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# **PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL PREDATORS**

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As parents, we all view our children as gifts from the Lord, and we are told to protect and cherish them. Sometimes it can be difficult to know who to trust and who is a threat to the safety of our children. We want to believe the best of people, but that is not always the safe or correct path of action. This article will explain how to identify a predator, how to protect your children, and steps to take if a child has already been abused.

Let's start with the definition of sexual abuse. "Child sexual abuse is a form of child abuse that includes sexual activity with a minor. A child cannot consent to any form of sexual activity, period" (RAINN, 2019). Sexual activity isn't just touching. It includes showing pictures of a sexual nature to a child (not including educational pictures of the body), a predator exposing their private parts to a child, dirty sexual comments, or any other sexual activity with a minor. It is estimated that in the United States, one out of every four girls, and one out of every seven boys will be molested or sexually assaulted before they reach the age of 18. The rate of male sexual abuse is most likely much higher because boys are less likely to report abuse for fear of appearing weak or "less of a man." As many as 93% of abused children know their abuser. It is estimated that 34% of child sexual assault cases are sexual assaults by a family member. (RAINN, 2019) This article explains some steps we can take to protect our children and preserve their God-given innocence. To summarize

the article, sexual abuse affects children negatively in a variety of ways that can include physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually.

In the book of Hebrews, we are told that "the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12, KJV) In the book of Jeremiah, we are instructed "Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not." (Jeremiah 33:3, KJV) The Bible teaches that God speaks to us through His Spirit.

The Holy Spirit knows the innermost thoughts of every person, and as parents we are given the gift of discernment. Too often we disregard these feelings, especially if there is a check in our spirit regarding someone who appears harmless, or even an initially positive influence. If you have a warning in your spirit regarding a certain person, pay attention. Pray for wisdom and discernment, and do not hesitate to be vigilant. This step is key in laying the foundation for the rest of the steps we will discuss.

We must learn to spot the warning signs of a predator. The great majority of sexual predators follow a set pattern, often called "grooming." This process is part of what makes the abuse appealing to them. Some

predators strike without warning and seemingly without reason. Most predators have some type of grooming process, even if they are in contact with the child for only a short time. Here are some signs to watch for:

They set themselves up in the lives of the intended victim. This can be done through fulfilling a child's emotional, mental, physical, or even spiritual needs.

Eventually, the child feels that they cannot function without this person in their life.

Next, the predator convinces the child that they understand them in a way no one else can. The child comes to believe that this person is always on their side, more so than family or other friends. The predator reminds your child they are always there even when others let the child down. Then, this person makes your child feel obligated to them. They may ask your child to spend time alone with them, and if your child hesitates, they will remind them of things they have done in the past. "I listened when you were upset about a situation at home, so I deserve to have some time alone with you." This is usually worded in a way that plays on your child's guilt and makes them feel obligated to cooperate.

This can also lead to Stockholm Syndrome, which is a syndrome in which the victim begins to sympathize with and even defend and attach emotionally to the very person who is abusing them.

They will often set up double standards. It might be ok for them to be in a bad mood, but your child must always be cheerful. It is ok for them to lash out in anger, but your child must never get angry. Eventually, the child's "job" becomes pleasing this person in every way. Your child feels that they owe this person, so they succumb to more and more drastic abuse to please the predator.

A predator may threaten your child. A child might be told that the abuser will hurt them or their families if they tell anyone what is happening. They may also tell your child that no one will believe them, and everyone will look at them differently (Jennifer Foster, 2015). This creates fear and a feeling of helplessness.

Lastly, most sexual predators are social chameleons. They can play a part to fit in any situation. They are often charismatic, outgoing, and seem to make friends easily. They can even appear to be a strong Christian. It takes much discernment to recognize this behavior, but if you pay attention, you will soon notice that some things just don't add up. It may become apparent that a person is lying about many seemingly small things to fit in better with a certain group. Or you may see flares of anger that seem too strong for the situation, especially if it is in response to being questioned about their behavior. (Mary Ellen Mann, 2015)

It is very important to know the people in our children's lives because sexual predators come in all shapes and sizes. Many of us think of sexual predators as adult males, but this is not always the case. Approximately 20% of sexual predators are female, and approximately 23% of sexual predators are under the age of 18. (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2011) It is easy to miss the signs of a female sexual predator. Women are expected to be motherly, more emotionally attached, and are viewed as less threatening. But if there is a woman who seems to be acting the way we described earlier, be just as aware as if it were a man. None of us wants to think a child could be capable of sexually abusing or assaulting another child, but it happens far more frequently than most of us realize. It can be a classmate, another child in the church, or a sibling. (Mia Fontaine, 2013) This can be especially confusing to a child, even more so if the predator is a family member. Many people are part of a child's life, including friends, parents and siblings of friends, teacher, church members, etc. Get to know these people. Consider the warning signs mentioned earlier in this article. If you have the slightest doubt about the intention of anyone who interacts with your child, examine that relationship more carefully. (youaremom, 2018)

We must develop a deep, loving relationship with our children. We need to spend quality time with them. Get to really know them - their hopes, their dreams, their fears.

Get to know the way they think and the way they act when they are happy, when they are sad, when they are afraid. If you notice a change in their behavior,

find out what is causing it. Sexual abuse causes fear, shame, confusion and even guilt. These emotions can cause your child to act differently. The better our relationships with our children, the sooner you can spot these signs. Our children must know that it is safe to talk to us about anything. If a child does not feel they can talk to us about the little things, they will never come to us about the big things.

This next topic may be uncomfortable, but it is extremely important. We must educate our children about their bodies and discuss sexuality on an age appropriate level. Children are naturally curious, and everyone experiences sexual urges. Our bodies are a gift from God, and there is nothing dirty about them. The Bible refers to our body as a temple (1 Corinthians 3:16). If we consider the instructions God gave Solomon to build His physical temple on this earth, we quickly see that a temple is a precious thing to God, built for His honor and glory. The same applies to our physical temples. Mothers must teach their daughters and fathers must teach their sons the names of private body parts, explain the difference between boy's and girl's sexual parts, teach them that it is inappropriate to touch another person's private parts, and that no one should touch them in a private area against their will. If someone asks your child to touch them inappropriately, your child must know that they should take action.

Teach your child that it is always ok to say no to anyone who asks them to do anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. God's gift of innocence often gives a child the ability to sense the motives of a predator. They may not completely understand the feeling in their spirit, but they need to be taught to listen to it and share that with a trusted adult.

As our children get older and puberty and hormones kick in, talk to them about things they may be feeling and thinking. A child should NEVER be punished for asking questions about their bodies or reporting someone who is making them feel uncomfortable or is actively abusing them, no matter who that person is. NEVER.

Sexual urges are natural, and if your child understands that it is ok to talk to you about these things, they are far less likely to allow abuse, or turn into abusers themselves.

Being open with your child about the difference between boys and girls and how their bodies are made takes away the mystery surrounding the body of the opposite sex. Too many teenagers end up ignorantly sexually abusing someone because they have desires and urges and curiosity that they absolutely do not understand and feel they can't talk about. They have no intention of hurting someone else, but because of lack of education, they may do things that will cause permanent damage to someone else and that they will feel guilty about for the rest of their life. Others, especially girls, do not report someone abusing them, because they are taught to be submissive and obedient.

They often feel that they are not allowed to say no. There is also the fear of not being believed, or worse, being accused of tempting their abuser and being made to feel at fault (Jennifer Foster, 2015). This causes so much pain and confusion later in life.

Teach your child who to trust. This includes us as parents, teachers, police, church leaders, etc., as long as those people are not one of the abusers. Our children must know there are people who love and care about them and will do everything possible to protect them. That sense of security will help them feel safe and confident that there is protection available to them. Sexual abuse causes a severe sense of isolation, and our children must know they are not alone.

If you find out that your child has already been or is being sexually abused, take immediate action. Do NOT blame your child. It takes extreme courage to expose an abuser. Listen to your child and make sure they have no doubt that you will do everything you can to help them. Take steps to report the person to the proper authorities, seek out professional counseling for your child, and above all, make sure they know they are just as loved and cherished as they were before they came forward.

The pain and damage of sexual abuse cannot be "cured" or "healed" overnight. Be patient, supportive, comforting, and do not pressure your child to immediately "forgive and forget." Your child must be allowed to work through the pain they are feeling. That is the only way to reach true forgiveness and freedom. If your child feels forced to forgive before

they have dealt with all of the painful emotions, they may minimize how hurt they are and just sweep it all under the carpet. All of that pain has to go somewhere eventually, and it will definitely affect your child later in life. It can cause extreme anger issues, harming themselves, deep seated fears, and even substance abuse. Children who are abused and who never receive proper treatment and counseling are three times more likely to turn to drugs or alcohol to deal with the emotional pain (Deborah King, 2016). Although rare, it can even create a circle of abuse, turning a victim into an abuser later in life. We must emphasize at this point that childhood abuse is NOT a common reason an adult sexually abuses a child. In fact, the vast majority of victims do NOT become abusers, but professional therapy is absolutely

necessary to identify and deal with these emotions, both to heal your child and to prevent them from harming others.

We parents can teach our children by example how to become strong, healthy, loving adults who are able to protect the next generation. It is our sincere prayer that this article helps you to protect your children and prevents more children from becoming sexual abuse victims. We hope that it will help to expose sexual predators so they can be held accountable for their crimes and not be able to harm even more innocent children. We can play a part in ending the cycle of sexual abuse so future generations can be spared the pain so many of us have experienced.

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*For more information and help, contact:*

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