

Teaching children protective strategies:

Feel Safe, Be Safe



All parents are united in the desire to keep our young children safe. Safe at home, safe in their learning environment and safe when out. However, it is a sad fact that children in our community are harmed, sadder still, is that data suggests that as many as 1 out of 4 girls and 1 out of 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18¹. This is a confronting figure and there are things you can do to protect your child from harm.

From an early age, you can give your child age-appropriate knowledge, strategies and skills to respond to a range of unsafe situations, in a way that is helpful rather than frightening. These are known as protective strategies or protective behaviours. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse highlighted the importance of providing children with protective strategies to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse or harm.²

Protective strategies are crucial in promoting personal safety and well-being and are predicated on two themes:³

Themes

- **We all have the right to be safe all of the time**
- **We can all talk with a trusted adult about anything, even if it feels awful or small**

Protective Strategies

- From an early age, families can weave protective strategies into everyday conversations and routines to empower children with age-appropriate knowledge, strategies, and skills to respond to a range of unsafe situations. This should be done in a way that is helpful rather than frightening and encourage children to tell a trusted adult when they feel uncomfortable, worried, or unsafe.

- These key protective strategies are interrelated and form a comprehensive approach to ensuring children's safety and well-being. Teaching children these concepts in a consistent and integrated way reinforces understanding and helps children make connections between being safe and feeling safe.
- Incorporating these concepts into daily interactions and parenting requires consistency and communication tailored to children's understanding. Maintaining an open dialogue with children and creating an environment where they feel comfortable discussing safety concerns, asking questions, and expressing emotions and feelings is important. Modelling desired behaviour through actions—like seeking permission before physical contact (for example, hugging or kissing your child)—illustrates concepts such as personal space, boundaries, and consent.
- Using positive language that encourages safe behaviour—like explaining the importance of holding hands while crossing the road instead of solely focusing on the potential dangers—helps convey safety without causing unnecessary fear.
- Protective strategies discussions are not just single lessons; they are ongoing dialogues that are adapted as your child grows and matures, tailored to their unique personality and developmental stage to build their overall understanding, confidence, and competence in navigating the world safely.
- The following table outlines key protective strategies and examples in everyday practice. You can also explore these concepts further through activities outlined here in: [Protective Strategies Goodstart at Home](#).

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Retrieved January 12, 2009 from: www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html

2. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017). Final Report – Recommendations.

3. Margetts, D & Clee, B (2021). Protective Behaviours International: Feeling Safe – Standing Strong – Universal Practitioner Training Manual.

Protective Strategy	Description	Everyday Practice
Concepts of Safe and Unsafe	Teaching our child/ren about safe people, spaces, objects and situations helps them to understand what safe and unsafe is and take action to communicate their need for safety.	We can help our children to understand and explore the concepts of safe and unsafe by to describing places, people, objects and situations. For example, discuss road safety: “We look both ways before crossing the street” Read your child’s cues that suggest they feel unsafe and affirm their right to be safe and to feel safe all of the time.
Body awareness	Teaching our child/ren correct anatomical names for private parts to enhance body awareness and children’s ability to speak up when something is not right.	Teach body awareness early by using anatomically correct names for body parts as you bath your child, help them to use the toilet or when you change their nappy, so that they can refer to their body parts clearly if they need to speak up if they feel unsafe or harmed.
Boundaries and consent	Children are empowered to understand they have control, ownership and autonomy over their own bodies, the right to feel safe and be safe and respect the safety and boundaries of others.	Let your child know their body belongs to them, during these care routines you can discuss that no- one is allowed to see or touch their private parts without good reason (such as a doctor’s visit with a trusted adult) and children should not see or touch another person’s private parts even if they ask them to. This helps children to understand boundaries and that they have control, ownership and autonomy over their own bodies. Similarly teach your child they can say ‘no’ to touch by not encouraging them to kiss or hug a family member or friend when they communicate, verbally or non-verbally, that they do not want to.
Naming and understanding emotions	When we support children to understand and name their emotions, they can identify and articulate when they feel safe or unsafe and respond accordingly.	Help your child to identify and later articulate and act upon their feelings by naming your child’s emotions as they express it. For example, when they are distressed, you might say “I can see you are feeling sad” before supporting them to calm through co- regulation.
Identifying early warning signs	Teaching our child/ren to identify and trust their early warning signs (the physical signs that suggest we feel unsafe and can include racing heart, butterflies in tummy, shaky legs, sweaty palms etc) supports our child/ren to act when they feel unsafe by telling a trusted adult.	When we are in potentially dangerous situations, our bodies prepare us for action. We experience internal and external physical sensations or early warning signs associated with our flight, fight or freeze response, that suggest something isn’t right and we are unsafe. Respond to and discuss your child’s early warning signs to teach them to identify and trust their early warning signs so that they may act when they feel unsafe.
Creating a safety network	Children can identify several trusted adults (safety network) that they can communicate with who will take action to help the child feel and be safe.	Help your child to identify the trusted adults and friends (safety network) that they can communicate with to help them feel and be safe. It is important that children have a few people in their network so they can choose who they need to tell. Reinforce that they must keep on telling others in their network until they are believed. Similarly, help your preschool age child to learn 000 and their first and last name and your phone number as well as what to say in an emergency.
Persistence – Keep trying and don’t give up!	Teaching children to persist in a range of circumstances safeguards children as, if they are unsafe, they will persist in speaking up until they feel heard and feel safe.	We can cultivate the skill of persistence by meaningfully acknowledging when our child shows persistence in play. When children persist, they are more likely to continue in spite of difficulty. This skill safeguards children as, if they are exposed to harm, they will persist in speaking up until they feel heard and feel safe.
eSafety	Digital technologies are part of young children’s everyday lives, including watching and learning from the adults and older children around them. We have a responsibility to model and talk to children about online safety now.	Help keep your child safe online by being actively engaged in what they watch and ensure its safe content by applying child safe filters and co-viewing with your child, teach them to tell a trusted adult if they see something, or something unexpected happens, that makes them feel worried, scared or unsafe. Model safe and balanced media and device use.

It is the responsibility of adults to keep children safe from abuse, neglect and harm. If your child/ren disclose abuse to you, it can be hard to know how to respond and what to do. The kids helpline provides some useful suggestions:

<https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/responding-disclosures-child-abuse>

For more protective strategies check out the **Goodstart@home activities:**

www.goodstartathome.org.au/app/articles/protective-strategies

