

A LINE ON LIFE

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Not "*Child's Play*"

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Blaring headlines make us aware of children being sexually molested by adults. As parents, we become fearful about the safety of their children. What can we do to prevent this molestation?

To this question, some parents will reply, "*I always tell my children to stay away from strangers.*" Although this will help a little, about three-quarters (75%) of child molesters are **known** and **trusted** by their victims – family members, relatives, neighbors, baby-sitters, or someone connected with church, school, or recreational programs. The most common molester is a **relative** of the child.

If we were fearful as parents before, this added information is likely to lead to feelings of panic. But there are some things we can do. Many of our children are told to *always* do what an adult tells them to do. This promotion of blind obedience can be effectively modified to some extent. You can let your children know that their body belongs to them; they can decide who touches it. For example, you can tell them, "*If someone wants to pat your bottom, you can tell them not to do it,*" or, "*If someone wants to touch or rub between your legs, it is okay to tell them, 'No!'*"

*The "What if?" game allows people to
develop effective options for threatening situations
while still in a safe environment.*

With any instructions, it is good to know that children really *understand* what you have said. You can do this easily by playing the "*What if?*" game. In this game, you present a situation that may occur. Then ask the child what s/he would do. For example, "*What if our baby-sitter asked you to undress so that you could play a special game with him that would be a secret? What would you do?*" If the child gives a right answer, give praise. If the child gives a wrong answer, the parent can acknowledge that as a possibility and describe the desired response as a better option. Repeat the "*What if?*" game as often as necessary.

The "*What if?*" game can be used for other circumstances beside sexual molestation. For example, "*What if you were in a big store with mommy (daddy), and we got separated, so you couldn't find mommy? What would you do?*"

It helps if the child is clearly told about the problem of keeping **secrets**. Almost any activity that needs to be kept a secret forever is **wrong**. It doesn't need to be something sexual; it can be any activity.

It also helps to make the child feel free to tell you when any sexual molestation might occur or be attempted. This is accomplished by really listening to and believing your children. This is where a major problem occurs. Would you believe your child? Often the child molester warns, "*If you tell anyone, I'll just say you were lying.*" (Remember, the accused molester is most likely to be a relative.)

If a child is reluctant to be with a particular person, we often minimize their fears. We may respond to their complaints by saying, "*Oh, don't be silly!*" Rather than belittling their fears and forcing their interaction, we can believe their reports of discomfort and respect their feelings. If you haven't believed your children in the past, they won't tell you if something frightening happens to them in the future.

You don't need to be the parent to be a person who the child feels free to come to in case of problems. You can be a teacher, neighbor, friend or other trusted adult. All the child needs to feel toward these adults is, *"I can tell them about any problem."*



Even if child abuse does happen — or has happened — to you or someone close to you, there is something else you can do. In Yuma, we have Amberly's Place, named after a 9-year-old Arizona girl, who was raped and killed. Diane Umpress, Director of Victim Services, or trained volunteers are available on a 24-hour, 7 days a week basis at 928-[373-0849](tel:9283730849). Amberly's Place offers complete and compassionate "one-stop" victim services that empower victims and those close to them to deal with their trauma. The services involve a coordinated effort among physicians on call (some of them pediatricians), Child Protective Services, Adult Protective Services, the Yuma

Police Department, the Yuma Sheriff's Office and the Yuma County Attorney. The teamwork among these agencies means that you may get all the help you need within a few hours.
