

TIPS FOR TEACHING KIDS ABOUT BOUNDARIES

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Educating children about the importance of personal boundaries—and empowering them to speak out when they feel violated—is essential to healthy youth development. Yet, the topic of boundaries is one that many adults shy away from.

Addressing child sexual abuse may be uncomfortable, but the truth is it's a too-common crime that we must constantly protect against:

- One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused by the age of 18. ¹
- About 90 percent of sexual offenders are someone the child knows, such as a family member or acquaintance. ²

The more we educate ourselves and youth about the red flags associated with child sexual abuse, the better prepared we are to prevent it. One easy but important way we can do this is by helping youth understand their personal boundaries.

Here are some tips to help start this important conversation with kids in your care and their parents:

1. Encourage parents to teach children about their bodies and name private parts so kids have appropriate vocabulary to report an injury or describe abuse.
2. Help children understand that there are three types of personal boundaries: physical, emotional, and behavioral. People who want to harm children might try to violate all three.

Physical boundaries include who can touch you, how much they can touch you, and where they can touch you.

Emotional boundaries include how close you feel to a person, how much time you spend with them, and what information you share with them.

Behavioral boundaries include the things you will do and won't do, including rules you follow.

3. Children understand and appreciate rules. Be sure to teach them about their body parts and boundary rules, just as you would teach them about wearing a seat belt or refraining from biting or hitting other children.

A rule may include: "No one is allowed to touch your private parts without your parents knowing about it." or "No one should ask you to keep a secret from your parents."

If you work with youth, provide children and families with your organization's Code of Conduct so it's clearly understood what behaviors are not permitted and families understand how to report a violation.

4. Give children language for “no” if someone tries to break a rule or violate a boundary.

This may include loudly saying: “No!” or “Leave me alone.” or “My body is private.”

Role-play saying these phrases with children so they are comfortable, and remind them that these phrases can be used with other children as well as adults.

Children should also be taught to move away from anyone who is violating their boundaries and to report the behavior to an adult.

5. If you work with youth, make reporting suspicions or abuse as easy as possible to help protect all children. Give kids (and their parents) the names of at least two people at the Y they can talk to if they have concerns. An anonymous reporting method also helps support anyone who may feel too ashamed or embarrassed to report.

These tips were provided by Praesidium, Inc., a nationally recognized leader in abuse prevention. Through a partnership with YMCA of the USA, Praesidium works closely with YMCAs to strengthen their abuse prevention efforts and create safe environments for kids. YMCAs interested in additional tips and support can [contact Praesidium](#) directly.

Citations

1. [Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics](#) (Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2005). *See also* David Finkelhor *et al.* “The Lifetime Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault Assessed in Late Adolescence.” *Journal of Adolescent Health*. February (2014): 1-5. Accessed March 18, 2014. 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.12.026.
2. Finkelhor, David, and Anne Shattuck. “[Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles](#).” (Durham, NH: Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 2012: 5.