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It's an awful thing to think about... the possibility that a child you know is being sexually abused.

While most adults think they would KNOW if a child was being victimized, the truth is, they don't.

How can a child be sexually abused without mom, dad or another caring adult knowing about it? Under the shroud of the **"Three A's"** that are generally present for child sexual abuse to occur —

Access

Alone Time

Authority

It is estimated that between 1 in 4 children to 1 in 10 children will become a victim of sexual abuse before turning 18 years old.

*"For many, it may be difficult to comprehend that a child would **NOT** immediately run to tell someone — mom, dad, a teacher, sibling, grandparent — after experiencing sexual abuse.*

Unfortunately, silence or delayed disclosure is actually the norm, rather than the exception."

One estimate cites that 73% of children don't disclose sexual abuse for at least one year, 45% don't tell anyone for five years, and others never disclose their abuse at all (Smith et al., 2000; Broman-Fulks et al., 2007).

So, why don't children disclose sexual abuse?

Well, there are 10 primary reasons why children endure abuse in silence:

1) "Keep it a secret!"



Sexual predators are master manipulators and will often instruct children to keep the abuse a "secret," that it's something special that just the two of them are doing. This tactic is used frequently, especially with younger children.

Safety Lesson for Kids: Teach children the difference between "secrets" and "surprises," which are good, fun things like birthday gifts or family celebrations. Inform them to NEVER keep a secret about someone seeing or doing something to a private part of their bodies.

2) Fear and Threats.



Another common tactic used by sexual perpetrators is to instill fear in child victims and/or threaten them. Threats can take a variety of forms including physical harm to the child, the child's parents, siblings, friends or **even a child's pets**. Threats can also include withholding items

or privileges that are special to a child or even the basic necessities of life such as food and water. Sometimes, kids are just plain scared of or intimidated by their abusers. A child might also be fearful of how the person they want to disclose to will react, or of negative repercussions, both explicit and implied, for telling.

Safety Lesson for Kids: Establish an environment where children can openly talk with you about times they are scared or worried. Clearly let them know they should come to you or another **Safe Adult** if someone ever threatens them or someone else in their lives.

3) "I don't know how or who to tell."



Imagine how you would feel describing to someone the details of your last sexual encounter... Would you feel uncomfortable? Would you know what to say? Would you be selective about the

person to whom you recounted your experience?

Now imagine a young child or even a teenager trying to find the words to describe their experience of sexual abuse. For younger children, this is can often be difficult if they do not know the proper names of their body parts or understand basic body safety principles. For older kids, even if they can describe the abuse, it's often embarrassing for them to talk about even with someone they trust. In fact, most children who disclose sexual abuse DO NOT tell their parents — rather, they seek out someone else in their circle of trust, if they choose to disclose at all.

Safety Lesson for Kids: When talking with kids about sexual abuse prevention, teach the **proper names of body parts** at a very young age! It's NEVER TOO EARLY to start teaching children important body safety concepts, starting with identifying the names and locations of their private body parts. Additionally, working with children to identify **Safe Adults** in their lives is key!

4) The Blame Game.



Again, sexual predators are master manipulators and will often lead a child to believe that the sexual abuse is ALL THE CHILD'S FAULT! A child is told that s/he is the reason behind the abuse and that the child "made" the perpetrator do it — the perpetrator places all the blame for the abuse on the child.

Safety Lesson for Kids: When teaching body safety principles to children, reinforce that **it would NEVER be a child's fault** if someone asked to see or did something to their private body parts for no good reason or just to play a game.

5) Grooming.



Another sexual predatory behavior is grooming, which is the process of earning a child victim's trust and compliance. Predators groom victims for two reasons:

1. "Test the waters" to see how a child victim will react or respond to advances.
2. Train the child victim for continued inappropriate and more advanced sexual contact.

Grooming enables predators to earn a victim's trust and can also reduce the likelihood that a victim will disclose the abuse. Grooming can take place in a very short period of time, or through numerous interactions with a child over a longer period of time. Predators also groom parents, caregivers, and other adults in a child's life in order to establish an environment where the **"Three A's"** can occur.

Safety Lesson for Kids: Let children know that if someone treats them differently (often in a "good" way) by giving them special gifts or favors not offered to other kids, that the child should let you or another **Safe Adult** know what's happening.

6) "No one will believe you!"



By diminishing a child's self-esteem and convincing a child that no one will believe them, predators often manipulate children into silence. This tactic is commonly used by people in positions of power or authority. If a child thinks his/her story of abuse will not be believed, then why bother telling anyone?

Safety Lesson for Kids: Reinforce the notion that NO ONE has the right to see or do something to a private body part for no good reason or just to play a game — and that includes all adults like parents, teachers, coaches, doctors and more! Emphasize that it is the job of adults to keep children safe. If the first **Safe Adult** on their list is too busy to listen or does not believe them, then they should go to the next Safe Adult on the list... and keep talking until someone listens and responds to keep them out of harm's way!

7) Dissociation.



Dissociation is defined as disruptions in aspects of consciousness, identity, memory, physical actions and/or the environment. This state of being can often help children live through abuse by psychologically separating the child from the trauma as the abusive event is occurring. Sometimes, children who dissociate from abusive events do not recall the abuse until sometime in the future.

Safety Lesson for Kids: Talk to kids about the fact that it is never too late to tell a Safe Adult if someone has abused them. Even if the child “forgets” to say something right away, be clear that it is always better to talk with a Safe Adult as soon as they remember.

8) Punishment.



Many times, children are led to believe they will get in trouble for disclosing. Punishment can take on many forms including physical abuse, harm to other family members including beloved pets, or elimination of items that are special to a child (toys, special privileges, etc.). Kids are sometimes told they will be taken away from a parent or home they love if they tell anyone about the abuse.

Safety Lesson for Kids: As with #4 above, reinforce that it is NEVER a child's fault if someone asked to see or did something to their private body parts for no good reason or just to play a game

9) Shame.



Sexual assault victims of any age can experience shame, embarrassment or humiliation. Those feelings can be so strong that they override the choice to tell anyone about the abuse.

Safety Lesson for Kids: Reinforcing the above teaching moments can help to reduce feelings of shame. Be sure to establish and maintain a safe environment for children to talk about difficult topics. Start with less serious topics like disagreements with siblings or friends, how to handle being mad or sad, and so on. When a child feels comfortable approaching you with everyday challenges, it increases the likelihood of them coming to you should a more serious event like sexual abuse ever occur.

10) Love



Love is a powerful motivator to stay silent about abuse. Remember: 90% of all sexually abused children know, LOVE, or trust their abusers. So, it's pretty common for children to have strong feelings for those perpetrating crimes against them. Because of those strong feelings, children often keep sexual abuse a secret. Love can take on many forms in child sexual abuse cases; some examples include:

- The child loves a parent or another family member who is abusing him/her
- The child wants to protect mom, dad, grandma, etc. if that person's partner is sexually molesting him/her
- A Romeo-Juliet scenario exists where the child thinks s/he is in love with an older perpetrator

Safety Lesson for Kids: Teaching body boundaries and healthy sexual development — including what relationships typically look like at various life stages — will help children make good choices and turn to you or another Safe Adult when needed. Additionally, including yourself as someone who is not allowed to touch a child for no good reason reinforces the concept that even those you love and who love you must play by the same rules of body safety.