

SAFETY BRIEF: DISCUSSING SENSITIVE TOPICS

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Prevention education is extremely important for children and teens 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 is inappropriate for children and teens. Some think that children and teens 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. Education does not take away a child's innocence, experiences do.

The Problem:

Victimization, including sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, is very real starting at a very young age. Research shows:

- » 1 in 4 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) and high school (grades 9-12), *MBF Athlete Safety Matters*® (for youth athletes), and *MBF After-School Safety Matters*® (for after-school and youth-serving organizations) are available. The programs teach students 5 universal Safety Rules® and other age and developmentally appropriate strategies, to prevent, recognize and respond appropriately to bullying, cyberbullying, the four types of child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, neglect), digital abuse, and other digital dangers. Our goal is to reach every child and teen 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 students receiving prevention education, parents or guardians need to discuss safety issues with their children. These are not always the easiest conversations to have, but they are important. So, we have provided you here with tips and activities to help make these conversations easier.
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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/teen. Becoming informed and comfortable about a topic prior to discussing it is the key to having a productive conversation and not distressing your child/teen. Our website and app have downloadable Safety Briefs and free online trainings 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/teens 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/teen 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 5 Safety Rules.

Activities to Facilitate Ongoing 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/teen 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 them, you can reply in turn with a letter.
 - » **Topic Cards** – Keep a "Conversation Jar" available; you or your child/teen 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/teen to review, to help educate them, and to help you start conversations.
 - » **Media** – Look for everyday opportunities to have discussions with your child/teen about tough and sensitive topics. Movies, TV shows, and even commercials can often lead to a conversation about something of concern. Begin by asking them 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.
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Talking to Your Child About Concerns:

- » If you suspect that something has happened to your child, such as abuse or bullying, do not be afraid to ask them specific questions. The conversation is important, the key is how you approach it.
- » Start by asking your child if they have noticed any Red Flags anywhere in their community or with anyone they are frequently around.
- » You can also ask them if someone has ever made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- » If your child begins to express concerns, listen carefully and ask open-ended questions such as, "what happened next," or "tell me more" to keep the child talking.
- » Do not ask specific or leading questions such as, "did someone touch your private parts?"
- » Be sure you don't inadvertently cause your child to feel guilty by asking questions such as, "why didn't you run away" or "why didn't you tell me sooner."
- » If it seems your child does not want to talk about it, respect that and don't push.
- » If you have concerns, or if your child discloses abuse or victimization to you, report your concerns to your state child abuse reporting hotline. Contact information can be found at www.childwelfare.gov/organizations.
- » If your child has been through an MBF Prevention Education Program, reinforce your child's use of the 5 Safety Rules in your discussion. Learn more by visiting www.mbfpreventioneducation.org and reviewing our 5 Safety Rules.

As a parent, your main concern is to protect your child/teen. 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.

Every child deserves to be safe!
