



LISTEN AND SUPPORT

**– GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS
ABOUT CHILDREN'S SEXUAL EDUCATION**



Save the Children

This material is specifically addressed to you, as a parent/guardian of a 5-11-year-old child. By reading it, you will learn about sexual education, understand its purpose, and discover ways to support your child through open and informed discussions. You will also learn what online child sexual abuse is and how it can be prevented through e.g., educating your child about safety and boundaries.

Good to know!

The main aim of sexual education is not to prepare a child for sex, but rather to impart knowledge about emotions, boundaries, sexual rights, and identity among others. Sexual education strengthens the child's sense of self-worth and increases their knowledge on themselves. High self-esteem and having your own identity are the basis of positive adulthood. When a child knows themselves and considers themselves valuable, they can grow into positive sexuality safely.

Terminology

Child sexual abuse:

Any act, by an adult or a person significantly older than the child, that violates a child's right to sexual self-determination or any attempt of such act. Child sexual abuse includes e.g., engaging in sexual activities with a child, causing a child to witness sexual activities or sexual abuse, and coercing, forcing, or threatening a child into sexual activities with a third party.

Child sexual abuse material:

Any photo/video material that depicts a child engaging in sexual conduct (with or without an adult) and material with a focus on the genital/anal region of the child.

Grooming (solicitation of a child for sexual purposes):

An adult approaching a child online or offline, with the goal to abuse the child sexually. Grooming can include the following (Note! All of these are also considered child sexual abuse):

- Communicating with a child in a sexualised way
- Commenting on the child's image or body with sexual connotations
- Asking a child for a nude/intimate photo of themselves
- Sending nude/intimate or pornographic material to a child
- Getting a child to act in a sexual way in front of a camera
- Getting a child to agree to meet online or offline

WHAT TO DO IF MY CHILD HAS EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ABUSE?

Learning that your child has experienced sexual abuse is alarming and can cause a major crisis within the family. At first, you may find it hard to believe or understand what has actually happened. The news is often a big shock, as in most cases there were no clear indicators to warn of what was happening.

Many parents/guardians report experiencing a range of emotions after receiving the initial information. It is natural that, as a parent/guardian, you are confused and experience feelings for instance of disbelief, sadness, anger and fear, which you and your child, as well as the whole family, have to deal with. Your child can also show many contradictory behaviours and be full of confusing emotions – at one moment angry and the next moment withdrawn and anxious. This can increase the parents' feeling of insecurity and helplessness.

As a parent/guardian, you have a significant role in the process of your child's recovery and strengthening their ability to adapt or cope with the difficulties they will face. One of the most helpful steps you can take is to provide emotional and physical stability and comfort. Most importantly, stay calm, trust your child, and give them the security they need. In the midst of helping your child, it is also important to take care of yourself and seek necessary support. This is the only way you can provide your child with a soothing, supportive, and safe environment.

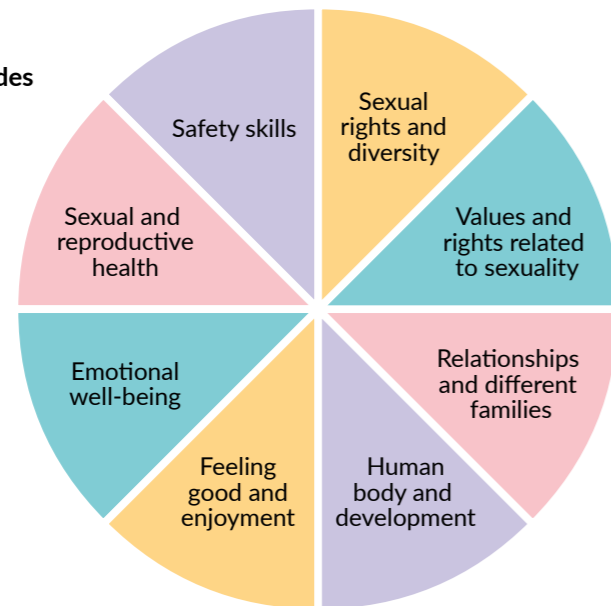
TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEXUALITY

Sexuality is a natural part of human development. Starting from a young age, your child may have questions concerning sexuality, their own bodies, liking or not liking someone or something, or even sex. Young children approach new things with curiosity and issues related to sexuality are rarely perceived by the child as embarrassing or difficult. Therefore, it is important to start talking about these topics early on. Also, if your child has good basic knowledge about a topic, they are more equipped to critically evaluate any information that is given to them.

The purpose of sexual education is to provide information to a child and promote their positive sexual development and well-being. Sexual education can also strengthen a child's knowledge of themselves and their self-esteem.

Providing sexual education is the responsibility of the parent/guardian. It is easier to talk about sexuality with children, if the conversation starts early, is casual, and frequent. It needs to be part of everyday life within family dynamics, not in the form of a lecture, or something to be done separately. Be honest and provide as much information that is suitable for their age and level of development.

Sexual education includes the following topics:



You can talk about all of these topics with your child.

Good to know!

- It might be difficult to talk about sexuality if the issue feels uncomfortable, but avoiding the conversation will not stop children from getting information or keep them safe.
- Practice in advance: What do you want your child to know and how do you put it in words?
- Your child may ask something that makes you feel uncomfortable, or you are not sure how to respond. In this case tell the child that you don't know how to answer, but you will get back to them.
- If your child seems not interested at all, or embarrassed, try to pick up the conversation another time or change the setting. Try on a bicycle ride, or a walk. Use a situation in a movie you are watching together, the lyrics of a song, or a story from a book. Let your child know that even if they don't want to talk right now, you're always there for them when they're ready.

As the topic may be difficult to talk about, it is important for you as a parent/guardian to first think about your own perceptions related to sexuality. This can make it easier to start a conversation with a child. Try to start this journey by answering the questions below:

- What preconceptions do you have in relation to sexuality?
- Are there some topics you find hard to talk about? Find out more about these topics.
- What kind of sexual education would you want your child to receive?

HOW CAN YOU PROTECT YOUR CHILD FROM SEXUAL ABUSE?

RIGHT TO GOOD HEALTH

Children can encounter sexual abuse in different environments. In the online environment, this can mean, for example, that an adult sends sexually suggestive messages to a child or asks the child for a nude photo. As a parent/guardian, it is important to be aware of this so that you can support the child's safe growth and development by giving your child information and supporting them if they encounter any kind of abuse.


Most children only tell their friends about what has happened and do not talk to their parents/guardians. This is why it is very important for you to be aware of any changes in behaviour of your child and be available to support your child in need. Any feeling of your child is valid, and it is important to remind your child that it is never their own fault if they have fallen victim to sexual abuse, even if they have been active in the situation – it is always the responsibility of the adult subjecting them to abuse.

Falling victim to child sexual abuse or grooming can affect the child in different ways. Children may not understand that for example receiving a nude image or pornographic material from an adult is sexual abuse. These occurrences may be 'normalised' because they might happen so frequently to the child themselves or to their friends. In some cases, children may feel that the experience did not have any particular consequence. However, some children may feel anxious, depressed, self-critical, embarrassed, afraid, or that they should be blamed for the incident. Some children may experience somatic symptoms such as: headaches, stomach pain, or difficulties sleeping.



Good to know!

There are some preventative factors that can reduce the risk of a child falling victim to child sexual abuse. These include providing a safe environment and giving the child the support they need. You should aim to have good and open relationship with your child, so your child feels comfortable speaking to you about anything that is on their mind. The child's own feeling of worthiness helps them set their own boundaries and keep anyone else from crossing them. Being informed and educated on possible risks and dangers can help the child notice signs of possibly harmful conversations or situations.



When speaking to a child about sexual abuse, it is important to be honest, but speak in a way that the child understands. You can use one of the following conversation starters to begin the conversation:

- Do you know that nobody is allowed to touch your body without your permission?
- You can always say no to something you don't want to do – you are in charge of your own body.
- If something happens to you that makes you feel uncomfortable or that you don't understand, please always tell me or another trusted adult about it.

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD

RIGHT TO
HEALTHY
DEVELOPMENT

The sexual development of a child occurs in stages and is a natural and expected part of their overall growth and development. Certain behaviours and expressions of a child's sexuality may surprise, worry, or upset you, a parent/guardian. This is why it is good to be aware of the development of a child's sexuality and how it can be manifested in children's behaviour.

The table below describes the child's sexual development and how sexuality is displayed in the child's behaviour. The things presented in the table describe the child's sexual development on a general level. However, it is important to remember that every child grows and develops at their own pace.

Good to know!

Children need an open and non-judgmental environment to explore and learn about their own sexuality. Sexuality is an inseparable part of a child's development and you, as a parent/guardian, can help your child to accept their body and their sexuality in a functional and healthy way. Follow the development of your child's sexuality, encourage them to express their needs, satisfy their curiosity, and be a source of accurate and age-appropriate information.

Remember to:

- Create an environment where the child can feel safe and comfortable about their sexuality.
- Support and build an environment in which the child can express sexuality without being judged, punished, or mocked.
- Talk openly with the child about all aspects of sexuality in a way they can understand.
- Be available to answer their questions and provide accurate information.
- Respect their privacy and boundaries, ensuring they have control over their own bodies and choices.
- Establish trust and mutual respect, providing guidance without being overly intrusive.

Stages of sexual development and behaviour of children

0-3-year-olds:

Children are curious about their body and they develop a basic understanding of it through touch and exploration.

Children explore their genitals in the same way as other parts of the body and it may feel good. Children experience pleasant and unpleasant physical sensations related to their bodies, but sexual behavior as commonly understood does not occur.

4-7-year-olds:

Children begin to develop a sense of their own gender identity and become more aware of physical differences between genders. They begin to develop a sense of privacy.

Children feel comfort in being nude and touching and holding their own genitals. They develop an interest in body parts and functions and may want to touch familiar children's genitals e.g., at play/bath time. Looking at or touching bodies of familiar children and familiar adults can happen.

8-11-year-olds:

Children's curiosity about bodies and sexuality may increase. They may start to ask questions about reproduction, relationships, or engage in imaginative play that includes themes of romance or family.

Children's sense of privacy about their bodies increases. Children may start more purposefully touching their genitals as it may feel good. Children may start using swear words for genitals.

12-14-year-olds:

Puberty marks a significant stage of sexual development. Hormonal changes lead to physical changes in the body, like breast development and testicular growth. During puberty, children may experience sexual feelings and attractions towards others, as well as increased interest in sex and relationships.

Often children do not feel comfortable being naked around other people. Masturbation may occur in private. Children might develop an interest in or participate in romantic relationships. Children may seek information from peers and the internet. Children are more active online and might send sexualised messages and nude images to peers. This can be part of socialising with peers.

HELPING YOUR CHILD BE SAFE ONLINE

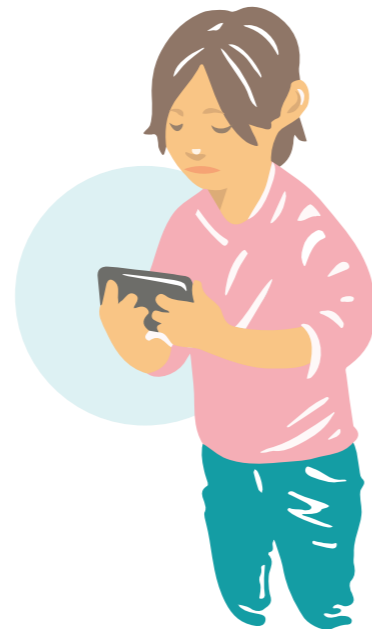
RIGHT TO
BE SAFE

In general, it is good to consider the internet and social media as a good and safe place for children. Children use the internet e.g., for school activities, hobbies, gaming, and to socialise with friends. At its best, the digital environment supports the child's development, increases their knowledge, skills, and wellbeing. However, it is important to be aware of the risks of using the internet. Not all content is meant for children, and they may encounter for example cyberbullying, hateful speech, or violent or sexualised content online.

A child sending nude images of themselves

It is part of children's everyday life to take images and videos of themselves and send them to friends or post them on their social media accounts with quite a low threshold. This is something that also young children do. Sharing imagery is a way to socialise, to have fun, and an easy way to communicate with peers. However, children may be asked, by a peer, an adult acquaintance, or a stranger, to take nude or intimate images or videos of themselves and share them online. When it comes to young children (5-11-year-olds), they should not share intimate images of themselves to anyone. If an adult asks a child to send a nude or intimate image of themselves this is a criminal offence. If the child sends a nude/intimate image of themselves to an adult that asked for one, it is always the responsibility of the person asking.

Young children should be instructed to never share nude or intimate images of themselves to a peer, an acquaintance, or a stranger. Once an image is sent or posted, it can spread on the internet without anyone having any control over it. It is a natural part of a child's sexual development to be intrigued by their own and others' bodies and nudity. Children might think it is ok to send a nude/intimate image of themselves if someone asks for it – it can be frightening but also exciting. Young children may not yet have the understanding, knowledge, skills, or ability to evaluate these kinds of requests.



Good to know!

Children need information, support, protection but also boundaries to be safe online. Information helps protect children from risks. It is the task of the parent/guardian to guide children to navigate safely online. If your child feels safe and they have a trusting relationship with you, it is more likely that they will tell you about online experiences that worry, harm, or scare them. Remember to be there for your child.

How can you as a parent/guardian support and protect your child to be safe online?

- Be present and interested in your child's online activity. Foster a safe and open environment where children feel comfortable discussing their online activity. Encourage them to share anything that may have made them uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Start the conversation on online safety and image/video sharing as soon as your child starts using digital devices. Sometimes parents think their children are too young to start the conversation, but often this is not the case.
- Talk openly and in a child-appropriate manner about the existing risks that are present online. Tell the child that they should not share nude or intimate photos online.
- Set boundaries. Establish clear guidelines for screen time and appropriate content. It is important to respect the age limits for applications and websites. Encourage a healthy balance between online activities and other forms of recreation.

PROTECTING YOUR CHILD'S ONLINE PRIVACY

Today's children are born into a digital age and are described as "digital natives". How does this affect children's privacy and development?

Privacy is vital for the children's well-balanced development. Online privacy is a recent social phenomenon that even adults find difficult to understand. Children are perceived particularly vulnerable to online privacy threats due to their lack of digital skills and awareness of privacy risks. Online risks, such as online sexual abuse, may limit their potential development in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It is thus important that we recognise and respect children's right to be active online, while also safeguarding their privacy.



Lead by example. Reflect on what you post online about your child.

You, as a parent/guardian, should reflect on your online behaviour, especially that affecting your child. You should consider for example the recent digital trend of "sharenting", i.e., the transmission of private details (images, videos, and info) about a child via digital channels by an adult close to the child. By developing a digital footprint from a young age, children may internalise the pressure to perform

constantly and seek validation through social media, which can negatively impact their self-esteem later in life. Parents/guardians need to be mindful of their motives when engaging in sharenting, prioritising the well-being of their children over self-promotion. It is not advisable to share images of your children online – especially without consent.

Good to know!

- **Educate your child about internet use and privacy**

Children need to be aware of the impact that their online activity can have on both them and other people. Even older children struggle to comprehend the full complexity of the internet and the multiplicity of online risks. It is thus of crucial importance to tell your children that:

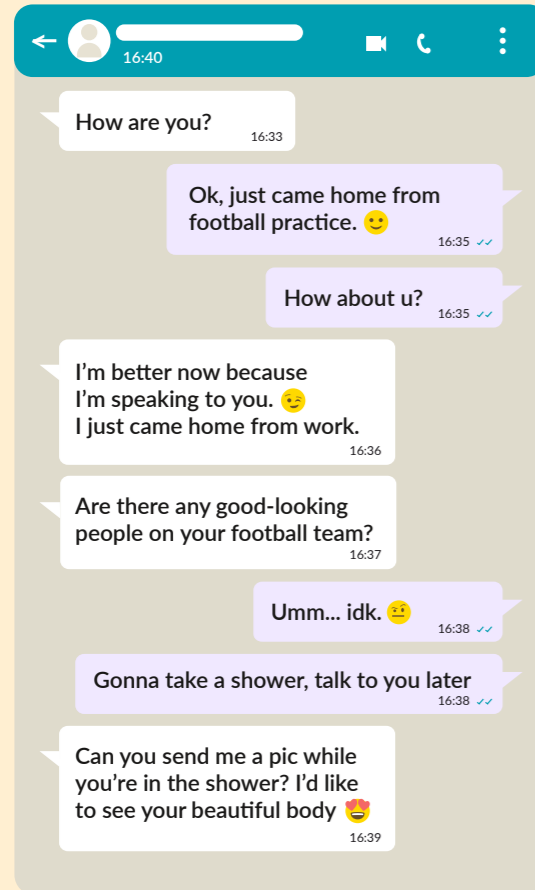
- Once they post content online, they no longer have control over it. It can be forwarded, saved, or printed out. Also, that deleting an image or video from the internet does not necessarily mean that it is gone. Therefore, they should consider carefully before posting any content of themselves online and always ask for permission before posting any content of others online.
- They should keep their personal information (e.g., phone number, home, school address and other location) private and not share it with strangers. Make them aware that some people hide behind fake profiles.
- They should use strong passwords for every online account and not share them with others.
- Online content may be age-inappropriate and unreliable. Encourage them to be critical about what they see online.

- **Manage the content that children may be able to access and foster open communication**

Parental controls and privacy settings in children's apps, devices, and accounts are rather useful tools to minimise online risks. But remember that those are only one part of online safety. Make sure you keep having regular conversations with your children about their online experiences and encourage them to share anything they may have found uncomfortable or unsafe online. Also, keep in mind that you are not entitled to see everything that the child is doing online or their location without good reason, as this is also an aspect of their right to privacy.



AN UNKNOWN ADULT ASKS FOR A NUDE IMAGE FROM A CHILD

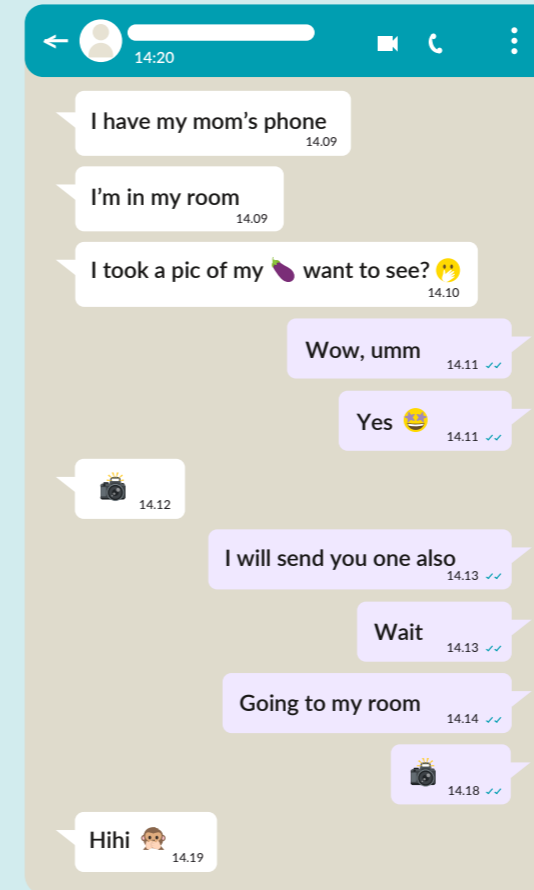


There are some alarming signs in conversation that you can teach your child to look out for:

- If someone asks to keep the conversation a secret from others or is constantly messaging
- If someone asks to provide personal information
- If someone asks to send nude/intimate images or sends such images of themselves
- If someone sends sexually suggestive messages or asks about previous sexual experiences

In these cases, it is important for the child to stop messaging the person, block them on all platforms, and to tell a trusted adult. Screenshots should be taken of the conversation as these can be used as evidence. The situation should be reported to the police.

TWO CHILDREN TAKE PHOTOS OF THEIR GENITALS AND SEND THEM TO EACH OTHER



When discussing what happened with your child, consider the following:

- Talk openly with the child about what happened. It is important that they do not feel ashamed or embarrassed about being interested in their own and other's bodies.
- Explain to the child that it is not ok to post their nude/intimate photos online or on social media. Once an image is posted, you no longer have control over it.
- Accept that this is normal behaviour and is part of the sexual development of a child.

YOU NOTICE THAT YOUR CHILD IS WATCHING A PORNOGRAPHIC VIDEO ON THEIR COMPUTER AND AS YOU COME CLOSER, THEY CHANGE THE PAGE

- Keep calm. If you need to reflect on how to approach this, take your time.
- Find a quiet place and time later on to approach the subject. Ask your child about what they were watching in a casual way, without anger or judgment in your tone.
- Discuss pornography in informative terms. Tell the child that it is ok to be interested in sexuality and sex. It is important to understand that porn is acted: adults engage in sexual activity with each-other and it is filmed. Porn does not necessarily reflect reality. Also, porn may influence their perception of sex in the future.
- Together, look for reliable information about sexuality online or at the library.



REMEMBER TO BE THERE FOR YOUR CHILD

The **CSAPE**-project aims to prevent child sexual abuse by promoting sexual education and supporting young people who have a sexual interest in children. The **CSAPE**-project is executed in collaboration between **Save the Children Finland, Save the Children Albania, Save the Children in North West Balkans, KMOP - Social Action and Innovation Centre Greece, and Barnaheill – Save the Children Iceland.**



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CHILD SEXUAL
ABUSE PREVENTION
AND EDUCATION