



From Silence
to Safety



COLLEGE OF MEDICINE TUCSON

Sonoran Center for
Excellence in Disabilities

A Family and Caregiver's Guide to Addressing Sexual Abuse

People with disabilities are at a much higher risk of sexual abuse. This can be difficult to think about, but family members, caregivers, and supporters play a powerful role in prevention. Talking openly, teaching safety skills, and building a network of trust help protect the people you care for. The following sections provide ideas on what you can do and talk about.



*Why this
matters*

Teach Body Safety

- Use the correct names for body parts.
- Explain the difference between safe touch (hugs, high-fives, touch that feels okay and is wanted) and unsafe touch (anything that hurts, feels wrong, or is a secret).
- Emphasize the right to say “no” to unwanted touch — even from family, caregivers, or helpers.
- Practice how the person can say “stop,” shake their head, move away, or use a word/picture/device.
- Teach them to tell someone they trust if they feel unsafe.

Keep the Conversation Open

- Use simple words, pictures, or devices that match the person’s needs.
- Repeat safety messages often—practice makes them stronger.
- Ask how the person feels about people they spend time with.
- Praise honesty and curiosity.

Teach Healthy Boundaries

- Talk about privacy and personal space: bathrooms, bedrooms, changing clothes.
- Explain that no one should ask them to keep secrets about touch.
- Practice what to do in unsafe situations.
- Teach safety rules online (don't share personal info, pictures, or meet strangers).

Build a Circle of Safety

- Know the person's caregivers and staff at work, school, or programs.
- Make sure programs run background checks and have safety policies.
- Stay involved in the person's daily life and activities.
- Connect with trusted teachers, doctors, and support staff.

Know the Warning Signs

- Sudden changes in behavior (fear, aggression, withdrawal, staying away from certain people).
- Other people spending an increased amount of time with the person or asking to spend time alone with them.
- Keeping the person away from family and friends.
- Loss of skills or new behaviors that seem unusual.
- Fear of a certain person or place.
- Unexplained injuries or health changes.
- Trust your instincts—if something feels wrong, act right away.

What to Do If the Person Comes to You for Help

- Stay calm, listen, and believe them.
- Say: “Thank you for telling me. This is not your fault.”
- Take steps to keep them safe.
- Seek out advocacy resources and learn what actions you can take.



For more information:
[Bit.ly/FromSilenceToSafety](https://bit.ly/FromSilenceToSafety)

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