

# Don't believe these myths about child abuse

There's a lot of noise out there regarding child abuse – from Facebook posts to newspaper articles to chatter in the carpool pickup lane.

Perhaps you feel like you already know everything there is to know about child abuse and neglect. But there's a good chance that you believe at least a few myths about child abuse prevention.

And we can do better.

Here are a few of these myths - and the truth you really need to know to support child abuse prevention right here in the Quad Cities - and in your own homes.

**Myth: Your biggest worry should be protecting your children from strangers.**

**Fact: The biggest dangers are not strangers, but those closer to your family and kids.**

It's become part of some unwritten parenting manual to teach kids not to talk to strangers. This fear of strangers is drilled into us and them from an early age. We certainly need to be concerned about abductions and aware of surroundings, but that's not the whole story. Focusing only on stranger danger leads us to forget about dangers closer to home.

“Over 90 percent of abuse happens at the hands of someone your kids know, love and trust,” explains Angie Kendall, director of development and communications at the Child Abuse Council.

The ugly truth is that abusers often form relationships with potential victims and their families prior to abuse. This is what's known as the grooming process. The process is intentional and works to gain the trust of the entire family. To truly prevent abuse and neglect we must recognize that no child or family is immune to this threat.

**Myth: Kids lie about abuse all the time.**

**Fact: The rate of false reporting is less than 3-4% (which are mostly influenced by adult caregivers and/or misinterpretation).**

It seems to be a common myth that kids often lie about abuse, but that's simply not the case.

As adults and caregivers, it's not our job to judge a child's story. It's our job to listen. **This is how we keep kids safe and notice warning signs.**

Remember, a child won't usually use the words adults would when reporting abuse. They may be



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confused, overwhelmed or scared. If a child says, "Uncle Bill has funny underwear," it may raise a red flag. And as adults, it's our job to take those red flags seriously.

When children tell someone about abuse but aren't believed, it can actually lead to further trauma, fear and shame.

**Myth: Talking about body parts makes children more likely to be interested and even lead to promiscuity.**

**Fact: There's no link between talking about body parts with kids and future promiscuity. But giving your kids accurate information can keep them safe and position you as the authority on the subject.**

Children are naturally curious - always asking questions and expanding their knowledge about the world and their place in it.

As parents, we have the ability to filter information. But what we neglect to tell them will leave a void that our kids seek to fill. And sometimes, that means getting incorrect information or making up something themselves.

What this means: If you don't talk to your kids about their bodies, they may look for that information somewhere else.

But we can avoid this by being the source of information ourselves. This ensures the information is accurate and age appropriate. And when you talk to about sensitive subjects, you become the go-to source of information. This opens the lines of communication and welcomes more questions later. (And wouldn't you rather your kids come to you than someone else?)

If this feels uncomfortable to you, you aren't alone. Start using accurate names for body parts from birth - breasts, penis, scrotum, vagina or vulva. This actually makes the body parts less mysterious to kids. And it gives children the vocabulary they need to report abuse. **You can also read books that normalize these words.**

But most of all, don't be afraid or embarrassed to talk to your child's about his/her body. It's vitally important.

**Myth: Emotional abuse and neglect are less serious than physical abuse.**

**Fact: The emotional impact of abuse and neglect cannot be ignored - and some studies suggest it can actually cause more damage than other types of abuse.**

There are a variety of types of abuse, including physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse. And the truth is that an emotional component is present in every situation.

That means that the types of abuse aren't independent or exclusive. Denial of critical care is the most common type of founded abuse child abuse across the country but emotional abuse is even more common and even less likely to be reported.

Emotional abuse is associated with severe long lasting psychological, behavioral, developmental and physical health issues.

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The bottom line - the emotional impact of any abuse cannot be ignored and some studies suggest it can actually cause more damage than other types of abuse.

**Myth: A child abuse diagnosis ruins a child for the rest of her life.**

**Fact: Child abuse and neglect is not a diagnosis or life sentence.**

Any life event - good or bad - has the potential to impact who we become as adults. But that doesn't mean that abuse has to be a life sentence. And it isn't a diagnosis.

By providing support and access to services, a child and family receive the tools to heal. Early intervention can help improve mental and physical health, thinking and learning, and stress management.

"Not reporting abuse or pretending it doesn't exist does far more damage than addressing it head on," says Angie.

**Myth: Good parents will know if abuse is happening.**

**Fact: It's just not that simple.**

There's a lot that goes into discovering child abuse. Even the best parents may not know, and it isn't an indictment on the parents who failed to recognize that abuse was happening.

Only about 38 percent of child sexual abuse victims disclose the abuse throughout their lifetime. This means that over 60 percent of victims never tell anyone - because of a relationship with the alleged offender, fear, or feelings of guilt and shame.

Some never report.

If this seems hopeless, there are things adults can do - talk to your kids, keep the lines of communication open, and be aware of potential red flags.

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KEEP CONNECTING.

And remember - it's never responsibility of children to keep themselves safe. That's the responsibility of all the adults in their lives. So keep learning and connecting - and help keep the youngest members of our community safe, healthy and joyful.

Originally posted on the Now What? Blog on 3/28/17. The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to

1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention
2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse
3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors

Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.

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