

Creating a Safe Space: Healthy Boundaries for Children Impacted by Sexual Abuse

We know that children and youth entering foster care—as well as those who may have spent time in out-of-home care—often come to us with histories that include abuse or neglect. It may be scary or upsetting to think about a child whom you love and care about experiencing sexual abuse. You may find that if you are parenting a child with a history that includes sexual abuse, you need to learn more about healthy boundaries for the safety and well-being of everyone in your household. Creating and maintaining your home as a safe space can be crucial as the child in your care heals and learns to build healthy and appropriate relationships.

Child sexual abuse, as defined by the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), is a form of child abuse that includes sexual activity with a minor. Some forms of child sexual abuse include:

- Exhibitionism, or exposing oneself to a minor
- Fondling
- Intercourse
- Masturbation in the presence of a minor or forcing the minor to masturbate
- Obscene phone calls, text messages, or digital interaction
- Producing, owning, or sharing pornographic images or movies of children
- Sex of any kind with a minor, including

vaginal, oral, or anal

- Sex trafficking
- Any other sexual conduct that is harmful to a child's mental, emotional, or physical welfare

While there are no certain behaviors or signs that may indicate sexual abuse as opposed to part of typical sexual development, there are some red flags that may suggest that a child in your care might have experienced some form of sexual abuse:

- Sexual knowledge beyond the child's developmental stage
- Sexual fixations such as language, drawings, and behaviors
- Inserting objects in genitals
- Sexual behaviors with other children



- Excessive masturbation
- Irritated genital areas
- Nightmares, trouble sleeping, or fear of the dark
- Loss of appetite
- Self-harm
- Bedwetting

In some cases, you will not be aware that a child in your care has been a victim of sexual abuse. These signs may give you an insight into past trauma.

Creating a home environment that focuses on safety, comfort, and structure may go a long way in helping the child in your care

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feel able to share their feelings about past experiences. And there are ways that you can support the child as they heal from trauma and learn how to have healthy boundaries with family, friends, and other children or adults in their lives.

- **Not everyone has the same level of comfort with touch, including hugs, kisses, or tickling.** You might want to have family conversations about what is comfortable and okay for each household member. Doing so will help everyone know what is appropriate and what is not. This is also a good way to be clear about expectations and encourage all children in the home to come to you if they feel uncomfortable or feel that their individual boundaries are not being respected. (If a child is new to your care, we recommend you talk with them one-on-one and ask them how they feel about certain kinds of touch, such as hugs or tickles, before having a conversation with the whole family.)
- **Talk with the children in your care about what privacy means and why it is important.** You may also want to keep in mind the level of affection you display with your spouse, partner, or significant other. Along with conversations about what is done privately and what is done in public, modeling appropriate behavior can be a vital teaching tool.
- **Consider creating a home safety plan.** After talking together about boundaries and privacy—and why both are important—you might make a family list that everyone can see. Reminders might include things like keeping doors open while playing, asking before giving a hug or knocking before entering a bedroom or bathroom.
- **Be aware of the media the children in your care have access to.** You might want to take such steps as enabling parent locks on tablets, cell phones,

computers, and televisions to help block access to any sexual, violent, or inappropriate content. You may also want to limit the music, video games, and magazines that are in the home. There are a lot of parental control software options that are available through phone and internet providers. It is also important to teach the why behind the controls when using parental controls. As it becomes age-appropriate, discuss the idea of making good choices, knowing that you will not always be present or able to control all of the child's activity on devices.

- **Supervise children when they are playing together.** Not all children who have experienced sexual abuse abuse other children. Those who do may not know that the behavior is wrong—to them, it may seem “normal,” or how children play with other kids or adults. Being present during playtime and other interactions can help ensure the comfort and safety of every child. It is also important to build good communication with all the kids you supervise so they know they can talk to you if they become uncomfortable in a playing situation. This might mean that you share reminders with them before and after playtime. It is also a good practice to engage in conversation after playtime. Ask them questions about playtime and let them share their thoughts with you.
- **Educate yourself.** Being open to learning about child sexual abuse can be very helpful as you work to set healthy and safe boundaries. As you know more, you might also become more comfortable with this very sensitive topic, which, in turn, can help eliminate any fears that you may have about caring for a child who has been a victim of sexual abuse. Often, discomfort leads us to neglect essential conversations or avoid setting clear boundaries.

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Reaching out to or consulting with a therapist or another care provider working with the child may also be helpful. They might have other tips or strategies that would benefit the child best. You may need to talk with the child's teachers or others they may regularly interact with in the community about boundaries and expectations when you cannot be present.

Finally, you may find that therapy or support groups will help you as a parent. You can always access resources from the Wisconsin Family Connections Center or connect with a member of our Resource Team. Don't be shy about reaching out or taking advantage of such support. Doing so means doing your best for a child who needs love, support, and a family with whom they feel safe and secure.



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Parenting the Young Sexually Abused Child*, by Lauri Nichols
- *Please Tell! A Child's Story About Sexual Abuse*, by Jessie Hazelden
- *No Secrets No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal from Sexual Abuse*, by Robin Stone
- *Living a Lie: Surviving Sexual Abuse*, by Youth Communication
- *AJ's Story About Not Ok Touches*, by Rachel Miller, PsyD. and Esther Deblinger, Ph.D.
- *Fostering Changes: Treating Attachment-Disordered Foster Children*, by Richard J. Delaney, Ph.D.
- *Sexual Behaviors of Children: Skills for Caregivers*, by Howard Harrington and Debbie Kuehn

Tip Sheet

- [Parenting Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused and May Be Sexually Reactive](#)

Additional Resources

- [Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#)
- [Sexual Abuse Resources From the National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)