

AGE APPROPRIATE PARENT DISCUSSION POINTS ABOUT PERSONAL SAFETY

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Excerpts from Chapter 3 of *'Breaking the Silence – Sexual Abuse in the Jewish Community'*; Edited by Dr David Mandel and Dr David Pelcovitz

The following document is divided into 3 sections:

1. Talking to Preschoolers (Ages 2 – 6)
2. Talking to Children (Ages 6 – 11)
3. Talking to Adolescents

PART 1: TALKING TO PRESCHOOLERS (Ages 2 – 6)

How Parents Can help to Prevent Personal Abuse of Preschoolers

The *most important tool* in preventing personal abuse is *communications between parents and children*. This communication has to be cultivated throughout the child's life.

THE BASIC RULES

When a child leaves home to go to preschool, crèche or kinder, their mother (or father) should sit down and talk to them. This conversation should contain the following elements:

1. Your mommy loves you

"I'll always love you. Nothing you do will ever take that love away from you."

"I want to hear about things that happen in school – all the good things and even the bad things that happen."

"If you have done a bad thing, I may not like what you did but I will always love you."

2. There are three kinds of touches

The **Yes Touch** (like when your friend hits you – it hurts!)

The **I Don't Know Touch** (This is when someone touches you and it doesn't hurt but it makes you feel funny.)

"If someone touches you and you feel funny, **SAY NO! – GO AWAY** from them – and **TELL MOMMY** about it".

3. "No one is allowed to hurt you or make you sad or scared.

If someone is hurting you or making you feel bad at school tell me about it. I will find out what is happening and I will stop it"

4. "The area that is covered by your bathing suit is your private area. Sometimes when you are little your teacher may help you in the bathroom. That is OK. Other than that, you are not allowed to touch someone else and no one is allowed to touch you in the area covered by your bathing suit. You are not allowed to show anyone and no one is allowed to show you. If anyone does this you can say *No! My mommy doesn't let me! Go away* from that person and *tell your mommy* what happened."

5. "If anyone tells you 'do not tell your mommy,' be sure to tell mommy right away! I will give you the biggest hut if you tell me about it."

Eye Contact and a Couple of Minutes of Your time Are Very Important

The most important thing you can do as a parent is to stop what you are doing, look the child in the eye, and ask him, "how was your day?" He might not tell you much, but if you consistently show him that you are interested, he will remember this when he needs you.

If you are always busy in the kitchen or on the phone he might feel that he does not want to bother you. The larger the family the more important it is that you give a few minutes a day of eye contact and keep the channel of communication open with each child. That way when something does happen he will feel comfortable telling you about it. This line of talk should be gently reinforced periodically with each child.

Behavioural Signs

When a young child is being subjected to personal abuse there might be certain behaviour changes that will alert you:

- The child may seem unusually interested in the private areas of other people's bodies.
- The child may draw pictures of hidden body parts
- The child may show signs of stress such as bellyaches, sleep problems, appetite changes, behaviour changes, tantrums, new onset daytime or night-time bed-wetting, sadness, fears, and irritability.
- The child may become unusually afraid of, or unusually attached to, an adult in his life.
- The child might give verbal hints or even describe the abuse to the parent.

PART 2: TALKING TO CHILDREN (Ages 6 - 11)

Parents should restate the same basic rules delineated for pre-schoolers, but in a more mature way when the child starts school or goes away to camp.

- 1) Explain the types of touch – good touches, bad touches and touches that make him feel funny inside. At this age the idea of "personal space" should be introduced. Most people do not want to be touched by anyone besides their parents during the course of the normal day. Children should learn to respect other people's personal space. If anyone is invading the child's own personal space the child should tell his parents about it.
- 2) The bathing suit rule should be restated and in addition, "You are a big boy now. You have to maintain basic modesty yourself – keep your pants zipped, close the bathroom door," etc. Or, "You are a big girl now, you have to keep your skirt down," etc.
- 3) "No one is allowed to threaten you. If you are afraid of someone, tell us. We will protect you."
- 4) "Tell us when you are in trouble. No matter what happened, you can speak to us. We may not love what you did, but we will always love you."

Unfortunately, children often try to handle difficult situations independently. As a result they can become entrapped in an abusive situation and feel that there is no way out.

Because the abuser is frequently nice to the victim, gaining this loyalty and confidence before starting to take advantage of him, the child may have affection for the abuser and feel that he is enjoying the relationship, even though he knows it is not right. The confusion only adds to the stress. These relationships go on for a very long time until someone intervenes or circumstances change.

Parents must realise that an older child should not have very strong feelings towards or against any casual adult in his life, like an uncle or a neighbour. If he has such inappropriate feelings about someone the reason for this should be investigated.

During these years and beyond, parents must pay attention to the symptoms that might indicate a problem with personal abuse. In the cases described above, the abuse could have been prevented if the basic rules had been reinforced.

PART 3: TALKING TO ADOLESCENTS

Teenagers need to be reminded of the basic rules about inappropriate touch, the importance of communications, and the fact that the love of parents is always assured.

It is important to remind them that if they see or experience something inappropriate in a dorm or camp situation they should call home and let their parents handle it.

Besides these fundamental elements, there are certain additional features that need to be highlighted:

- Girls should be educated in the religious rules regarding the prohibition of being alone in private setting with a man. This includes close family members, youth leaders, or even taxi drivers.
- Boys need to be warned about the possibility that they might be shown pictures that are immodest. This should be equated with improper touch. They should get away and tell someone about it if this occurs. Since pornography can be a serious addiction and can ruin normal life, they must be taught to fear pornography like they fear addictive drugs.

What Parents and Teens Should Know

- Parents should know where their teens are at all times. Teens should know that their parents are keeping tabs on them.
- A rebellious teenager is not always an abused one, but if there is a sudden change in his or her basic nature, this is a cause for concern.
- If a teenager unexpectedly becomes angry and disillusioned and if previously good schoolwork deteriorates, abuse should be suspected.
- If a teen starts to transgress religious rules that he or she has always followed (eg; Sabbath observance), or if the teen does not identify with his family and their values and standards of behaviour, the possibility of abuse should be considered.