

SAFETY BRIEF: DISCUSSING SENSITIVE TOPICS

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Prevention education is extremely important for children today, as they face new and varied dangers more than ever before. Yet for a variety of reasons, many adults think discussing topics such as abuse, sexual abuse, online dangers, sexting, and pornography are inappropriate for children. Some think elementary students are too young to discuss these kinds of sensitive topics, that they don't know what the concepts mean, and that having these conversations will expose them prematurely to material that might cause them emotional distress. However, research tells us that is not the case.

The Problem:

Victimization, including sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, is very real, even for young children. Research shows:

- » 1 in 5 children will suffer some sort of trauma or victimization before they turn 18.
- » 1 in 10 children will be sexually abused before they turn 18.
- » 1 in 4 students will be bullied and 1 in 5 will be cyberbullied while in school.
- » The fourth most frequently searched term on the Internet for children under the age of 7 is "porn."
- » 90% of 8–16 year olds have viewed pornography online.
- » 42% of Internet users aged 10 to 17 surveyed said they had seen online pornography in the past 12 months.
- » Approximately 1 in 5 (19%) of teens have engaged in some kind of sexting; of those, 9% sent a sext; 17% received a sext; and 3% forwarded a sext.
- » 11 years old is the average age of first Internet exposure to pornography (meaning many students are exposed much younger).

The Solution:

- » Children need to be educated and empowered with prevention education curricula from caring and trained adults. MBF Prevention Education Programs are comprehensive, evidence-based and evidence-informed prevention programs. *MBF Child Safety Matters®* for elementary school (grades K-5) and *MBF Teen Safety Matters®* for middle school (grades 6-8) are available. The programs teach children 5 universal Safety Rules and other age and developmentally appropriate strategies, to prevent, recognize and respond appropriately to bullying, cyberbullying, all types of child abuse, digital abuse, and other digital dangers. Our goal is to reach every child with these safety programs. To learn more, please visit www.mbfpreventioneducation.org and/or download our "Child Safety Matters" app at no cost from the App Store or Google Play.
- » In addition to children receiving prevention education, parents or guardians need to discuss safety issues with children. These are not always the easiest conversations to have, but they are important. Below you will find tips and activities to help make these conversations with your child easier.

Every child deserves to be safe!

SAFETY BRIEF: DISCUSSING SENSITIVE TOPICS

Keys to Successful Communication:

- » Become familiar and comfortable by researching a topic, such as sexual abuse, digital abuse/safety, cyberbullying, or sexting, before talking with your child. Becoming informed and comfortable about a topic prior to discussing it is the key to having a productive conversation and not distressing your child. Our website and app have downloadable Safety Briefs for parents on these topics and more; we also provide resources for you to find additional help.
- » Ensure your conversations are developmentally appropriate for your child's age. If you need help understanding their developmental level, see the Safety Brief: Child Development on our website.
- » Allow children the opportunity to talk and to ask questions before you start talking. Often they know more than parents think, or they have incorrect information that you can correct once you begin the conversation.
- » Have ongoing conversations rather than one "big talk." If your child is asking about an issue, answer them honestly and provide safety knowledge to educate and satisfy their request, but avoid giving too much information, or information that is too developmentally advanced.
- » Reinforce your child's use of the 5 Safety Rules to respond to unsafe situations. Learn more by visiting www.mbfpreventioneducation.org and reviewing our Safety Brief: 5 Safety Rules.

Activities to Facilitate Conversations:

- » **Letters/Journals** – Sometimes it is easier to write thoughts than to articulate them verbally. If you are having difficulty beginning a conversation about a topic, ask your child to write you a letter explaining what they already know and any questions they may have. This gives you a starting point for the conversation and questions to address directly. Should it still be difficult for you to have a face-to-face conversation with your child, you can reply in turn with a letter.
- » **Topic Cards** – Keep a "Conversation Jar" available; you or your child can write down a topic or question you want to discuss on a card and place it in the jar to discuss at an appropriate time.
- » **Books** – Books often naturally lead to questions or conversations, so they are great for facilitating discussions about sensitive topics. Depending on the child's age and the topic, you may choose to read a book with your child, or ask them to read it first and then discuss it.
- » **Websites** – In addition to books, there are many great websites available to help facilitate discussions about sensitive topics. Look for websites with credible sources and authors for your child to review, to help educate them, and to help you start conversations.
- » **Media** – Look for everyday opportunities to have discussions with your child about tough and sensitive topics. Movies, TV shows, and even commercials often lend themselves to a conversation about something of concern. Begin by asking your child about the movie or show, what they thought, was there anything they saw they did not understand, was there anything they noticed that might not be safe, or anything that concerned them? Use these questions as starting points for a more in-depth conversation.

As a parent, your main concern is to protect your child. The best way to do that is to stay active and involved in their life to assess any risks they may be facing, and to educate and empower them to protect themselves. Ongoing conversations about tough and sensitive topics are a great way to do that and more.
