



## **Talking to Children about Touching Safety**

Janet Harmon, MSW, Director of Prevention and Education  
Pat's Place Child Advocacy Center

Keeping children safe from sexual abuse is an adult's responsibility, but one way to help protect children is to arm them with information. Just as you would discuss other family safety rules with your child – like “always use a seatbelt or car seat”, or “never play with guns”, - it is important to talk with your child about his/her body and about “touching” safety.

Teach children the correct or anatomical names for all of their body parts, including their breasts and genitals. Learning correct names for body parts ensures children have the words to use, and gives them permission to talk about all of the parts of their bodies. Talk with children about the importance of respecting one another's privacy and explain that the parts of their body covered by their underwear or swimsuit are their “private” body parts.

Tell children that they are the “boss” of their bodies and have the right to control who touches them and how they are touched. Allow children and teens to decide who they hug or kiss, and to decline unwanted affection from others, including family members. Respect your child's right to say “no” and help reinforce boundaries your child sets. For example, if your child is playing with a friend or sibling and asks the other child to stop because the game has become too physical, be sure the other child acknowledges the limit that has been set and complies with the request.

Educate children about different kinds of touches, those that are “ok” and those that are “not ok”. Ok touches are those that help them to be safe, healthy and cared for. Ok touches include assistance provided to a young child when bathing or changing a diaper or care provided by a healthcare provider during a check-up when mom or dad is present. An ok touch might even include a touch that is necessary, but does not feel good, like having a splinter removed. Not ok touches are those that are hurtful or make a child feel confused or uncomfortable, and include touches on private areas of the body that are not necessary for health or safety. Teach children that they should not be asked to give others touches they believe are not ok.

Talking about safe touching is not a one-time conversation. Use everyday moments to teach, taking advantage of opportunities for discussions. Children learn best when there is repetition and when they have opportunities to practice. Incorporate personal body safety into other safety education discussions. Play “What if...?” games with your children, asking them how they would respond to various situations or dilemmas. Ask them to role play, and have them show you how they would respond. Talk with your children about the differences between surprises and secrets. Let them know that surprises can be fun and make people happy, like giving a present to someone special. Secrets, on the other hand, can sometimes be hurtful. Let children know they should not be asked to keep secrets from a parent and should instead tell you right away. Encourage children to come to you to talk about anything, including things that are confusing or hurtful, and be prepared to listen.

For more information about how to protect children, go to [www.patsplacecac.org](http://www.patsplacecac.org). To find out about prevention training available for your organization or parent group, contact Janet Harmon, Director of Prevention and Education, at 980-613-8976 or by email at [janet@patsplacecac.org](mailto:janet@patsplacecac.org). We can all play a part in keeping children safe and preventing child sexual abuse. Talking to our children, and to other adults, is one important step.