

STEP UP TO PREVENT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A Guide For Parents & Caregivers



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Children & youth

This guide is about keeping all children safe from sexual abuse. When we use the term:

- ⇒ “Children”, we are talking about children to age 18.
- ⇒ “Youth”, we are talking specifically about older children and teens.

Note to readers

If reading this guide affects you emotionally because of your own history of abuse, please seek support for yourself. See a list of resources starting on page 32.

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INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem. It happens more often than most people think and is most often committed by people we know and trust. According to studies:

- One in 10 children are sexually abused before they turn 18.
- About 90% of victims know their abusers.
- Sexual abuse can change the areas in a child's brain that control long-term, verbal and spatial memory as well as their ability to learn life skills and control their emotions.

Who this guide is for

It was written for:

1. parents of children up to age 18,
2. foster parents, and
3. kinship caregivers (e.g., grandparents and family friends).

How this guide can help

There are things we all know we need to do to keep our children safe. Like making sure they:

1. sleep on their backs as infants,
2. wear helmets when riding their bikes, and
3. wear seat belts when driving a car.

Keeping them safe from sexual abuse is not something we've been taught to automatically think about. But it should be!

This guide will teach you how to:

- Reduce the risk to children to keep them safe.
- Identify and react responsibly to incidents if they happen.

SECTION 1: EDUCATE YOURSELF

Children cannot be responsible for protecting themselves from sexual abuse. That is our job as adults. The first, and perhaps most important, step we can take is to educate ourselves. Knowing the facts about sexual abuse can help us keep children safe!

What child sexual abuse is

It can include both touching and non-touching acts between:

1. An adult and child/youth.
2. Two children/youth when there are significant differences in age, physical size or intellectual ability.

TOUCHING ACTS CAN INCLUDE:

- ⇒ touching a child's genitals, buttocks or breasts,
- ⇒ putting a penis, finger or other object into the body opening of a child for sexual pleasure, and
- ⇒ coercing a child to touch themselves, the abuser or another child, youth or adult.

NON-TOUCHING ACTS CAN INCLUDE:

- ⇒ exposing oneself to a child in a lewd way,
- ⇒ viewing a child's private behaviors (e.g., bathing, showering or undressing) when not appropriate,
- ⇒ involving a child in viewing or producing pornography,
- ⇒ encouraging children to behave in sexual ways, and
- ⇒ sharing sexually explicit pictures of a child electronically.

VERMONT'S CHILD PROTECTION LAW

(33 VSA § 4912) DEFINES SEXUAL ABUSE AS:

Any act or acts by any person involving sexual molestation or exploitation of a child, including:

- ➔ human trafficking, incest, lewd and lascivious conduct involving a child, luring a child, obscenity, prostitution, rape, sexual assault, sodomy and voyeurism;
- ➔ aiding, abetting, counseling, hiring, or procuring of a child to perform or participate in any photograph, motion picture, exhibition, show, representation, or other presentation which, in whole or in part, depicts sexual conduct, sexual excitement, or sadomasochistic abuse involving a child; and
- ➔ viewing, possessing or transmitting child pornography (with the exclusion of the exchange of images between mutually consenting minors, including the minor whose image is exchanged).

FACT: Children with disabilities and youth who identify as LGBTQ are at much higher risk of being sexually abused.

SEX TRAFFICKING OF MINORS

A range of crimes, including:

- ➔ exploiting a minor through survival sex (i.e., exchanging sex or sexual acts for money or something of value such as shelter, food or drugs);
- ➔ recruiting, enticing, harboring, transporting, providing or obtaining minors for the purpose of sexual exploitation; and
- ➔ exploiting a minor through sex tourism, mail order bride trade, early marriage or performing in sexual venues.

Learn more at <https://dcf.vermont.gov/safety>.

Who sexually abuses children

It's difficult — perhaps even impossible — to describe a typical person who sexually harms children. We do know that they:

- Can be found in all areas of society.
- Are often well-respected members of their communities.
- Are often kind, caring people in other areas of their lives.
- Relate well with kids.
- May be in adult romantic relationships/marriage at the same time they are abusing children.

People who seek to sexually abuse children work hard to develop an image of being trustworthy. This benefits them in two ways:

1. It helps them gain access to children.
2. It makes it difficult for people to believe any accusations that are made against them.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US:

- Nearly all child sexual abuse is committed by people the children and families know and trust. This includes:
 - ➔ parents, grandparents, aunts, cousins and siblings,
 - ➔ neighbors and family friends, and
 - ➔ other people they know through school, church, sports and other community activities.
- Men are more likely to sexually abuse children than women.
- Children and youth sexually abuse other children and youth. In fact, about a third of sexual abuse is committed by youth under the age of 20.
- Most sexual abuse happens when a child is alone with an adult or older youth.

How sexual abuse happens

Two things are needed to sexually harm children:

1. Access to a child.
2. Time alone with the child.

WHAT ABUSERS LOOK FOR:

1. Children they see as vulnerable and easy to deceive.
2. Children they think may not be believed if they ever tell.

Some target children and youth with specific vulnerabilities (e.g., disability, LGBTQ). They may look for jobs or volunteer opportunities that give them the access they need.

THE GROOMING PROCESS:

Grooming is a deliberate process that's done to:

1. Earn the trust of children, parents, caregivers and other adults around a child.
2. Gain access to, and time alone with, children.

While the ultimate goal is to sexually abuse a child, it can be weeks, months or even years before any abuse takes place. The process is gradual and may not be obvious. It often begins with behaviors such as:

- ➔ Testing a child's boundaries by telling inappropriate jokes, roughhousing, giving backrubs and playing tickling games.
- ➔ Moving from non-sexual touching to "accidental" sexual touching. This can happen during play or cuddling so the child may not even realize it was done on purpose and is wrong. It's often done slowly so the child is gradually desensitized.
- ➔ Spending time with the child, giving them special attention and telling them things they want to hear.

SAFETY TIP: Choose group activities instead of one child/one adult situations.

HOW TEENS ARE GROOMED:

Grooming teens often includes additional strategies:

- ➔ identifying with them and appearing to be the only one who understands them,
- ➔ displaying common interests in things like sports, music, movies, video games and television shows,
- ➔ recognizing and filling their need for affection and attention,
- ➔ allowing or encouraging them to break the rules (e.g., smoking, drinking, using drugs and viewing pornography),
- ➔ giving them gifts or special privileges, and
- ➔ communicating with them outside of the person's role and without the parents' knowledge or permission (e.g., coach communicating with teen via social media).

HOW ADULTS ARE GROOMED:

It's not just children and teens who are groomed. People seeking access to children also work hard to gain the trust of the adults in the children's lives. This could include:

- ➔ befriending the parents and other caregivers,
- ➔ looking for chances to spend time alone with a child (e.g., offering to babysit, having the child over for a sleepover, driving the child to sporting events), and
- ➔ taking advantage of a parent's vulnerability (e.g., lack of money, substance use, busy schedule or loneliness) to gain access to their children.

What to look for

Your children will almost certainly spend time with adults other than you. You may think: “How do I know who I can trust with my children?” There is no easy answer, but there are things you can do that can help keep them safe:

1. Be mindful of who is spending time with them.
2. Screen the individuals and organizations they will be involved with.
3. Pay attention to a person’s behavior rather than their personality or your relationship to them (i.e., he’s so nice or she’s family, they’d never do anything).

SCREENING INDIVIDUALS/ORGANIZATIONS:

When choosing a child care provider, school, afterschool program or sports program for your child, it’s important to examine them carefully. Get to know them. Ask lots of questions!

Ask about:

- ➔ The systems in place to prevent child sexual abuse (e.g., supervision of adult-child interactions and policies that deal with inappropriate behavior and suspected abuse).
- ➔ The background checks they do on employees and volunteers (e.g., criminal records, child protection registry, adult abuse registry and sex offender registry).
- ➔ The training they provide staff and volunteers related to preventing, recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse.
- ➔ How they encourage parents to get involved. Whether they can ask questions and drop in whenever they want.

CONCERNING ADULT BEHAVIORS:

Pay attention if an adult or older youth:

- ➔ Creates opportunities to spend time alone with your child.
- ➔ Befriends your family and shows more interest in having a relationship with your child than with you.
- ➔ Spends time with your child outside their role as teacher, coach or employer.
- ➔ Ignores your child's cues that they don't want to be touched (e.g., continues to wrestle, tickle or roughhouse with your child when they are obviously uncomfortable).
- ➔ Doesn't respect your child's privacy (e.g., deliberately walks in on them dressing or using the bathroom).
- ➔ Gives your child money or gifts for no reason.
- ➔ Plays with your child in a way that makes you uncomfortable.
- ➔ Minimizes any concerns that you raise.
- ➔ Seems "too good to be true" (e.g., babysitting for free).
- ➔ Tells your child sexual jokes or stories.

While these behaviors don't necessarily mean they are grooming your child or family, they could indicate poor boundaries and should be concerning. If something doesn't seem right, trust your instincts.

When thinking about someone's interaction with your child, ask yourself:

- ➔ Did it seem odd?
- ➔ Did it make me uncomfortable?
- ➔ Did it make my child uncomfortable?
- ➔ Has anyone commented on it?

CONCERNING CHILD/YOUTH BEHAVIOR:

It can be difficult to think that children and teens are capable of sexually harming other children. But it's important to know the facts. About one third of all child sexual abuse in Vermont is committed by youth under 20 (according to the *Annual Report on Child Protection in Vermont*).

The resources listed below can help you learn:

- ➔ What sexual behaviors are a normal part of growing up.
- ➔ What sexual behaviors are appropriate based on a child's age and development.
- ➔ What sexual behaviors may be harmful.
- ➔ What to do if you're concerned a child is at-risk of sexually harming another child or being sexually harmed by a child.
- ➔ How to plan for safety.

While sexual curiosity is a healthy part of a child's sexual development, there may be times when some type of intervention is needed — from speaking up about your concerns to getting professional help. Early intervention is key!

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- ➔ **STOP IT NOW: Help & Guidance: Children's Behaviors**
<https://www.stopitnow.org/help-guidance>
- ➔ **NATIONAL CHILD TRAUMATIC STRESS NETWORK: Sexual Development and Behavior in Children**
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/sexual-development-and-behavior-children-information-parents-and-caregivers>

How to recognize a child's disclosure

It's not always obvious when a child discloses (tells). They are usually not this clear and direct: *Uncle Joe sexually abused me*. It might sound more like: *I don't want to go to Uncle Joe's anymore* or *Please don't leave me alone with him*.

While children may disclose all at once, they'll most likely tell a bit at a time. This could happen over hours, weeks, months or even years as they test how people react to their words. They may seem hesitant, confused or uncertain. They may even change their story and deny the abuse took place. This does NOT mean it didn't happen.

Children often reveal more through their behaviors than their words. That's why it's important to know what to look for. If your child displays any of the behaviors listed on the next page (or similar ones), think about the possible reasons. Ask yourself whether it's possible that they are:

- ➔ Reacting to issues happening in the family (e.g., divorce, separation, death or illness).
- ➔ Being bullied at school or having problems with friends.
- ➔ Being groomed, sexually abused or trafficked for sex.
- ➔ Feeling guilty about their own sexually harmful behaviors.

If the behavior continues over a long period, you may want to seek professional advice.

Having regular, daily chats with your children – about their activities and feelings – can increase the likelihood that they'd share their concerns with you. Talking and connecting is key.

There may be cause for concern if your child displays any of the behaviors below, especially if the change is sudden:

- Displays sexual knowledge beyond their age/development.
- Verbalizes what sexual contact looks or sounds like; mimics sexual behavior.
- Acts out sexually and doesn't respond to limits.
- Displays extreme behaviors, from a lack of emotion to aggressive and risk-taking behavior.
- Suddenly changes their eating habits or refuses to eat.
- Suddenly has nightmares or problems sleeping.
- Has headaches, stomach pain or chronic pain.
- Displays sudden, unexplained personality changes or mood swings; acts out or becomes withdrawn.
- Seems suddenly afraid to go certain places or spend time alone with a certain person.
- Starts having problems at school.
- Becomes clingy, cries excessively or seems sad.
- Is overly protective of social network accounts; refuses to give you passwords to their electronic devices.
- Refuses to talk about a secret.
- Self injures (e.g., cutting, burning, attempting suicide); self medicates with drugs or alcohol.
- Becomes sexually promiscuous or runs away from home.
- Talks about a new older friend.
- Suddenly has money, expensive clothes or other gifts without good reason.
- Shows distress around a particular adult or older youth.

How to respond to a child's disclosure

If your child tells you they've been sexually abused:

- ➔ Find a private place to talk.
- ➔ Stay calm. Don't overreact. Don't under react. Displaying a strong reaction may cause them to stop talking.
- ➔ Believe what they tell you. While children are sometimes confused about the details, they rarely lie about sexual abuse.
- ➔ Thank them for telling you and praise their courage. Let them know it was not their fault.
- ➔ Don't make negative comments about the person who abused them since your child likely knows and cares about them.
- ➔ Don't question your child about the abuse. This could jeopardize any ensuing investigation.
- ➔ If your child wants to talk about the abuse, listen calmly and carefully. Afterwards, write down what was said in as much detail as you remember.
- ➔ Don't correct your child's language if they don't use the proper terms for private body parts. Use their language.
- ➔ Respect what they are feeling. Each and every child expresses their feelings differently.
- ➔ Tell your child you will be taking action to keep them safe, but be careful not to promise things you can't control (e.g., "I'll make sure he goes to jail").
- ➔ Call DCF's 24-hour Child Protection Line to make a report: 1-800-649-5285. They will work with law enforcement to address the situation and help you figure out the next steps.

Why children may not tell

There are many reasons children may delay telling or never tell. For example, they might:

- ➔ Be afraid of not being believed or of being judged.
- ➔ Feel shame, guilt or embarrassment.
- ➔ Feel responsible for what happened.
- ➔ Not want to lose any perceived benefits they are getting from the abuser (e.g., gifts, love, attention, time).
- ➔ Have been threatened by the abuser — with violence against them, their family, friends or pets.
- ➔ Not know who they can tell.
- ➔ Be afraid of what will happen if they tell (e.g., the family will break up, a parent will go to jail).
- ➔ Not recognize that they've been abused (this is especially true for young children and those with disabilities).

FACT: Research shows that many victims never tell about sexual abuse during childhood.

A child's decision to tell is often influenced by the behavior of their abuser and the protective adults in their life. You can increase the likelihood your children would tell by:

- ➔ Talking about healthy sexual development, personal safety, and situations that may leave them confused.
- ➔ Letting them know it's okay to tell a trusted adult anything.
- ➔ Allowing them to make choices about physical contact (e.g., don't force them to kiss or hug anyone).
- ➔ Telling them children are never responsible for abuse.

SECTION 2: PLAN FOR SAFETY

There's no one thing you can do to guarantee your child will be safe from sexual abuse. There's no one personality type or situation that can act as a total safeguard. You can, however, help them stay safe by:

1. Identifying and increasing protective factors.
2. Identifying and decreasing risk factors.

When making a safety plan, think about your child and the world they live in.

Step one: identify protective factors

Protective factors are characteristics in individuals, families and communities that promote the healthy development and well-being of children and families. Below are some examples.

MY CHILD:

- Displays confidence.
- Has a positive body image and outlook on life.
- Has a strong sense of belonging and connection.
- Is able to express a full range of emotions.
- Has a good network of friends.
- Has a safe, trusting relationship with at least one adult.
- Is able to set personal boundaries and respects other people's personal boundaries.
- Knows and uses the correct names for private body parts.
- Is active in the community.

OUR FAMILY:

- Has inner resources we can draw on when times are tough (e.g., faith, flexibility and humor).
- Has strong, supportive relationships with family members, friends and neighbors.
- Spends time playing, working and being together.
- Models and promotes respectful communication, relationships and personal boundaries.
- Has consistent rules, expectations, routines and limits.
- Allows our children to make choices, think for themselves and become independent.
- Talks openly about healthy sexuality & sexual development.
- Has a strong sense of family connectedness and belonging.
- Has enough food, a home and health care.
- Is ready and able to ask for help when we need it.
- Is educated about child sexual abuse.
- Carefully considers and minimizes one-on-one situations between children and adults or older youth.

OUR COMMUNITY:

- Has playgrounds, programs and activities for families.
- Openly discusses issues related to child sexual abuse and the sex trafficking of minors and takes responsibility for prevention.
- Holds public classes on healthy sexuality and personal safety.
- Has safe public areas.
- Encourages child and youth-serving organizations to put policies and procedures in place to keep children safe.

Step two: identify risk factors

Risk factors are characteristics found to increase a child's risk of being victimized. Below are some examples.

MY CHILD:

- Is insecure, has low self-esteem.
- Feels lonely or disconnected.
- Does not know the correct names for private body parts.
- Does not have access to information about sex and sexuality.
- Is exposed to videos, music or games that are violent, sexually explicit or degrading.
- Has unsupervised access to technology.
- Has a cognitive, physical, emotional or learning disability.

MY FAMILY:

- Does not supervise one-on-one situations between our child and adults or older youth (e.g., tutoring, transportation).
- Does not always know where our children are.
- Has high levels of conflict, domestic violence, mental health and/or substance abuse issues in the home.
- Is socially isolated; lacks community connections.
- Moves frequently and/or changes schools often.
- Does not have a strong bond between family members.
- Does not spend much time doing things together.

MY COMMUNITY:

- Does not question what happens in other people's families.
- Does not have resources where families can get help or make connections.
- Does not have places where healthy sexuality and safety are talked about or taught.

Step three: develop a plan

Make a list of the protective factors you'd like to increase and the risk factors you'd like to decrease. *See examples below.*

PROTECTIVE CHILD FACTOR:

My son is a talented dancer. It helps him be more confident.

Actions I will take to strengthen it:

- ✓ Become more involved with dance (e.g., take him to see a dance production and sew costumes for the troupe).

PROTECTIVE FAMILY FACTOR:

Our family is committed to the safe use of technology. The only computer we have with Internet access is in the living room where we monitor its use.

Actions I will take to strengthen it:

- ✓ Make sure my children know the rules for using technology and understand why we have rules (i.e., the Internet is one way people who want to harm children get close to them).
- ✓ Review the rules regularly and update them if needed.
- ✓ Install filtering and monitoring software on our computers.
- ✓ Take a class to stay current on ever-changing technology.

PROTECTIVE FAMILY FACTOR:

My child is active in sports. When she participates in a new sport or sports camp, we make sure everyone involved has gone through a background check.

Actions I will take to strengthen it:

- ✓ Ask about the training coaches and others receive related to preventing, recognizing and reporting child sexual abuse.
- ✓ Ask about the policies and procedures in place to keep children safe.

CHILD RISK FACTOR:

My son has a diagnosis of autism. He interacts with several providers on a one-to-one basis and needs help with personal activities like getting dressed. I am aware that because of his disability, he faces a higher risk of sexual abuse.

Actions I'll take to decrease the risk:

- ✓ Make sure all his service providers have current background checks (e.g., criminal records, child protection registry, adult abuse registry and sex offender registry).
- ✓ Make sure the service provider's employers have policies for dealing with inappropriate behaviors and suspected abuse.
- ✓ Drop in unexpectedly, on a regular basis, and have someone else drop in if I can't.
- ✓ Tell the caregivers that both my son and I are educated about child sexual abuse.

FAMILY RISK FACTOR:

Our family just moved somewhere new. We don't know our new neighbors and are far from family and friends.

Actions I'll take to decrease the risk:

- ✓ Look for local groups we can join to connect to other parents and kids.
- ✓ Volunteer to help out at my child's school. This is a good way to connect to natural supports for my child.
- ✓ Introduce myself to our new neighbors.

Step Four: Put Your Plan Into Action

Follow through on the steps you've committed to taking. Review your plan regularly and make adjustments if needed.

SECTION 3: TALK ABOUT IT

Research tells us that children with the following are less likely to be targeted:

- ➔ positive feelings and knowledge about their bodies,
- ➔ accurate information about sexuality,
- ➔ open communication with their parents, and
- ➔ a sense of ownership, power and control over their bodies.

If talking about these issues with your children raises strong emotions because of your own history of sexual abuse, seek support and resources for yourself.

Talk to your children about healthy sexuality

- ✓ Think about the messages you want to share—beforehand. As parents, we continuously send messages to our children about our values and beliefs around sexuality. We do this through what we do, what we say, how we say it and what we don't say. These messages can have a deep and long-lasting impact on our children.
- ✓ Start talking to them early and do it often. We start learning about sexuality from the moment we're born and this learning continues throughout our lives.
- ✓ Be open, honest and positive. Inform yourself. Read a book, take a class or contact a community or statewide organization with expertise in this area.
- ✓ If you're uncomfortable talking about sexuality, practice with a partner or friend.
- ✓ Seek opportunities. Take advantage of "teachable moments."

- ✓ Provide your children with accurate information — appropriate to their ages and ability to understand (*developmentally-appropriate*).
- ✓ If you don't know what to say or how to answer their questions, offer to find the information for them or look for the answers together.
- ✓ Show your children that they can talk to you anytime and about anything. Be approachable. Listen. Try to understand their points of view. Be a consistent, reliable source that they can go to with all their questions.
- ✓ Use the proper names for body parts (e.g., nose, ears, penis, vagina) This lets them know their bodies are natural and good, okay to talk about and worthy of protection. It also gives them the correct language for understanding their bodies, asking questions and talking about potentially inappropriate behaviors.
- ✓ Respond calmly if your child displays sexual behaviors or asks questions that make you uncomfortable. Think about what you want to say before you say it. If you need time to gather your thoughts, take it.
- ✓ Teach your children sexual feelings are normal and healthy.
- ✓ Discuss healthy relationships and what they look like.
- ✓ Don't wait until they ask questions. Some may never ask.
- ✓ Learn the stages of healthy sexual development and what to teach at each stage.
- ✓ If you need support or information, go to Section 5: Find Resources.

Talk to your children about personal safety

It can be difficult to know what to say, how much to say and when to say it. You don't want to confuse or scare your children, but you do want to keep them safe. Below are some general strategies for having ongoing discussions.

- ✓ Consider the messages you want to share—beforehand. Think of it as a process that evolves over time rather than one “big discussion.” Make sure the information you share is appropriate to their ages and ability to understand (*developmentally appropriate*).
- ✓ Set and respect clear boundaries. All family members have the right to privacy (e.g., dressing and bathing). If someone acts in ways that violate these boundaries, it's an adult's responsibility to enforce them.
- ✓ As your children grow, encourage them to take ownership over their bodies (e.g., dress & bathe themselves). This helps them learn about boundaries and privacy. As they become more independent, respect their increasing need for privacy.
- ✓ Teach your children about setting personal boundaries and getting consent. For example: ask them if they want to be hugged or picked up. Teach them to ask others if a touch is okay. Show them their “no” will be respected and that they need to respect other people's “no”.
- ✓ As your children get older, discuss healthy relationships (e.g., open communication, respect, trust and equal power). Get a copy of the *Relationship Status Booklet*, published by the Vermont Network Against Domestic & Sexual Violence: <https://vtnetwork.org/relationship-status-booklet/>.

- ✓ Teach your children safety rules about private parts of their bodies (e.g., penis, vagina, anus, breasts). The rules should cover touching as well as the taking and sharing of images.
- ✓ Let them know there may be situations when these things are okay. Use concrete examples to help them understand. For example: with a young child you may say “mommy and daddy can help you stay clean and touch your penis when we wash it.”
- ✓ With teenagers, you might discuss the safety rules for using technology and what to do if they feel pressured to be more intimate with a partner than they are comfortable with.
- ✓ Let them know it’s okay to say “no” if someone doesn’t follow the safety rules and it’s okay to tell a trusted adult.
- ✓ Be careful not to suggest that they need to protect themselves from sexual abuse. It’s unrealistic to expect them to do that. Be clear that keeping them safe is an adult’s job.
- ✓ Teach them that secrets about touching and pictures are never okay, no matter who asks them to keep the secret.
- ✓ Help them identify trusted adults they can turn to for help. Let them know they can talk to these adults if they feel scared, uncomfortable or confused. Help them identify more than one trusted adult and update the list regularly.
- ✓ Vermont schools are required to teach child sexual abuse prevention as part of K-12 comprehensive health education. Find out what your school is doing. Use this as another opportunity to talk with your children.

Vermont's Consent Law

There can be significant, long-lasting consequences for teens who engage in illegal sexual behaviors. That's why it's important they understand that the legal age of consent in Vermont is 16 years old — with the following exceptions:

- ➡ The persons are married to each other and the sexual act is consensual.
- ➡ The older person is under 19, the younger one is at least 15 and the sexual act is consensual.

No person shall engage in a sexual act with a child who is under the age of 18 and entrusted to their care by authority of law or is their child, grandchild, foster child, adopted child or stepchild.

[13 V.S.A. - Chapter 72 § 3252](#)

Talk to other adults about child sexual abuse

Talking to other adults can help raise awareness in your community and influence choices about child safety. Below are some tips for doing this:

- ✓ Ask your school or parent group to hold discussions on topics such as healthy sexual development, child sexual abuse and sexual violence. Talk openly about these issues.
- ✓ Vermont schools and licensed child care centers are required by law to inform staff about the prevention, identification and reporting of child sexual abuse. Ask questions: Have they trained their staff? How do they deal with inappropriate behaviors? What are their policies?

SECTION 4: TAKE ACTION

It's essential to the safety of each and every child that adults have the courage to take action when something seems wrong—whether it involves their children or someone else's.

If you suspect child sexual abuse

If you suspect a child is being, or has been, sexually abused, call Vermont's 24-hour Child Protection Line at 1-800-649-5285.

Try to have as much information on hand as possible, including the:

- ➔ names of the child's parents/caregivers,
- ➔ child's name, date of birth, address, school or child care provider, and
- ➔ nature of your concerns.

If you notice inappropriate behavior

It can be difficult to identify behavior that is inappropriate but not necessarily sexual abuse. You may see or hear something that's unsettling or has some kind of sexual energy. A situation may make you uneasy or just not feel right. Although you have no reason to believe sexual abuse has happened, you are still concerned. For example:

- ➔ You discover a teacher has been exchanging emails and text messages with your 14-year-old son, without your or the school's knowledge. While the emails and texts are not sexual in nature, the behavior is still out of bounds.
- ➔ You overhear your 15-year-old daughter using sexually-explicit language around much younger kids.

When faced with a troubling situation, ask yourself:

- ➔ Does this make me uncomfortable?
- ➔ Does it seem odd?
- ➔ Would it concern someone else?

Inappropriate behaviors may make children uncomfortable and be part of the grooming process. If you're hesitant to take action, ask yourself these questions:

- ➔ Is there a safety issue?
- ➔ Why am I reluctant to act?
- ➔ What's the worst that could happen if I'm wrong?
- ➔ What if I'm right?

While confronting these behaviors can be difficult, the well-being of children must always come first. Taking action:

- ➔ Sends a clear message that you are paying attention.
- ➔ Helps prevent abuse.
- ➔ Lets children know you value and want to protect them.

Situations you might encounter

On the pages that follow are examples of situations you may encounter and ways you might respond.

As you think about how you might respond in a given situation, consider the following questions:

- ➔ What do I need to do to protect my children?
- ➔ What could I do to help protect other children?
- ➔ Should I talk directly to someone who is behaving inappropriately?

SCENARIO 1:

You're looking for a child care provider for your son. You visit a provider's home based on a friend's recommendation and get a *funny feeling*.

- ➔ Trust your instincts. Look for another provider.
- ➔ Call 1-877-705-9008 to be directed to a local agency that can help you find a provider.

SCENARIO 2:

An uncle is playing with his niece in a way that makes you uncomfortable. (i.e., he continues to tickle her in spite of her obvious discomfort and requests for him to stop).

- ➔ Address the situation directly with him when it happens.
- ➔ You might say something like: "Your niece has asked you to stop, so stop".
- ➔ Pay attention to his ongoing behavior.
- ➔ Supervise your children when he's around.
- ➔ Talk to the girl's parents about your concerns.

SCENARIO 3:

You're monitoring your daughter's emails and come across sexually-explicit emails between her and a teacher. The teacher sent naked pictures of himself to your daughter and asked her to send naked pictures of herself to him.

- ➔ Call DCF's Child Protection Line immediately to report the situation: 1-800-649-5285.
- ➔ DCF will work with law enforcement to address the situation.
- ➔ DCF will help you figure out next steps, including getting support for your daughter.

SCENARIO 4:

Someone interacts with your child in a way that crosses boundaries (e.g., a coach offers your child an unauthorized ride, a bus driver gives special treats only to your child).

- ➔ If it feels safe and appropriate, talk to the person directly about their behavior.
- ➔ Contact the person's place of work to report the behavior.
- ➔ Talk to your child about the situation.
- ➔ If you're still concerned about the situation, call DCF at 1-800-649-5285.

SCENARIO 5:

You're concerned that a day camp counselor is spending time alone with a child outside of their role as counselor.

- ➔ Contact the camp to report your concerns.
- ➔ Ask how they address these types of situations.
- ➔ Talk to the child's parents to express your concerns.
- ➔ Restrict that person's access to your children.
- ➔ Talk to your children.
- ➔ If you are still concerned about the situation, call DCF at 1-800-649-5285.

Help & Guidance — From Stop It Now!

Specialized resources to help you learn how to speak up about your concerns and take the next steps toward a healthier, happier tomorrow.

<https://www.stopitnow.org/help-guidance>

SCENARIO 6:

You notice your teenage son is especially uncommunicative lately. He has a sudden interest in playing with younger kids and has been watching movies with strong sexual content (contrary to your rules). Taken individually, you might not worry about any of these behaviors, but the combination is concerning.

- ➔ Take immediate action. A quick response is essential to ensure the best possible outcome.
- ➔ Get professional advice about the best way to respond, how to talk to your son about your concerns and how to determine if further action is necessary.
- ➔ Address your concerns with your son in a straightforward, calm manner.

SCENARIO 7:

Your 15-year-old daughter has let you know that she is romantically involved with another 15-year-old girl. She also tells you that a boy in her class has been forcing her to kiss him and let him fondle her to convince her that she really likes boys and wants a boyfriend.

- ➔ Let your daughter know that you fully support her relationship with her girlfriend and that it's natural for them to have feelings for one another.
- ➔ Tell your daughter that what this boy is doing is WRONG.
- ➔ Advise her that you will be talking to the school about his behavior and making a report to DCF.
- ➔ Call DCF at 1-800-649-5285.

SECTION 5: FIND RESOURCES

Advocacy Services

CENTER FOR CRIME VICTIM SERVICES

<http://www.ccvv.vermont.gov>

Provides information to crime victims, supports them through the criminal justice system and provides some financial help to victims of violent crimes. Call 1-800-750-1213 or (802) 241-1250.

CHILD ADVOCACY CENTERS (CAC'S) / SPECIAL INVESTIGATION UNITS (SIU'S)

CAC's and SIU's coordinate multi-agency responses to child sexual abuse investigations and provide advocacy to child victims and their families.

➤ *Statewide Chapter of Child Advocacy Centers:*

VT Children's Alliance at <http://www.vtchildrensalliance.org>

➤ *Addison County SIU:* (802) 274-5724

➤ *Bennington County CAC & SIU:* (802) 442-5107

➤ *Caledonia County SIU:* (802) 424-1227

➤ *Chittenden SIU:* (802) 652-6800

➤ *Chittenden Child Advocacy Center:* (802) 652-0391

➤ *Franklin & Grand Isle Counties:* Northwest Unit for Special Investigations at (802) 524-7961

➤ *Lamoille County SIU:* (802) 851-8116

➤ *Orange County SIU:* (802) 685-4712

➤ *Orleans County CAC & Northeast Kingdom SIU:*
(802) 334-6002, (802) 225-8357

- *Rutland County*: Child First CAC & Rutland SIU:
(802) 747-0200
- *Washington County*: O.U.R. House of Central Vermont:
(802) 476-8825
- *Windham County*: Windham County Safe Place CAC & SIU:
(802) 579-1358
- *Windsor County*:
 - ⇒ CAC at The Family Place and Windsor County SIU:
(802) 295-3882
 - ⇒ CAC at the Springfield Area Parent Child Center:
(802) 295-3882

Helplines & Hotlines

- ⇒ **CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE (24/7):** 1-800-649-5285
- ⇒ **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE:** 1-800-228-7395
- ⇒ **PARENT'S HELPLINE:** 1-800-244-5373
- ⇒ **SEXUAL VIOLENCE HOTLINE:** 1-800-489-7273

Referral Services

COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTERS

<https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/individuals-and-families>

Call (802) 828-3824 or visit the website above for a list of centers that provide services to children and families throughout Vermont.

HELP ME GROW (FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN)

Dial 2-1-1 to connect to a child development specialist who can answer your questions and connect you to resources and services in your community.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT PROVIDERS

<http://healthvermont.gov/adap/treatment/treatment.aspx>

Call (802) 863-7200 or visit their website for a list of providers.

VERMONT 2-1-1

<http://www.vermont211.org>

Dial 2-1-1 for help connecting to government programs, community-based organizations, and more—24/7.

VT NETWORK AGAINST DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

<http://www.vtnetwork.org>

Call (802) 223-1302 to connect to the nearest sexual violence service agency for information, crisis support and referrals.

Web Resources

CENTER FOR PREVENTION & TREATMENT OF SEXUAL ABUSE

<http://humanservices.vermont.gov/help-and-resources/vermont-center-prevention-and-treatment-sexual-abuse>

Visit this website to find resources for families, law enforcement and other professionals.

PREVENT CHILD ABUSE VERMONT

<https://www.pcavt.org/>

We promote and support healthy relationships within families, schools and communities to eliminate child abuse.

STOP IT NOW'S ONLINE HELP CENTER

<http://www.stopitnow.org/help-guidance/online-help-center>

Answer a few questions about your concerns to receive a customized selection of information and resources.

Congratulations!

You have taken the time to educate yourself about:

- ➔ Child sexual abuse.
- ➔ How to recognize potentially abusive behaviors—in adults, youth and perhaps even your own children.
- ➔ How you can help keep children safe.

You cannot do it alone! You must rely on others (e.g., family members, friends, child care providers and teachers) to help keep your children safe. We all need to step up to protect children and keep them safe from abuse no matter our relationship to them (e.g., relative, family friend, coach, teacher or neighbor).

While no one can prevent all instances of child sexual abuse, learning the facts and using the strategies in this guide may decrease the likelihood that it will happen.

MORE INFORMATION

Go to <http://dcf.vermont.gov/safety> to learn more about abuse prevention.

REPORT CHILD ABUSE

If you suspect that a child is being or has been abused, call Vermont's 24-hour Child Protection Line to report it.

1-800-649-5285

CHILD SAFETY RESOURCES

Visit this webpage to find resources that will help you keep children safe.

Preventing abuse helps ensure the safety, health and ideal development of our children.

dcf.vermont.gov/safety