

SOMETHING WE
AGREE ON

PARENTING IS TOUGH

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO RECOGNIZING & PREVENTING CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Children's Trust Fund
Missouri's Foundation For Child Abuse Prevention

Something We Agree On

As parents, caregivers, and educators, we all want children to grow up safe, supported, and free from harm. That's something we can agree on.

Child sexual abuse is a difficult topic, but one we cannot ignore. It can affect any child, in any community, and its impact can last a lifetime. Yet research shows that prevention works. By building safe environments, teaching body safety, and strengthening relationships, we can greatly reduce risk and help children feel secure.

Fortunately, there are practical steps every educator and caregiver can take. This packet shares strategies that are safe, respectful, and proven to protect children while fostering the trust and connection they need to thrive.

How to Use This Packet

This packet is for teachers, aides, directors, and staff in early childhood programs. It provides practical strategies and clear steps to help protect children from sexual abuse.

You can read it straight through or turn to specific sections when you need them. Each part covers a different topic, from recognizing warning signs to building a safe program culture.

Remember: Adults are responsible for prevention. Children are never to blame!

1. Understanding Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)

- **What Is Childhood Sexual Abuse:** According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) is any sexual activity involving a child under 18-years-old that the child does not understand, cannot consent to, or is not developmentally ready for. (CDC)
- **How Common is CSA?:** At least 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 20 boys experience CSA in the U.S.

- **Who Commits CSA?:** Around 90% of cases involve someone known and trusted by the child or family.
- **What is the Impact of CSA on a child?:** CSA is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) with short- and long-term health effects for children who are victims. The effects can last a lifetime, impacting learning, relationships, and mental health.
- **Prevention:** The CDC emphasizes Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments (SSNREs). When children feel safe, connected, and supported, risk decreases.

Key Terms You May Hear Throughout this Packet:

- **Grooming:** A deliberate process by which an adult (or older youth) builds trust, tests boundaries, creates secrecy, and isolates a child to facilitate abuse and avoid detection
- **Contact vs. non-contact harm:** Abuse can include touching offenses and non-contact exploitation (e.g., exposure, photographing, forcing a child to watch sexual content, online coercion, etc.).
- **Disclosure:** When a child tells (directly or indirectly) about abuse. Disclosures may be direct ("He touched me") or indirect/partial (a drawing, behavior, or vague statement that hints at abuse).
- **Mandated Reporter:** A professional required by law (like early educators) to report suspected child abuse or neglect immediately when they have reasonable cause to suspect it.
- **Reasonable Suspicion:** The standard for reporting. You do not need proof or certainty, if you observe signs or receive information that would cause a reasonable person to be concerned, you must report.

- **Secondary Trauma (or Vicarious Trauma):** Emotional distress that can occur in educators who listen to or support children who have experienced trauma. Programs should provide support and wellness strategies for staff.
- **Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments (SSNREs):** A CDC prevention framework emphasizing that strong, consistent, positive adult-child connections are protective against abuse.
- **Boundary Violations:** Any staff or volunteer action that crosses professional or program rules (e.g., being alone with a child without visibility, physical affection beyond policy). These may not be abuse but are risk factors and must be addressed immediately.
- **Exploitation:** Using a child for sexual purposes for gain, including online exploitation (e.g., coercion, sextortion, or production of sexual images).
- **CSA Material (Child Sexual Abuse Material, informally called “child pornography”):** Any image, video, or media depicting child sexual abuse. Possession, creation, or distribution is illegal and must be reported.
- **Protective Factors:** Characteristics of children, families, or environments that reduce risk (e.g., positive parent-child relationships, community resources, supportive staff).
- **Trauma-Informed Care:** An approach that recognizes the impact of trauma and emphasizes safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment in working with children.

2. Recognizing Signs and Red Flags

Educators rarely witness abuse directly. Instead, they may notice signs in a child’s behavior or grooming behaviors from adults.

Child indicators may include:

- Sudden withdrawal, aggression, or regression in behavior
- Sexualized play or knowledge and language beyond their age
- Nightmares, toileting setbacks, or fear of certain people
- Unexplained pain or bruising, difficulty walking/sitting, signs of injury, or sexually transmitted infection (STI) symptoms

Remember: One sign doesn't prove abuse. Patterns or clusters matter.

Grooming behaviors may include:

- Insisting on spending unusual amounts of time alone with a child
- Giving gifts or privileges in secret
- Ignoring boundaries with touch or bathroom rules
- Finding excuses to avoid or break supervision rules and photography policies

Remember: Boundary violations may not be abuse themselves but are warning signs that create opportunities for harm. All violations should be taken seriously.

3. Building Protective Environments

A strong program culture makes all interactions observable, interruptible, and appropriate. Beyond policies and supervision, educators should build Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments (SSNREs), the CDC's prevention framework.

What SSNREs mean in practice:

- **Safe:** Children know adults will protect them, boundaries are respected, and the environment is physically and emotionally secure.
- **Stable:** Predictable routines, consistent caregivers, and clear policies reduce chaos and confusion that offenders might exploit.
- **Nurturing:** Warm, supportive relationships where children feel valued and connected, making them more likely to speak up if they're uncomfortable and less vulnerable to grooming.

Key strategies to build protective environments:

Hiring & People

- Comprehensive background checks (state and federal fingerprinting and the abuse/neglect registry).
- Structured interviews & reference checks with boundary/safety questions.
- Signed staff code of conduct.

Supervision Practices

- Children should always be in sight and/or hearing.
- Staff actively scan and count children.
- Any 1:1 interaction must be observable, interruptible, and documented.

Bathrooms & Diapering

- Follow posted, visible procedures.
- Keep doors ajar, half-shut, or use half-doors/windows.
- No phones or cameras in bathrooms.

Spaces & Visibility

- Windows in doors; no covered glass.
- Arrange classrooms for clear sightlines.

Technology & Media

- Program-approved platforms only.
- Written parental consent required for media/photos.
- No staff personal devices used for child photos.

Training & Culture

- Annual CSA prevention training, plus onboarding refreshers.
- Speak-up culture: staff can report boundary concerns without retaliation.
- Emphasize protective factors: consistent routines, strong family partnerships, and supportive leadership.

Takeaway: Policies + SSNREs = real prevention. Structures keep children safe, while relationships make them resilient and more likely to disclose if something is wrong.

4. When a Child Discloses or You Suspect Abuse

Children may disclose abuse directly (“He touched me”) or indirectly (through vague comments, suggestive play themes, disturbing drawings, or sudden fear of a specific person). Educators DO NOT need to investigate, your role is to listen, believe, and report.

Do:

- Listen calmly and thank the child. This reassures them they did the right thing.
- Use minimal, open-ended prompts. Example: “Can you tell me more?” Avoid leading questions.
- Document what was said. Write down the child’s exact words and any observations of behavior or injuries.
- Report immediately. Don’t wait to gather more proof.

Don’t:

- Ask repeated or detailed questions. This can confuse the child or affect investigations. This is not your role.
- Confront the alleged abuser. This could put the child at further risk. Leave this to the proper authorities.
- Promise secrecy. Instead, say: “I need to share this with people who can help.”

Remember: As a mandated reporter, you must act on reasonable suspicion. You don’t need evidence or certainty.

5. Mandated Reporting (Missouri & National)

In Missouri, early educators are mandated reporters by law. This means you must act if you have reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect.

How to report in Missouri:

- Call the Missouri Department of Social Service's Child Abuse & Neglect hotline immediately: 1-800-392-3738
- Use Missouri Department of Social Services Online System for Child Abuse & Neglect Reporting (OSCR) portal for non-emergency online reports by visiting: apps.dss.mo.gov/OnlineCanReporting/default.aspx (see References and Resources for QR Code)
- Call 911 if a child is in immediate danger

National resources for support or additional guidance:

- Childhelp National Hotline: 800-422-4453 (call/text/chat, available 24/7)
- Use the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's Cyber Tipline for suspected online exploitation by visiting: report.cybertip.org. (see References and Resources for QR Code)

Why reporting matters:

- Failure to report can result in legal consequences for you or your center.
- Good-faith reporters are protected by law, and identities are kept confidential.
- Reporting ensures trained investigators can act quickly to protect our children.

Remember: It is highly recommended that you keep hotline numbers available for staff to use easily. Keep printouts in staff areas, put relevant hotline numbers on lanyards or in binders, and practice mock reporting calls during training.

6. Consider Using “The Swimsuit Rule”

The “swimsuit rule” is a child-friendly way of teaching body safety.

It means teaching children that the parts of your body covered by a swimsuit are private and no one should touch or look at those parts unless it’s for health, hygiene, or safety, and even then, only by trusted adults (like a doctor or parent) and never in secret.

Why it works

- It gives children a simple, concrete reference (their swimsuit) instead of vague language about “private parts.”
- It helps children understand boundaries for touch without making them feel ashamed of their bodies.
- It makes it easier for children to communicate concerns, they can say, “They touched me where my swimsuit goes.”

Important Notes for Educators

- Pair the swimsuit rule with teaching correct anatomical names (e.g., penis, vulva, breasts, buttocks). Using proper terms reduces potential confusion with adults when talking about these parts of the body.
- Reinforce that safe touches (like a parent applying diaper cream or a doctor during a check-up) are always with permission, for a reason, and never a secret.
- Remind children that their whole body belongs to them, the swimsuit rule is a starting point, not the only boundary.

7. Partner with Families

Families are a critical protective factor. When parents and caregivers feel supported and informed, they are better equipped to create Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments (SSNREs) at home.

What This Looks Like:

- **Safe:** Families set clear boundaries, respect body autonomy, and reinforce body-safety rules.
- **Stable:** Consistent routines at home mirror classroom structure, reducing confusion and stress.
- **Nurturing:** Families provide warmth, encouragement, and connection, which makes children more resilient and more likely to disclose.

Educators can support families by:

- Teaching children and families about the swimsuit rule.
- Modeling consent (never forcing hugs; offering high-fives or waves).
- Sharing program safety codes and explaining supervision policies.
- Sending home resources about body safety and disclosure support.

Remember: Strong family and educator partnerships multiply the protective factors that keep children safe.

8. Child-on-Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse does not always involve an adult. Research shows that a significant proportion of child sexual abuse is child-on-child (sometimes called “youth-on-youth” or “peer-to-peer” harmful sexual behavior). Sometimes, children can engage in harmful sexual behavior toward other children. While curiosity and age-appropriate exploration are normal parts of development, harmful sexual behavior goes beyond this and can cause trauma.

What to look for

- Age or developmental gaps between children involved (e.g., a 12-year-old with a 5-year-old).
- Use of force, threats, coercion, or secrecy.
- Repeated, intrusive behaviors after being told to stop.
- Sexualized behavior far beyond what is expected for the child’s age.

Why it matters

- Both the child harmed and the child causing harm need protection and support.
- The child causing harm was likely exposed to trauma, violence, or abuse themselves.
- Early intervention prevents patterns from continuing into adolescence or adulthood.

Educator response

- Ensure immediate safety of all children involved.
- Separate the children calmly; do not shame either child.
- Document what was observed and stick to facts.
- If behavior meets criteria for abuse or neglect, it must be reported
- Inform parents/caregivers according to program policy.
- Refer both children for assessment and support services.

Prevention strategies

- Teach body safety and consent in age-appropriate ways.
- Supervise high-risk times (bathrooms, playground corners, nap time) closely.
- Create a culture where children can say no, and adults reinforce boundaries.
- Provide staff training on distinguishing healthy development and touch from harmful sexual behavior.

Remember: When sexual behavior occurs between children, it must be taken seriously. The priority is to protect the child harmed, support the child showing harmful behavior, and involve families and professionals early.

8. Special Considerations

CSA prevention requires special attention to certain contexts for staff and children.

Children with Disabilities

- May need more personal care (toileting, feeding, mobility).
- Policies should require documentation of care and, whenever possible, two adults present.

Transportation and Field Trips

- Use buddy systems and frequent headcounts.
- Require two-adult coverage in buses and off-site activities.
- Keep environments visible (no hidden areas on buses or in bathrooms).

Staff Wellness

- Hearing disclosures or suspecting abuse can cause secondary trauma in educators.
- Programs should provide access to debriefing, peer support, and mental health resources.

Trauma-Informed Care

- Children impacted by trauma need stability and predictability.
- Daily routines should emphasize safety, trust, consistency, and empowerment.
- Even small practices, like giving choices or calmly acknowledging emotions, help children feel secure.

9. References & Resources

The following trusted resources were used to create this packet. They are sorted by organization and also provide additional tools, research, and guidance that educators and families can use to strengthen child sexual abuse prevention efforts.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in Youth-Serving Organizations:
cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/youthorganizations.html



- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):
cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html



- Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Resources:
cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/index.html



Missouri Department of Social Services (DSS)

- Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline (CANHU): 1-800-392-3738
dss.mo.gov/cd/can.htm



- Online Child Abuse & Neglect Reporting (OSCR Portal):
apps.dss.mo.gov/OnlineCANReporting/default.aspx



- Mandated Reporter Guidelines (PDF):
dss.mo.gov/cd/pdf/can-mandated-reporter-guide.pdf



Children's Trust Fund (CTF) – Missouri's Foundation for Child Abuse Prevention

- General Information and Resources: ctf4kids.org/



- Prevention Resources for Families and Educators: ctf4kids.org/resources/



Head Start / Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC)

- Active Supervision: A Referenced Strategy:
eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/active-supervision



Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)

- Criminal Background Checks for Child Care Staff Members:
<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/ccdf-requirements-regarding-background-checks-child-care-staff-members>



National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)

- CyberTipline (Report Online Exploitation): <https://report.cybertip.org/>



- Resources for Educators: missingkids.org/gethelpnow/educators



Childhelp

- National Child Abuse Hotline: Call or text 1-800-422-4453
childhelp.org/hotline/



U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)

- Sextortion: Online Exploitation of Children:

<https://www.justice.gov/oped/sextortion-what-it-and-how-keep-your-children-safe>



- Project Safe Childhood: [justice.gov/psc](https://www.justice.gov/psc)



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Everyday conversations help
prevent child sexual abuse.

SomethingWeAgreeOn.Org

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Strong Families, Safe Kids