



## KEEPING KIDS SAFE

# Choosing Safe Adults: External Caregivers

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe series was created to help parents and primary caregivers learn concrete ways to keep children and teens safe from sexual abuse. The series introduces key concepts and age-appropriate ideas and activities for protecting the children you love and helping them learn and build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized

Parents' top priority is the safety and well-being of their child. Therefore, letting go and allowing someone else care for your child without your supervision can be scary, especially when the caregivers are outside of your family or close circle. You are not only picking adults to keep your child safe but also choosing the role-models in their life. Ensuring that your child is surrounded by safe adults is a key protective factor in their development and safety.

Taking the proper precautions while choosing external adults to care for your child can help alleviate some of the risk and fear of this process. Use these tips from Michigan State University (MSU) Extension (<https://www.canr.msu.edu/outreach/>) to think thoughtfully about choosing external caregivers to care for your child.

### WHO ARE EXTERNAL CAREGIVERS?

The two main groups of external caregivers include:

- People you choose to be around your child, such as babysitters, caregivers, childcare providers, and others.
- People who are assigned to be around your child, such as teachers, camp counselors, mentors, and others.

With chosen caregivers, you can be proactive to ensure the people you choose are safe for your child. Assessing assigned external caregivers is just as essential as assessing chosen ones. Even though an organization has chosen them does not mean they are a safe individual. Child predators are skillful in grooming adults, families, and even whole communities to hide their

### Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets we have chosen to use the inclusive words *they*, *their*, and *them* as singular, nongendered pronouns.

Families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A *family* may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. *Parents* may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else.

When we use the words *family* and *parent* in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.





actions, gain access, and decrease the risk of being found out and stopped. It is easy to say, “Oh no, they are safe, they are a doctor, teacher, coach.” However, having a respected role is just one example of how child predators gain access through establishing rapport in the community. You should evaluate assigned caregivers with the same criteria as you would evaluate chosen caregivers. (For more information on grooming, see the MSU Extension Keeping Kids Safe fact sheet *How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, & Communities* at <https://www.canr.msu.edu/creating-safe-environments/uploads/files/Final%20-%20Grooming%20Adult%20&%20Communities.pdf>).

## EDUCATE YOURSELF ON CHILD PREDATORS

It is a parent’s worst nightmare to have anything bad ever happen to their child, especially when it’s an abusive incident perpetrated by a loved one or someone close to the family. Unfortunately, even when preventive measures are taken to choose a safe adult, abuse still occurs. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (n.d.-a), “As many as 93% of children under the age of 18 know the abuser.” Thinking about your child being hurt in any way is difficult; however, educating yourself on [warning signs of sexual abuse](#) and [ways sexual predators groom children, families, and communities](#) helps protect your child’s present and future safety.

## CHOOSING SAFE CAREGIVERS

You can take proactive steps to evaluate the safety of the chosen and assigned caregivers in your child’s life. The steps given here are not exhaustive, and you will not be able to use all of these preventive measures on each external caregiver in your child’s life. However, they are guidelines to follow when evaluating adult external caregivers.

- **Conduct a background check on the [National Sex Offender Public Website](#).** This search can be conducted on anyone and is helpful in pointing out red flags in adults and child predators. You should look beyond someone’s apparent personality and reputation when considering your child’s safety. Visit the site at <https://www.nsopw.gov/>.
- **Conduct a search on the [Michigan Sex Offender Registry](#) or your state’s registry.** The state of Michigan has its own sex offender registry where anyone can search the name of an individual to inquire as to their status. Offenders can move from one state to another so you may also consider checking registries in other states. Visit the site at [https://www.michigan.gov/msp/0,4643,7-123-1878\\_24961---,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/msp/0,4643,7-123-1878_24961---,00.html).
- **Call their references.** Ask for references and then follow up with them. Ask their reference about the candidates’ relationships, personality, and temperament. Focus on more than just their work ethic. When speaking with references, pay attention to their words but also their tone and pauses. You can learn a lot from how someone says something or what someone does not say.
- **Host an interview.** Meeting the individual in person (or over the phone or computer if need be) helps you understand what type of relationship they might have with your child. What is their personality and temperament? Will their caregiving style work for your family needs?
- **Observe their interactions with your child.** Observe all aspects of the caregiver’s interaction with your child. During these interactions, think about:
  - How the adult engages, plays, or interacts with your child. Do they stay in the role of the adult or do they act like your child’s peer?





- How the adult touches or engages physically with your child. How, where, and when does the adult touch your child? Is there handholding, lap sitting, or excessive hugging?
- How your child acts before, during, and after their interactions with the adult. Do they seem nervous or anxious or try to avoid interactions with the adult?
- How the adult sets up interactions with your child. Are they interacting with your child in an appropriate way (language used, spatial proximity, time left alone)? Do they incorporate both individual and collaborative activities? Are they attentive to the emotions and behaviors of your child? Are they providing the right level of interactions with other children that are present?
- **Avoid being a helicopter parent.** Choosing safe adults helps to make sure your child can develop in a safe and caring environment. Let the other adult interact with your child to get an accurate representation of how they will treat your child unsupervised. Let go and observe how the adult interacts with your child through body language, actions, and temperament. Avoid the urge to hover. Step back a bit while actively observing their interactions.
- **Drop in unannounced.** Observe the caregiver's interaction with your child when they are not expecting it. Sometimes people might "put on a face" or act more responsibly in front of parents as a tactic of grooming and gaining your trust. When you do leave your child in the care of a friend or family member, dropping in unannounced can give you a better lens into how the caregiver actually acts around your child when you are not there.

As a parent, your child's safety is your number one priority. Be intentional and thorough in screening the adults who interact with and care for your children so you can do your best to keep them safe.

## EVALUATING CENTERS AND AGENCIES

When your child interacts with adults through an agency or center such as a school sports team, summer camp, or childcare center, stay engaged to make sure your child is safe. Centers and agencies have more criteria, rules, and qualifications compared to individual caregivers, and therefore are often easier to evaluate.

- **Check screening policies.** What types of screenings do the agencies run on their employees? Be aware of the criteria, rules, and qualifications the agencies expect of their employees. The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (n.d.-b) recommends asking if they are licensed in the local jurisdiction, and questioning their hiring criteria, certifications, and other relevant information.
- **Consider an interview or orientation.** Even though the organization has already interviewed the adult, you can host your own interview to make sure this individual will be the best caregiver for your child. Additionally, it provides an extra layer of relief knowing that you have also conducted a thorough vetting process to ensure your child is protected.
- **Attend the facility.** Planning a visit to the facility before you decide to enroll your child is crucial in assessing if it is truly a safe environment. You can also plan on visiting or dropping in unexpectedly to get a sense of what the environment is like when staff or volunteers are not expecting you.





## CONTINUALLY ASSESS

Deciding whether an adult is safe isn't a one-and-done decision. An individual can lose their status as a safe adult at any time. Child predators are skillful in grooming families to hide their actions, gain access, and decrease the risk of being found out and stopped. Always look out for the warning signs of abuse to protect your child. One way you can assess is by having a daily check-in with your child. Ask them how they are feeling? What was the best thing that happened that day? Did anyone make them feel uncomfortable? If they feel safe? Make sure they know the difference between what is appropriate and inappropriate. (For more information on the warning signs of abuse, see the MSU Extension Keeping Kids Safe fact sheet *Warning Signs of Child Sexual Abuse* at <https://www.canr.msu.edu/creating-safe-environments/uploads/files/Warning%20Signs%20of%20Child%20Sexual%20Abuse%20Final.pdf>.)

## TRUST YOUR GUT

The last component of assessing safe adults is trusting your gut intuition. Things can feel “off” or unsafe even if there are no apparent red flags. As the primary caregiver of your child, you know what they need to be safe more than anyone. It can be challenging to follow your intuition and set boundaries, especially with family members and other close individuals. However, if you don't think someone is a safe adult to care for your child, or something just doesn't feel right, don't overthink it—trust yourself.

Although it would be easy to trust everything individuals say to you or write on paper, be proactive and fact-check to find out if this individual is truly safe for your child. Making these personal connections with your child's possible future caregiver is a great first step in keeping them safe.

## EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, be actively involved in their lives, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming or like they are overkill, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in both protecting your child and helping them build the skills and competencies that will help them stay safe as they get older.

You don't have to prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. Instead, use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. You can do a lot of things to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living and enjoying the world around you.

## REFERENCES

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network. (n.d.-a). *Child sexual abuse*.  
<https://www.rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse>

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network. (n.d.-b). *Evaluating caregivers*.  
<https://www.rainn.org/articles/evaluating-caregivers>





## FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out these other MSU Extension resources:

- **Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming and Fair Environments** (<https://bit.ly/36CwUk7>)—The Be SAFE curriculum is designed to help young people aged 11 to 14 and adults work in partnership to create environments that are physically and emotionally safe. It draws from extensive research from a variety of key disciplines, as well as from evidence-based bullying prevention programs. Be SAFE includes engaging activities that promote social and emotional learning and development, address and prevent bullying, and foster positive relationships with peers and adults. Designed for use in out-of-school time settings (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, and after-school programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.
- **Keeping Kids Safe series** (<https://bit.ly/3jG8JFo>)—The fact sheets in this series are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; sharing about kids on social media; and recognizing and preventing grooming by child sexual predators. There are currently 11 titles in the series:
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5: <https://bit.ly/3zLjmhG>
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11: <https://bit.ly/3f8ecEH>
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17: <https://bit.ly/3zRbWJB>
  - Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media: <https://bit.ly/3f9toBl>
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators: <https://bit.ly/3ib4vXZ>
  - Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children: <https://bit.ly/3BWYRFc>
  - Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, and Communities: <https://bit.ly/3f8F7jM>
  - Keeping Youth Safe Virtually: Best Practices: <https://bit.ly/2VI9Cvr>
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Characteristics of Child Sexual Offenders: <https://bit.ly/3Bh2qJa>
  - Keeping Kids Safe: Female Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse: <https://bit.ly/3sNN17J>
  - Keeping Youth Safe: Warning Signs of Child Sexual Abuse: <https://bit.ly/2XR2vMC>

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). *Family media plan*. <https://bit.ly/3iE9Wf1>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). *Resources*. <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *Preventing child sexual abuse resources*. <https://bit.ly/34zyAYW>





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