



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

Choosing Safe Adults: Friends & Family 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.

Thinking or talking about child sexual abuse is incredibly difficult, especially when a family member is the perpetrator, but if we are going to prevent it, education is key. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (n.d.), 93% of juvenile sexual abuse victims knew the perpetrator, and 34% were family members. You must take the proper precautions and measures while choosing which adults are safe to be around and care for your child.

Telling a family member that you are not comfortable having them be around or care for your child can be difficult; however, your child's safety and well-being is your most important job as a parent. Thoughtfully identifying adults that should be around your child helps keep your child safe and helps you in choosing the role models in your child's life.

Use the following tips from Michigan State University (MSU) Extension to think thoughtfully about which family and friends are safe to interact with your child alone.

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.

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. 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.





IDENTIFY SAFE ADULTS

Recognize the difference between a trusted adult and a person you care about or have a relationship with. You might have a great relationship with your sister, but if she is known to be a distracted driver, she would not be a safe adult to drive your child to school. A safe adult should model healthy behaviors and actions to set an example for the child.

Positive role models help children learn safe, appropriate behaviors through direct intervention and indirect observation. For example, if your father's values are all based on jealousy and greed, he might not be the best role model for your child. Having adults show examples of good morals and values promotes your child's social and emotional development.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

Identify the strengths and weaknesses of your family members and friends to highlight what contexts they can safely supervise your child in. Consider the environment and the purpose of having this safe adult supervise your child. For example, imagine your mother has a bad hip and your child is prone to running away. She might be a perfect adult to help your child with their homework, but it might not be safe for her to walk your son to school as she cannot run after him.

You may also need to consider *when* an adult is safe to care for your child. For example, your sister might typically be a caring and attentive aunt to your daughter, but if she is currently swamped with a huge work project and is stressed, now might not be the right time for her to care for your daughter.

OBSERVE INTERACTIONS WITH YOUR CHILD

Observing and evaluating the caregivers in your child's life is vital in ensuring their safety. Analyze their actions, words, and overall awareness for your child's well-being.

- **Observe in multiple contexts.** Just because someone is a safe adult in one context does not mean they are in all contexts. For example, your daughter might be a safe adult for watching your son at home; however, when it comes to the Friday night football game, she is preoccupied with watching her crush on the field. She would not be a safe babysitter that night because she is distracted by the game.
- **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.





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

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 do not think someone is a safe adult to care for your child, or something just does not feel right, do not overthink it—trust yourself.

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.). *Perpetrators of sexual violence: Statistics*.
<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>





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>





Acknowledgments

Author: Kate O'Connell, MSU Intern; Kylie Rymanowicz, Extension Educator in Child and Family Development, MSU Extension; Christine Heverly, Extension Educator in Youth Development, MSU Extension; Jodi Schulz, Extension Educator in Youth Development, MSU Extension; Janelle Stewart, Extension Educator in Youth Development, MSU Extension

Edited by the MSU Extension Educational Materials Team for MSU Extension
(extension.msu.edu)

MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer, committed to achieving excellence through a diverse workforce and inclusive culture that encourages all people to reach their full potential. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. Issued in furtherance of MSU Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Quentin Tyler, Director, MSU Extension, East Lansing, MI 48824. This information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply endorsement by MSU Extension or bias against those not mentioned. The 4-H name and emblem are protected under Title 18 USC 707. 1P-9:2021-Web-PA WCAG 2.0 AA

