



Creating a Safe Space: Healthy Boundaries for Children Impacted by Sexual Abuse

We know that children and youth entering foster care—as well as those who may have spent time in foster care—often come to us with histories that include abuse or neglect. And it may be scary or upsetting to think about a child for whom you love and care experiencing sexual abuse. You may find that, if you are fostering or have adopted a child with a history that includes sexual abuse, you need to learn more about healthy boundaries for the safety and wellbeing of everyone in your household. Creating and maintaining your home as a safe space can be crucial as the child in your care heals and learns to build healthy and appropriate relationships.

Child sexual abuse, as defined by the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), is a form of child abuse that includes sexual activity with a minor. Some forms of child sexual abuse include:

- Exhibitionism, or exposing oneself to a minor
- Fondling
- Intercourse
- Masturbation in the presence of a minor or forcing the minor to masturbate
- Obscene phone calls, text messages, or digital interaction
- Producing, owning, or sharing pornographic images or movies of

children

- Sex of any kind with a minor, including vaginal, oral, or anal
- Sex trafficking
- Any other sexual conduct that is harmful to a child's mental, emotional, or physical welfare

While there are no certain behaviors or signs that may indicate sexual abuse as opposed to part of normal of sexual development, there are some red flags that may suggest that your child might have experienced some form of sexual abuse:

- Sexual knowledge beyond the child's developmental stage
- Sexual fixations such as language, drawings, and behaviors
- Inserting objects in genitals
- Sexual behaviors with other children
- Excessive masturbation
- Irritated genital areas
- Nightmares, trouble sleeping, or fear of the dark
- Loss of appetite
- Self-harm
- Bed wetting

In some cases, you will not be aware that a child you are adopting has been a victim of sexual abuse, so these signs may give you an insight on past trauma.



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Creating a home environment that focuses on safety, comfort, and structure may go a long way in helping the child in your care feel able to share feelings about past experiences. And there are ways that you can support the child as they heal from trauma and learn how to have healthy boundaries with family, friends, and other children or adults in their lives.

- **Not everyone has the same level of comfort with touch, including hugs, kisses, or tickling.** You might want to have family conversations about what is comfortable and okay for each member of the household. Doing so will help everyone know what is appropriate and what is not. This is also a good way to be clear about expectations and encourage all children in the home to come to you if they feel uncomfortable or that their personal boundary is not being respected. (If a child is new to your care, you might have a one-on-one talk with them and ask them how they feel about certain kinds of touch, such as hugs or tickles, before having a full family conversation.)
- **Talk with the children in your care about what privacy means and why it is important.** You may also want to keep in mind the level of affection you display with your spouse, partner, or significant other. Along with conversations about what is done in private and what is done in public, modeling appropriate behavior can be a

strong teaching tool.

- **Consider creating a home safety plan.** After talking together about boundaries and privacy—and why both are important—you might make a family list that is posted where everyone can see it. Reminders might include things like keeping doors open while playing, asking before giving a hug, or knocking before entering a bedroom or bathroom.
- **Be aware of the media the children in your care have access to.** You might want to take such steps as enabling parent locks on tablets, cell phones, computers, and televisions in order to help block access to any sexual, violent, or inappropriate content. You may also want to limit the music, video games, and magazines that are in the home.
- **Supervise children when they are playing**



together. Not all children who have experienced sexual abuse, abuse other children. Those who do may not know that the behavior is wrong—to them it may seem “normal,” or how children play with other kids or adults. Being present during playtime and other interactions can help ensure the comfort and safety of every child present.

- **Educate yourself.** Being open to learning about child sexual abuse can be very helpful as you work to set healthy and safe boundaries. As you learn more, you might also become more comfortable with this very

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sensitive topic, which, in turn, can help eliminate any fears that you may have about fostering or adopting a child who has been a victim of sexual abuse. It is often discomfort that leads us to neglect having important conversations or avoid setting clear boundaries.

Reaching out to or consulting with a therapist or another care provider who is working with the child may also be helpful. They might have other tips or strategies that would benefit the child best. You may need to have conversations with the child's teachers or others who they may regularly interact with in the community about boundaries and expectations when you cannot be present.

Finally, you may find that therapy or support groups will also help you, as a parent. You can always access resources from the Coalition or connect with a member of our Resource Team. Don't be shy about reaching out or taking advantage of such supports. Doing so means doing the best you can for a child who needs love, support, and a family with whom they feel safe and secure.



Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Parenting the Young Sexually Abused Child*, by Lauri Nichols
- *Please Tell! A Child's Story about Sexual Abuse*, by Jessie Hazelden
- *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids—A Parent's Guide for Instilling Confidence, Joy and Resilience*, by Peter A. Levine

Tip Sheet

- [Parenting Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused and May be Sexually Reactive](#)

Additional Resources

- [Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#)



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