protection of Children and Youth of the Archdiocese of Chicago. She worked for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services for more than 15 years, and was involved with child sex abuse investigation before joining the Archdiocese.



Womazetta Jones, director
Safe Environment Office,
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Any discussion of such a sensitive issue, she says, should be based on years of building a special relationship between parents and children. Mothers and fathers, Jones notes, “must develop, maintain and foster an ongoing positive relationship with their children. Parents need to listen to their children, talk to their children, and be actively involved in their lives and observant of everything.”

A second prerequisite, she adds, is that parents approach their children to talk about keeping them safe only after they themselves “obtain a fundamental level of understanding regarding the signs and symptoms of abuse, and the behavioral and emotional indicators of such trauma.”

Such prep work, she explains, helps parents “gain a comfort level before discussing the topic with their children. There is a lot of age-appropriate literature



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available on abuse, and there is also literature available on how to discuss this topic with minors of all ages.”

Jones calls it “critical” for parents to become “properly educated prior to beginning this discussion. It is also very important that parents are comfortable discussing this topic with their children. If the parent is openly uncomfortable or is unable to communicate effectively during the conversation with the minor, it will detract from what parents are trying to accomplish.”

Once educated and comfortable, parents are ready to talk to their children, using appropriate language “based upon their child's age and cognitive level.”

Teenagers who might be embarrassed about such a conversation or who are less likely to listen to mothers and fathers pose another obstacle to protecting children from abusers. The solution, Jones says, is for parents “to be open, direct, honest and prepared to dialogue. Even if your teenager seems uncomfortable or ‘laughs you off,’ keep talking. When they see that you have educated yourself on the topic and that you are not going to stop, they will begin to listen – and to ask questions.”

As moms and dads talk to their children, they should also make sure to listen themselves, she says, and watch for reactions. “Talk to your child. Listen to your child. Have open, ongoing communication with your child.”

In addition to talking to their children to protect them from abuse, Jones urges parents to learn if any sexual predators live in their neighborhood. If they do, a number of proactive steps can be taken.

“Contact your local police department for verification and to find out the restrictions listed in the registration,” she advises. “Every registered sex offender has a different set of restrictions, and you need to know what they are to ensure that you inform the authorities if you note violations. Ask your local police department for a print-out of his/her picture and the restrictions. Inform your child that there is a person in the neighborhood who is a danger to children; show them the picture, and tell them if this person ever interacts with them or any child, they should run and tell immediately.”



All of the effort prior to, during and after any discussion of abuse, she says, will help to ensure that “when you talk to your child, you will not scare them. You may, in fact, save them!”

In the end, she emphasizes, what will protect children is parents who care.

“Never get so busy that you forget about your child,” Jones says. “Never allow your child to get so busy that they forget about you. Make quality time for each other early on and keep it going. Respect each other. Trust each other. Love one another.”

