



Conversations with Children About Safety

Sex education and child safety are difficult topics. More for parents and teachers than for the children. The common dilemmas that adults face are, when to start, how much to say, what not to, and how not to distort things. It is an awkward topic for most. The essence of understanding how to teach safe touch and unsafe touch to a child goes much beyond just these two concepts. It is important to have a holistic understanding of the broader concepts regarding teaching safety and sexuality issues to children and young people.

Let us make an attempt to simplify things.

When to start: As early as the first words. We start with naming body parts by their true name rather than alternative colloquial short forms. Distortions are born out of our own embarrassment to call private parts by their proper name, or to name them at all. It is easy to ask a child to name ears, eyes, hands and legs rather than the 'bottom', 'penis', 'vagina' or 'breast'. Our discomfort will in turn teach children to be embarrassed about their private body parts.

Awkward questions: Every adult faces these. The best strategy is to give an ***age appropriate*** realistic answer. Its ok to feel awkward but it is best to be honest. For example, for the common question, "How did I end up in your tummy, Ma?", it is **not** a good idea to go into explicit sexual details or weave a magical story around the stork and the bees. Instead, talk about the "tiny egg cell born in ma's tummy which makes friends with the sperm from Baba to make You!". The adult must make it clear to the child that s/he may come back with any further questions about this. Better to get the correct answers from reliable adults than to obtain misconceptions from other people and/or the Internet.

How not to distort things: Equip the child with skills to say no and seek help in any situation. Tell the child if s/he feels uncomfortable to run away or speak to a trusted adult. Being prepared about how to respond, enables adults to give clear messages to children, rather than passing on confusing information because they were unsure.

Safe and unsafe touch: Do not think teaching this concept will make children skeptical about everyone. They need clear instructions until they learn to follow their instincts and stand up for themselves. Better an extra no from the child to keep them safe.

It is important not to play with the child's private parts, even in infancy. Respecting the child's privacy is important. For example, be mindful where children are changed or bathed, and being touched, and when posting naked or semi-clad photographs of children on social media.

It is *as* important to be affectionate and comforting to the child. Children who experience positive relationships and healthy touch will be better able to identify what makes them uncomfortable. So, the training starts on a positive note with helping children feel safe about touch. To be able to identify safe touch. Only then can s/he know what is unsafe!

Listen: It is important to learn to listen to the child. Listen means not only to hear, but to understand when a No is naughtiness, and when it is fear or vulnerability.

This document is created by Mental Health Foundation, Kolkata for RACSHA.