



# How to Protect Your Children from Child Abuse: A Parent's Guide



Boy Scouts of America

# Introduction

Our children are often faced with choices affecting their development and safety. As parents, we can do our best to provide education and guidance to prepare our children to make the best decisions. One way that we do this is to talk with our children. Some subjects are easy to discuss with our children—sports, their grades in school, their friends, and many other features of our daily lives. Other things are more difficult for us to discuss, including child abuse—especially child sexual abuse.

Although discussing child abuse with your children may be difficult for you, it is very important. Perhaps the most important step parents can take to protect their children from abuse is to have open communication in the home. Research has shown that children whose parents talk to them about preventing abuse are more effective at fending off assaults. Your role is very important.

More than three million reports of child abuse are received each year, including half a million reports of *child sexual abuse*. As a major youth-serving organization, the Boy Scouts of America has a unique opportunity to help protect the youth of our nation. This booklet is designed to give you essential information that should help you teach your children how to protect themselves.

If your son is a new Cub Scout, this might be the first time that you have seen this *Parent's Guide*. For parents who have other sons in Scouting, and for those whose sons have advanced in Cub Scouting, we hope that you are familiar with this guide and have discussed its contents with your children. In either case, we encourage you to make this information part of a continuing family effort that reinforces the concepts included in this guidebook.

We do not expect that your son will become a victim of child abuse. It is extremely important, however, that if he ever faces an abusive situation, he knows that there are adults in his life who will listen and respond in a supportive manner. The purpose of this booklet is to help you and your son establish, or reinforce, open communication on this sensitive topic.



# Section I.

## Information for Parents

### Using This Booklet

This booklet is divided into two sections. The first section is for your information. It contains information about child abuse and provides some tips to help parents talk about child abuse with their Cub Scout–age sons. The second section is for you to share with your son. **It begins with a few simple exercises for you both to complete together as part of his requirements for the Bobcat badge.** The second section also contains some optional activities for him.

It is important that you read the entire booklet before you and your son do any of the exercises together. Once you are comfortable with the topics in this booklet, you will be able to present the information in ways he can understand. Feel free to reword an exercise in order to help your child gain a better understanding.

### Child Abuse: Basic Information for Parents

An abused or neglected child is a child who is harmed, or threatened with physical or mental harm, by the acts or lack of action of a person responsible for the child's care. There are several forms of abuse: physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse. Child neglect is a form of abuse that occurs when a person responsible for the care of a child is able, but fails, to provide necessary food, clothing, shelter, or care. Each state has its own definitions and laws concerning child abuse and child neglect.

Child abuse and neglect are serious problems for our society. The number of cases reported has increased each year since 1976, when statistics were first kept. A brief discussion of each form of abuse follows:



## Neglect

A child is neglected if the persons he depends on do not provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, and supervision. When these basic needs are *deliberately withheld*, not because the parents or caregivers are poor, it is considered neglect. Often parents or caregivers of neglected children are so overwhelmed by their own needs that they cannot recognize the needs of their children.

## Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the deliberate injury of a child by a person responsible for the child's care. Physical abuse often stems from unreasonable punishment, or of punishment that is too harsh for the child. Sometimes, physical abuse occurs when caregivers react to stress. Drinking and drug abuse by caretakers have become more common contributing factors in physical abuse cases.

Physical abuse injuries can include bruises, broken bones, burns, and abrasions. Children experience minor injuries as a normal part of childhood, usually in places such as the shins, knees, and elbows. When the injuries are found in soft-tissue areas on the abdomen or back, or don't seem to be typical childhood injuries, it is possible that the child has been physically abused.

## Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is harder to recognize, but is just as harmful to the child than other forms of abuse. Emotional abuse damages the child's self-esteem and, in extreme cases, can cause developmental problems and speech disorders. A child suffers from emotional abuse when constantly ridiculed, rejected, blamed, or compared unfavorably with brothers, sisters, or other children.

Expecting too much from the child in academics, athletics, or other achievements is a common cause of emotional abuse by parents or other adults. When a child can't meet these expectations, he feels that he is never quite good enough.



## Sexual Abuse

When an adult or an older child uses his or her authority over a child to involve the child in sexual activity, it is child sexual abuse, and that person is a child molester. The molester might use tricks, bribes, pressure, threats, or force to persuade the child to join in sexual activity. Sexual abuse includes any activity performed for the sexual satisfaction of the molester, including acts ranging from exposing one's sex organs (exhibitionism), observing another's sex organs or sexual activity (voyeurism), to fondling and rape.

Here are a few facts you should know about child sexual abuse:

- Child sexual abuse occurs to as many as 25 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys before they reach 18 years of age.
- Boys and girls could be sexually abused at any age; however, most sexual abuse occurs between the ages of 7 and 13.
- Eighty to 90 percent of sexually abused boys are molested by acquaintances who are nonfamily members.
- Females perform 20 percent of the sexual abuse of boys under age 14 (prepubescents).
- Children are most likely to be molested by someone they know and trust.
- Few sexually abused children tell anyone that they have been abused. Children are usually told to keep the abuse secret. This could involve threats, bribes, or physical force.
- Children might feel responsible for their abuse and fear an angry reaction from their parents.

## Sexual Molestation by Peers

Approximately one-third of sexual molestation is committed by other children. If your child tells you about club initiations in which sexual activity is included, or if your child tells you about inappropriate or tricked, pressured, or forced sexual activity by other children, this is a form of sexual abuse and you need to take steps to stop the activity. This kind of sexual misconduct is serious and should not be ignored.



Children who molest other children need professional help. They are much more likely to respond to treatment when young than are adults who began in adolescence to molest children and received no treatment, and continued to do so into adulthood.

Parents and others who work with children need to distinguish between normal sexual behavior of children and abusive behavior. All children are curious about sexual behavior as a part of growing up. This behavior is not appropriate when it is forced, when the person who provokes the activity has more power, or when the sexual behavior lacks consent. When parents are concerned about their son's sexual behavior, they should try to talk with him and discuss what worries them specifically about his behavior.

## Signs of Sexual Abuse

The clearest sign that a child has been sexually abused is his statement saying that he was. Children often do not tell about their abuse, however, so parents should be alert for other signs. These are some signs to watch for:

- *Hints, indirect messages*—Refusing to go to a friend's or relative's home for no apparent reason; for example, "I just don't like him anymore."
- *Seductive or provocative behavior*—Acting out adult sexual behavior or using sexual language a young child is unlikely to know.
- *Physical symptoms*—Irritation of genital or anal areas.

The following are common signs that children are upset and need parental support. They might also be signs that your child is being sexually abused:

- *Self-destructive behavior*—Using alcohol or drugs, deliberately harming himself, running away, attempting suicide, or sexual recklessness or promiscuity.
- *Unhappiness*—Undue anxiety and crying, sleep disturbances, or loss of appetite.
- *Regression*—Behaving like a younger child, thumb sucking, or bed-wetting.



- *Difficulty at school*—Sudden drop in grades, behavioral problems, or truancy.

The presence of any of these signs should not be taken as an absolute sign of sexual abuse, but, if present for longer than several days, should be a sign that your child needs your help for whatever is bothering him.

## Preventing Child Abuse

Except for sexual abuse of boys, the great majority of child abuse happens within families. Preventing sexual abuse outside of the family requires a different approach than preventing abuse that involves parents. Prevention efforts for emotional and physical abuse as well as neglect generally focus on helping the abusers, often the parents, change their behavior.

Some physical and emotional abuse stems from reactions by parents to the stresses in their lives. By learning to recognize these stresses, and then taking a time-out when the pressures mount, we can avoid abusing those we love. The next page lists some alternatives to physical and emotional abuse for overstressed parents. These suggestions come from the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse.



## Alternatives to Child Abuse

The next time everyday pressures build up to the point where you feel like lashing out—**Stop!** Try any of these simple alternatives. You'll feel better . . . and so will your child:

- Take a deep breath. And another. Then remember you are the adult.
- Close your eyes and imagine you're hearing what your child is about to hear.
- Press your lips together and count to ten; or, better yet, to twenty.
- Put your child in a time-out chair. (Remember this rule: One time-out minute for each year of age.)
- Put yourself in a time-out chair. Think about why you are angry: Is it your child, or is your child simply a convenient target for your anger?
- Phone a friend.
- If someone can watch the children, go outside and take a walk.
- Splash cold water on your face.
- Hug a pillow.
- Turn on some music. Maybe even sing along.
- Pick up a pencil and write down as many *helpful* words as you can think of. Save the list.

Few parents mean to abuse their children. When parents take time out to get control of themselves before they grab hold of their children, everybody wins.



In addition to these alternatives, parents and other child caregivers may want to think about the following questions\* suggested by Douglas Besharov, the first director of the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, regarding the ways they discipline their children.

- Is the purpose of the punishment to educate the child or to vent the parent's anger?
- Is the child capable of understanding the relationship between his behavior and the punishment?
- Is the punishment appropriate and within the bounds of acceptable discipline?
- Is a less severe, but equally effective, punishment available?
- Is the punishment degrading, brutal, or extended beyond the limits of the child's endurance?
- If physical force is used, is it done carefully to avoid injury?

These questions help to define the boundaries between acceptable discipline and child abuse. Other causes of child abuse inside the family might be much more complex and require professional help to resolve.

Preventing sexual abuse outside the family calls for a different approach. Because parents cannot guarantee a safe environment for their children outside the home, preventing sexual abuse focuses on training the youth—the potential target of the abuse—about the “three Rs” of Youth Protection: *recognizing* schemes and situations used by child molesters; *resisting* attempts of molesters; and *reporting* anyone who tries to molest.

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\*Adapted from Douglas J. Besharov. *Recognizing Child Abuse: A Guide for the Concerned*. New York: Free Press, 1990.



## Talking with Your Child About Sexual Abuse

It is very difficult for many parents to talk to their children about sexual abuse. The information in this section, and the exercises in the youth section, are intended to make that task easier.

The following points should help you and your child talk about sexual abuse prevention:

- *If you feel uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with your child, let him know.* When you feel uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with your children and try to hide your uneasiness, your children might misinterpret the anxiety and be less likely to approach you when they need help. You can use a simple statement like, "I wish we did not have to talk about this. I am uncomfortable because I don't like to think that this could happen to you. I want you to know that it's important, and you can come to me whenever you have a question or if anybody ever tries to hurt you."
- *Select words your child understands.* One main concern of parents is finding words to explain sexual abuse. Most experts on child abuse prevention believe that children should learn the proper names for their genitalia; however, if you are uncomfortable with using the names of body parts, use whatever terms your child understands.
- *Provide the opportunity for your child to practice Youth Protection skills.* Learning is more effective when children can practice the skills they are taught. Practicing the exercise of their rights (see Section II. Information for Children) with parents gives children confidence.

Many parents feel that teaching children about sexual abuse will take away their children's innocence. Many children are at risk of sexual abuse because they do not have the maturity to understand why a child molester would want to look at, touch, or otherwise violate them. This, in part, explains why children who are sexually abused at a young age do not realize that they were abused until they are older. It also explains a child's confusion if the parents or other adults overreact when the child tells about sexual abuse.



## When a Child Discloses Abuse

If your child becomes a victim of abuse, your first reaction can be very important in helping him through the ordeal. The following guidelines may help you:

- **Don't** panic or overreact to the information your child tells you.
- **Don't** criticize your child or tell your child he misunderstood what happened.
- **Do** respect your child's privacy and take your child to a place where the two of you can talk without interruptions or distractions.
- **Do** reassure your child that he is not to blame for what happened. Tell him that you appreciate being told about the incident and will help to make sure that it won't happen again.
- **Do** encourage your child to tell the proper authorities what happened, but try to avoid repeated interviews that can be stressful for the child.
- **Do** consult your health care provider or other child abuse authority about the need for medical care or counseling for your child.

You should show real concern, but NOT alarm or anger, when questioning your child about possible

child abuse.

Finally, if your child has been sexually abused, do not blame yourself or your child. People who victimize children are not easy to identify. They come from all walks of life and all socioeconomic levels. Often they have positions of status—they go to church, hold regular jobs, and are active in the community. Child molesters are sometimes very skilled at controlling and using children, often by giving them excessive attention, gifts, and money. Child molesters use



their skills on parents and other adults, disguising their abusive behavior behind friendship and care for the child.

## Resources

### BSA Youth Protection Materials

Along with this booklet, the Boy Scouts of America has an educational video for use by Cub Scout packs or dens. This award-winning production provides age-appropriate information about sexual abuse of boys.

*It Happened to Me* is a video for Cub Scout-age boys that shows common situations in which sexual abuse could occur. The video discusses how child molesters often resort to tricks for gaining access to their victims. It emphasizes that if a boy has been sexually abused, he should talk to his parents or

other trusted adults. The video also stresses that it is not the child's fault if he has been sexually abused. It is the child molester who is responsible.

*It Happened to Me* should be shown to boys 6 to 10 years of age *only* when a parent or other adult responsible for the child's care is present with the child.

This videotape is available from your BSA local council. The BSA encourages Cub Scout packs or dens to view the video annually. A meeting guide supporting the video's use can be found in the *Cub Scout Leader Book* (1994 and later editions). Copies may also be obtained from your council.

For Scouting's leaders and parents, the BSA has a videotaped training session, *Youth Protection Guidelines: Training for Volunteer Leaders and Parents*, available from your BSA local council with regular training sessions scheduled in most districts. The training addresses many questions that Scout volunteers and parents have regarding child sexual abuse.



In addition to these videotaped materials, the BSA sometimes provides Youth Protection information to its members and families through *Boys' Life* and *Scouting* magazines.

## **Other Sources of Child Abuse Prevention Information**

National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
P.O. Box 1182  
Washington, DC 20013  
800-394-3366

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse  
332 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1600  
Chicago, IL 60604-4537  
312-663-3520

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children  
2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 550  
Arlington, VA 22201  
800-843-5678



# Section II.

## Information for Children

The *Child's Bill of Rights* outlines some specific ways your child can protect himself. You should discuss these and the Basic Rules of Safety for Children with your child before completing the Bobcat Youth Protection requirements. These could provide the information that your son needs to help him respond to the situations in the exercises.

### Child's Bill of Rights

When feeling threatened, you have the right to

- Trust your instincts or feelings.
- Expect privacy.
- Say no to unwanted touching or affection.
- Say no to an adult's inappropriate demands and requests.
- Withhold information that could jeopardize your safety.
- Refuse gifts.
- Be rude or unhelpful if the situation warrants.
- Run, scream, and make a scene.
- Physically fight off unwanted advances.
- Ask for help.

You should remind your son that these are actions that will give him the power to protect himself, and that some of these might not be appropriate for situations where he is not threatened.



## Basic Rules of Safety for Children

Cub Scout-age children benefit from having concrete safety *rules*. It is important, however, to stress that traditional cautions about “strangers” are not enough to protect our children. Children have different ideas than adults do about who a stranger might be. In addition, the person who harms a child is usually someone the child knows. It might be more helpful to teach your children to recognize possibly threatening situations or actions.

Discuss the following safety rules with your child:

- If you are in a public place and get separated from your parent (or the person in charge of you), do not wander around looking for him or her. Go to a police officer, a checkout counter, the security office, or the lost-and-found area and quickly tell someone in charge that you have been separated from your parent and need help.
- You should not get into a car or go anywhere without your parent’s permission.
- Adults and older youths who are not in your family and who need help (such as finding an address or locating a lost pet) should not ask children for help; they should ask other adults.
- You should use the buddy system and try not to go anywhere alone.
- Always ask your parent’s permission before going into someone else’s home.
- No one should ask you to keep a special secret when someone has been scared or hurt by the secret. If this happens, tell your parent or teacher.
- If someone insists on taking your picture or videotaping you and taking your clothes off, tell your parent or teacher.
- No one should touch you in ways or places that make you feel bad. You should not touch anyone else in ways that will make them feel bad. You should ask an adult you trust questions whenever you are mixed up about someone’s touch or behavior.



- You have the right to say “No!” to anyone who tries to take you somewhere, touches you, or makes you feel uncomfortable in any way.

These are some simple safety rules that can be approached in the same nonfrightening manner in which you tell your child not to play with fire. They emphasize situations common to many child molestation cases.

## Personal Protection Rules for Computer On-line Services

When you're on-line, you are in a public place, among thousands of people who are on-line at the same time. Be safe by following these personal protection rules and you will have fun:

- Keep on-line chats with strangers to public places, not in e-mail.
- Do not tell anyone on-line your real last name, phone numbers at home or school, your parents' workplaces, or the name or location of your school or home address unless you have your parent's permission first. Never give your password to anyone but a parent or other adult in your family.
- If someone shows you e-mail with sayings that make you feel uncomfortable, trust your feelings. You are probably right to be watchful. Do not answer. Tell a parent what happened.
- If somebody tells you to keep what's going on between the two of you secret, tell a parent.
- Be careful whom you talk to. Anyone who starts talking about subjects that make you feel uncomfortable is probably an adult posing as a kid.
- Pay attention if someone tells you things that don't fit together. One time an on-line friend will say he or she is 12, and another time will say he or she is 14. That is a warning that this person is lying and may be an adult posing as a kid.



- Unless you talk to a parent about it first, never talk to anybody by phone if you know that person only on-line. If someone asks you to call—even if it's collect or a toll-free, 800 number—that's a warning. That person can get your phone number this way, either from a phone bill or from caller ID.
- Never agree to meet someone you have met only on-line any place off-line, in the real world.
- Watch out if someone on-line starts talking about *hacking*, or breaking onto other people's or companies' computer systems; *phreaking* (the "ph" sounds like an "f"), the illegal use of long-distance services or cellular phones; or *viruses*, on-line programs that destroy or damage data when other people download these onto their computers.
- Promise your parent or an adult family member and yourself that you will honor any rules about how much time you are allowed to spend on-line and what you do and where you go while you are on-line.





# Bobcat Requirements

## 1. Child Abuse and Being a Good Cub Scout

When a boy joins the Cub Scouting program, he assumes a duty to be faithful to the rules of Scouting as represented in the Cub Scout Promise, Law of the Pack, and Cub Scout motto. The rules of Scouting don't require a Scout to put himself in possibly dangerous situations—quite the opposite, we want Cub Scouts to “be prepared” and to “do their best” to avoid these situations.

We hope that you will discuss these rules with your Cub Scout and be sure that he understands that he should not risk his safety to follow the rules of Cub Scouting.

### Cub Scouting's Principles

The Cub Scout Promise includes the phrase, “To help other people.” This means that a Cub Scout should be willing to do things for others that would please them, but only when his parent has given permission and knows where he is and who he is with.

The Law of the Pack includes the phrase, “The Cub Scout follows Akela.” Akela is a good leader and should never ask you to do something that you feel bad about. If Akela, who might be a teacher, coach, or other youth leader, ever asks you to do something you think is bad, as a Cub Scout you have the right to say “No!” and tell your parents or another adult you trust.



## 2. What If . . .

In this activity the parent describes situations that the child should recognize as possibly dangerous. Once the parent describes a situation, the child tells or shows what he would do if ever faced with a similar situation. After each situation, some possible responses are listed.

For some of these situations you might already have set rules. You should not change your rules in response to the exercise unless there is new information that you have not previously considered. You should also feel free to reword the situation if that helps your child understand the situation better.

### Situations and Suggested Actions for Each

***What if you are home alone, the telephone rings, and a voice on the other end asks if your parents are home? What would you do?***

- Tell the caller your parents are busy and cannot come to the phone.
- Take a message and the phone number of the caller.
- If the message needs an immediate response, call your parent.
- Do not tell the caller you are home alone.
- Let the answering machine answer and do not pick up the phone until you are sure who the caller is.

***What if an adult invites you on a camping trip and suggests that you allow him to take your picture when you are not wearing clothes? What would you do?***

- Tell that person you do not want to have your picture taken when you do not have your clothes on.
- When you return home, tell your parents what happened.
- Be very careful around that person in the future, and be sure to tell your parents anything that bothers you about that person.



***What if a neighbor comes to you and says that your parent is sick and you must go with him or her? This neighbor is not a person you have been told it's okay to go with. What would you do?***

- If you are at school, ask the principal or your teacher to help you make sure your parent really sent this person for you.
- If you are at home or somewhere else, call the emergency number your parents gave you, such as where they work, or a close relative, for help in making sure your parent sent this person.
- Do not go anywhere without checking with the person you have been told to contact in this kind of situation.

***What if you are in a public rest room and someone tries to touch you in ways or places that make you feel uncomfortable? What would you do?***

- Yell "STOP THAT" as loudly as you can.
- Run out of the room as quickly as possible.
- Tell your parent, a police officer, security guard, or other adult (such as your teacher) what happened.

***What if you are walking to school in the rain and a car stops and the driver asks if you want a ride? What would you do?***

- Stay away from the car. You do not need to get close to the car to answer.
- Unless you have your parent's permission to ride with the person, say "No, thank you." If the driver keeps asking, say "No!," then get away.
- Tell your teacher when you get to school and tell your parent when you get home.

***What if you are playing on the playground and an adult comes up to you and asks you to help find his or her lost puppy? What would you do?***



- If you do not know the person, stay away and tell a teacher or other adult you trust.
- Adults should ask other adults for help. Before you help that person, you must get your parent's permission.
- Tell your parent what happened.

***What if you are walking down the street and an elderly neighbor tells you that you'll get a quarter to help carry groceries? The person asks you to come into his or her house. What would you do?***

- Get permission first.
- Do not ever go into anyone else's house without your parent's permission.
- Tell your parent about the person.

***What if an older child you know invites you to play a game, and to pretend that he or she is the doctor and you are the patient? This child tells you to take off all of your clothes so that the "doctor" can examine the "patient." What would you do?***

- Keep your clothes on.
- If he or she persists, say "No!," then yell and get away.
- Tell your parent.



## Other Youth Protection Activities (Not Part of the Bobcat Requirements)

### My Safety Notebook

This exercise will help your child avoid situations that could lead to abuse or molestation. The safety notebook can be a loose-leaf notebook or pages stapled together for which your child has made an original cover. (Elective 9: Art, Bear Cub Scout requirements; Artist activity badge, Webelos Scout requirements.)

This safety notebook gives your child a place to list emergency telephone numbers, including parents' work numbers and a neighbor or friend's number to call when parents are unavailable. (Achievement 4: Know Your Home and Community, Wolf Cub Scout requirements.) In addition, your child can list the safety rules that you and he have discussed together. Encourage your child to decorate each page with pictures and drawings that illustrate some of the rules.

He may also want to list other kinds of safety guidelines, such as rules for bicycle safety. (Achievement 9: Be Safe at Home and on the Street, Wolf Cub Scout requirements. Achievement 14: Ride Right, Bear Cub Scout requirements; Readyman activity badge, Webelos Scout requirements.)

"My Safety Notebook" is intended to be a fun activity for getting across some serious concerns. It is a personalized reference that can reassure your child that he knows how to respond when confronted by a potentially dangerous situation.

### Plays and Skits

Sometimes children enjoy creating a script for a play or skit that will dramatize their understanding of the safety rules. The skit could then be presented to other children as a service project. (Showman activity badge, Webelos Scout requirements; Elective 2: Be an Actor, Wolf Cub Scout requirements.) As a parent, you can guide the creation of the script so that the situations reflect an understanding of the rules and give an opportunity for practicing the skills. Children need to feel that they can protect themselves.



As pointed out earlier, children learn Youth Protection strategies better and are able to apply them when necessary if they practice these skills.

## Family Meeting

A child must feel comfortable telling his parent about any sensitive problems or experiences in which someone approached him in an improper manner, or in a way that made him feel uncomfortable. Studies have shown that more than half of all child abuse incidents are never reported because the victims are too afraid or too confused to report their experiences.

Your children need to be allowed to talk freely about their likes and dislikes, their friends, and their true feelings. You can create open communication through family meetings where safety issues can be talked about by the entire family. (Family Member activity badge, Webelos Scout requirements.) Some of the activities suggested here could be done in the setting of a family meeting.



