

A Danger

That Concerns Every Parent

HHEATHER and Scott are a vivacious, happy couple, the parents of a bright, healthy three-year-old boy.* They take good care of their son. In today's world, that is no easy job. It involves a wide array of worries and responsibilities. There are so many things that children need to be taught! Heather and Scott feel strongly about one responsibility in particular: They want to protect their child from the dangers of sexual abuse. Why?

"My father was a cold, angry drunk," Heather says. "He beat me terribly, and he molested me and my sisters."† It is widely agreed that such abuse can inflict deep emotional scars. No wonder Heather is determined to protect her son! Scott feels the same about protecting him.

Many parents are concerned about child abuse. Perhaps you are as well.

* Names in this series of articles have been changed.

† Sexual abuse of a child occurs when an adult uses a child to gratify his or her own sexual desires. It often involves what the Bible calls fornication, or *por-ne'i'a*, which could include fondling of genitalia, sexual intercourse, and oral or anal sex. Some abusive acts—such as the fondling of breasts, explicitly immoral proposals, showing pornography to a child, voyeurism, and indecent exposure—may amount to what the Bible condemns as "loose conduct" or "uncleanness . . . with greediness."—Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:19.

Unlike Scott and Heather, you may not have come face-to-face with abuse and its effects, but you have no doubt heard shocking reports about the prevalence of this disgusting practice. Around the world good parents are horrified to learn what is happening to children in their area.

Not surprisingly, one researcher in the field of sexual abuse called the rates of child abuse "one of the most discouraging discoveries of our era." That is certainly sad news, but are such developments surprising? Not to students of the Bible. God's Word explains that we are living in a troubled period of time called "the last days," a time marked by a prevalence of "fierce" behavior, when people would be "lovers of themselves" and would have "no natural affection." —2 Timothy 3:1-5.

Sexual abuse is a daunting issue. Indeed, some parents feel overwhelmed when they contemplate the sheer wickedness of the people who seek out children to abuse them sexually. However, is this problem too much for parents to handle? Or are there some practical steps that parents can take to keep their children safe? The following articles will address these questions.

How to Protect Your Children

FEW of us want to dwell on the subject of sexual abuse of children. Parents shudder at the very thought of it! Such abuse, however, is a frightening and unpleasant reality in today's world, and its effects on children can be devastating. Is the matter worth considering? Well, what would you be willing to give for the sake of your child's safety? Learning about the unpleasant realities of abuse is surely a small price to pay. Such knowledge can really make a difference.

Do not let the plague of abuse rob you of your courage. At the very least, you have power that your child does not have—strengths that it will take years, even decades, for your child to gain. The passing years have brought you a fund of knowledge, experience, and wisdom. The key is to enhance those strengths and put them to use in protecting your child. We will discuss three basic steps that every parent can take. They are as follows: (1) Become your child's first line of defense against abuse, (2) give your child some needed background education, and (3) equip your child with some basic protective tools.

SEXUAL ABUSE —A GLOBAL PROBLEM

In 2006 the secretary-general of the United Nations transmitted to the UN General Assembly a world report on violence against children that had been compiled by an independent expert for the UN. During a recent year, according to the report, an estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 years of age experienced "forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence." Those numbers are staggering, but the report notes: "This is certainly an underestimate." A review of studies from 21 countries suggested that in some places as many as 36 percent of women and 29 percent of men had been subjected to some form of sexual victimization in childhood. The majority of the perpetrators were relatives!

Are You the First Line of Defense?

The primary responsibility for protecting children against abuse belongs to parents, not to children. So educating parents comes before educating children. If you are a parent, there are a few things you need to know about child abuse. You need to know who abuse children and how they go about it. Parents often think of molesters as strangers who lurk in the shadows, seeking ways to kidnap and rape children. Such monsters certainly do exist. The news media bring them to our

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Be your child's first line of defense

attention very often. However, they are relatively rare. In about 90 percent of the cases of sexual abuse of a child, the perpetrator is someone the child already knows and trusts.

Naturally, you do not want to believe that an affable neighbor, teacher, health-care worker, coach, or relative could lust after your child. In truth, most people are not like that. There is no need to become suspicious of everybody around you. Still, you can protect your child by learning how the typical abuser operates.—See the box on page 6.

Knowing such tactics can make you, the parent, better prepared to act as the first line of defense. For instance, if someone who appears more interested in children than in adults singles out your child for special attention and gifts or offers free babysitting or private excursions with your child, what will you do? Decide that the person must be a molester? No. *Do not be quick to jump to conclusions.* Such behavior may be quite innocent. Nonetheless, it can put you on the alert. The Bible says: “Anyone inexperienced puts faith in every word, but the shrewd one considers his steps.” —Proverbs 14:15.

Remember, any offer that sounds too good to be true may be just that. Carefully screen anyone who volunteers to spend time alone with your child. Let such an

individual know that you are likely to check on your child at any time. Melissa and Brad, young parents of three boys, are cautious about leaving a child alone with an adult. When one son had music lessons at home, Melissa told the instructor: “I’ll be in and out of the room while you’re here.” Such vigilance may sound extreme, but these parents would rather be safe than sorry.

Be actively involved in your child’s activities, friendships, and schoolwork. Learn all the details about any planned excursion. One mental-health professional who spent 33 years working with cases of sexual abuse notes that he has seen countless cases

**Be involved
in your child's
activities**



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A PATTERN OF SEDUCTION

An abuser is likely to be too clever to use force on his victims. Rather, he may prefer to seduce children gradually. He begins by selecting a target, often a child who seems vulnerable and trusting, thus relatively easy to control. Next, he singles out that child for special attention. He may also try to win the trust of the child's parents. Molesters are often expert at pretending to be sincerely interested in the child and the family.

In time, the molester will begin grooming the child for abuse. He gradually becomes more physical with the child through innocent-looking displays of affection, playful wrestling, and tickling. He may give generous gifts and begin to separate the child from friends, siblings, and parents, in order to spend time alone with the child. At some point he may ask the child to keep some minor secret from the parents—perhaps a gift or plans for some future excursion. Such tactics set the stage for seduction. When the abuser has won the child's trust and that of the parents, he is ready to make his move.

Again, he is likely to be subtle about it rather than violent or forceful. He may exploit the child's natural curiosity about sex, offering to act as a "teacher," or he may suggest that they play a "special game" together that only they will know about. He may try exposing the child to pornography in order to make such behavior seem normal.

If he succeeds in molesting the child, he is now eager to ensure that the child does not tell anyone about it. He may use a variety of tactics, including threats, blackmail, and blame, or perhaps a combination of these. For example, he may say: "It's your fault. You didn't tell me to stop." He may add: "If you tell your parents, they'll call the police and send me to jail forever." Or he may say: "It's our secret. If you tell, no one will believe you. If your parents ever do find out, I will hurt them." There is no end to the devious and malicious tactics such individuals will try.

that could have been prevented by simple vigilance on the parents' part. He quotes one convicted molester as saying: "Parents literally give us their children. . . . They sure made it easy for me." Remember, most molesters prefer easy targets. Parents who are actively involved in their children's lives make their children difficult targets.

Another way to act as your child's first line of defense is to be a good listener. Children will rarely disclose abuse directly; they are too ashamed and worried about the reaction. So listen carefully, even for subtle clues.* If your child says something that concerns you, calmly use questions to draw him out.† If he says that he does not want a certain babysitter to come back, ask why. If he says that an adult plays funny games with him, ask him: "What kind of game? What does he do?" If he complains that someone tickled him, ask him, "Where did he tickle you?" Do not be quick to dismiss a child's answers. Abusers tell a child that no one will believe him; all too often, that is true. And if a child has been abused, being believed and supported by a parent is a big step toward recovery.

Give Your Child Background Education

One reference work on the subject of child abuse quotes a convicted molester as saying: "Give me a kid who knows nothing about sex, and you've given me my next victim." Those chilling words are a useful reminder to parents. Children who are ignorant about sex are much easier for molesters to fool. The Bible says that knowledge and wisdom can deliver us "from the man speaking perverse things."

* Experts note that many abused children give nonverbal clues that something is wrong. For example, if a child suddenly regresses to behavior he had outgrown some time earlier, such as bed-wetting, clinginess, or fear of being alone, he may be sending a signal that something serious is upsetting him. Such symptoms should not be taken as definite proof of abuse. Calmly draw out your child to learn the cause of the distress so that you can offer comfort, reassurance, and protection.

† For the sake of simplicity, both the abuser and the victim are referred to here as males. Regardless of gender, though, the same principles apply.

Give your child background education

(Proverbs 2:10-12) Is that not what you want for your child? Then, as your second basic step in protecting him, do not hold back from teaching him about this important subject.

How, though, do you go about it? More than a few parents find the subject of sex a bit awkward to discuss with children. Your child may find the subject even more awkward, and he is not likely to bring it up with you. So take the initiative. Melissa says: “We started early, with naming the body parts. We used real words, not baby words, to show them that there is nothing funny or shameful about any part of their body.” Instruction about abuse follows naturally. Many parents simply tell their children that the parts of their body that a bathing suit covers are private and special.

Says Heather, mentioned in the preceding article: “Scott and I told our son that his penis is private, personal, and not a toy. It’s not for anyone to play with—not for Mommy, not for Daddy, not even for a doctor. When we take him to the doctor, I explain that he’s only going to make sure everything is OK, and that’s why he may touch there.” Both parents take part in these little talks from time to time, and they assure the child that he can always come to them and tell them if anyone touches him in a way that’s wrong or makes him feel uncomfortable. Experts in child care and abuse prevention recommend that all parents have similar talks with their children.

Many have found the book *Learn From the Great Teacher** to be a real help in teaching this subject. Chapter 32, “How Jesus Was Protected,” has a direct yet comforting message for children on the dangers of abuse and the importance of staying safe. “The book has given us a perfect way to reinforce what we

have told our children personally,” says Melissa.

In today’s world children need to know that there are some people who want to touch children or get children to touch them in ways that are wrong. These warnings need not fill children with fear or make them distrust all adults. “It’s just a safety message,” says Heather. “And it’s one message among many others, most of them having nothing to do with abuse. It hasn’t made my son fearful at all.”

Your child’s education should include a balanced view of obedience. Teaching a child to obey is an important and difficult lesson. (Colossians 3:20) However, such lessons can go too far. If a child is taught that he must *always* obey *any* adult, regardless of the circumstances, he is vulnerable to abuse. Molesters are quick to notice when children are overly compliant. Wise parents teach their children that obedience is relative. For Christians, that is not as complicated as it may sound. It simply means saying to them: “If anybody tells you to do something that Jehovah God says is wrong, you don’t have to do it. Even Mommy or Daddy should never tell you to do something that Jehovah says is wrong. And you can



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■ Equip your child with basic protective tools

always tell either Mommy or Daddy if someone tries to get you to do something wrong.”

Finally, let your child know that no one should ask him to keep a secret from you. Tell him that if anyone asks him to keep any kind of secret from you, he should always come and let you know. No matter what he is told—even if scary threats are made or he has done something wrong himself—it is *always* OK to come to Mommy or Daddy and tell them all about it. Such instruction need not scare your child. You can reassure him that most people would never do such things—touch him where they shouldn’t, ask him to disobey God, or ask him to keep a secret. Like a planned escape route in case of fire, these are just-in-case messages and will probably never be needed.

Equip Your Child With Some Basic Protective Tools

The third step we will discuss is to give your child some simple actions to take in case someone tries to take advantage of him when you are not there. One method that is often recommended is like a game. Parents

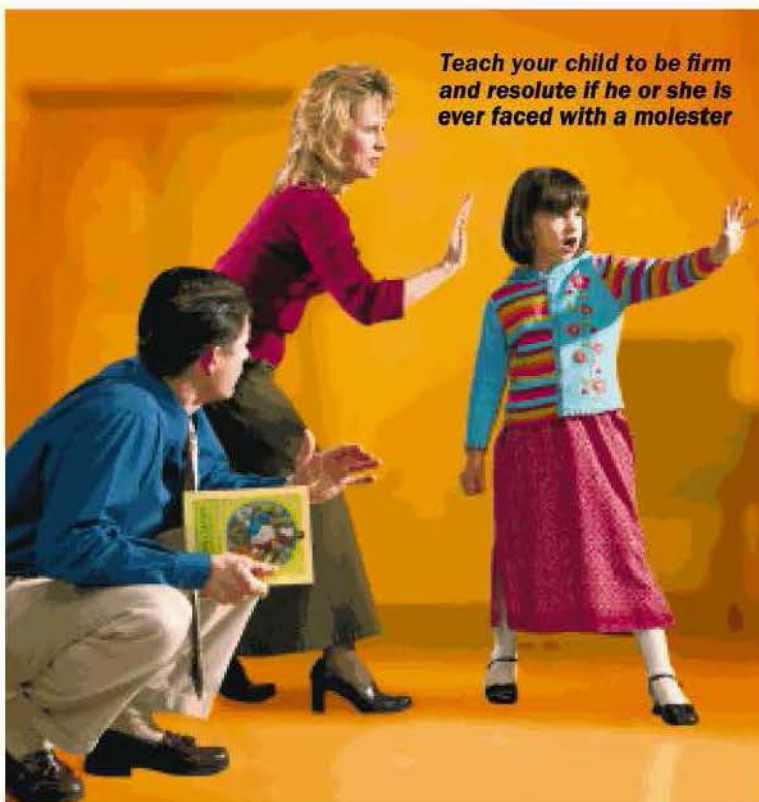
ask “What if . . . ?” and the child answers. You might say, “What if we were at the store together and we got separated? How would you find me?” The child’s answer may not be exactly what you would hope for, but you can guide him along with further questions, such as “Can you think of anything you could do that would be safer?”

You can use similar questions to ask a child what the safest response would be if someone tried to touch him in a wrong way. If the child is easily alarmed by such questions, you might try telling a story about another child. For example: “A little girl is with a relative she likes, but then he tries to touch her where he shouldn’t. What do you think she should do to stay safe?”

What should you teach your child to do in situations like the one above? Notes one author: “A firm ‘No!’ or ‘Don’t do that!’ or ‘Leave me alone!’ does wonders to frighten the seductive offender into retreat and into rethinking his or her choice of victim.” Help your child act out brief scenarios so that he

feels confident to refuse loudly, get away quickly, and report to you whatever has happened. A child who seems to understand the training thoroughly may easily forget it within a few weeks or months. So repeat this training regularly.

All the child’s direct caregivers, including the males—whether father, stepfather, or other male relatives—should be part of these discussions. Why? Because all involved in such teaching are, in effect, promising the child that they will never commit such acts of abuse. Sadly, much sexual abuse occurs right within the confines of the family. The following article will discuss how you can make your family a safe haven in an abusive world.





Make Your Family a Safe Haven

“HAVING no natural affection.” With those sad words, the Bible describes many people of our time, a period called “the last days.” (2 Timothy 3:1, 3, 4) The epidemic of child abuse in the family furnishes vivid proof of the truth of that prophecy. In fact, the original Greek word *a’stor-gos*, rendered in English “having no natural affection,” suggested a lack of the love that should exist among family members, especially between parents and children.* And all too often that is the setting in which child abuse occurs.

Some researchers say that the most common perpetrator of sexual abuse is the male parent figure. Other male relatives also commonly molest. While most victims are girls, many boys are abused as well. Female perpetrators are not as rare as you might assume. Perhaps the most underreported form of abuse is sibling incest, where an older or more powerful child bullies or seduces a younger

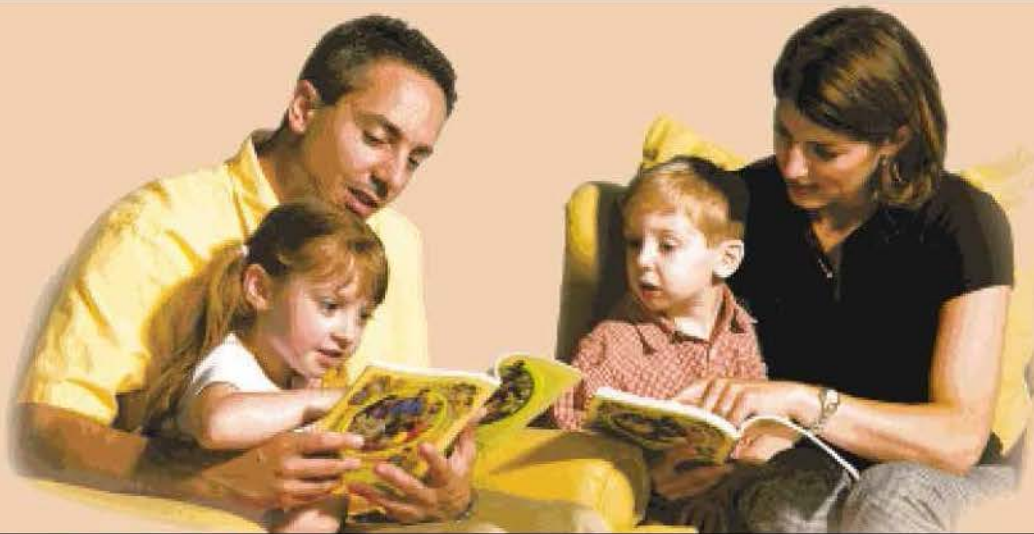
* This ancient Greek word has been defined: “Hard-hearted towards kindred.” One Bible translation thus renders this verse: “They will . . . lack normal affection for their families.”

or weaker brother or sister into sexual acts. As a parent, you surely find all such acts repugnant.

How can you keep these problems from arising in your family? Clearly, every member of every family needs to learn and to value some principles that rule out abusive conduct. The best place to find that kind of guidance is in God’s Word, the Bible.

God’s Word and Physical Relations

To be safe, every family needs to embrace the Bible’s standard of morality. The Bible is not prudish when it comes to discussing sex. It is dignified, yet frank and to the point. It shows that God designed sexual intimacy to be a real blessing to husband and wife. (Proverbs 5:15-20) However, it condemns sexual conduct outside that arrangement. For instance, the Bible speaks openly against incest. In Leviticus chapter 18, a wide variety of incestuous relationships are forbidden. Note these words in particular: “You people must not come near, any man of you, to *any close fleshly relative of his* to lay bare nakedness [to



TIPS FOR A SAFE HOME

Internet: If your children have access to the Internet, they need instructions on how to use it safely. There are countless pornographic sites as well as chat rooms and other social networks where pedophiles seek out and seduce children. It is wise to keep the computer in an open area where parents can more easily monitor its use. Without parental supervision children should never give out personal information or arrange to see anyone they have met over the Internet.—Psalm 26:4.

Alcoholic Beverages: In many cases of sexual abuse of a child, alcohol has played a role. Experience shows that adults who overindulge tend to lower their inhibitions; some give in to desires they might otherwise have suppressed. At any rate, this danger adds another reason to heed the Bible's counsel to avoid drunkenness and overdrinking.—Proverbs 20:1; 23:20, 31-33; 1 Peter 4:3.

Privacy: One woman recalls: "After Mom died, my father was the only one in the house who had curtains on his windows or a door into his bedroom. He gave us no privacy—even in the bathroom." This man molested all his daughters. Every family member needs to understand the importance of privacy. As parents need privacy from their children at certain times, so they need to give children an appropriate measure of privacy as they mature. Wise parents treat others as they themselves want to be treated.—Matthew 7:12.

have sexual intercourse]. I am Jehovah."—Leviticus 18:6.

Jehovah listed acts of incest among the "detestable things" punishable by death. (Leviticus 18:26, 29) Clearly, the Creator has very high standards on this matter. Today, many governments take a similar view, outlawing the sexual abuse of children within the family. Often, the law holds that a child who is subjected to sexual relations by an adult has been raped. Why use that strong word if physical force was not involved?

Many authorities have come to recognize

what the Bible has said all along about children—that they tend to be unable to reason in the way that adults do. For example, Proverbs 22:15 says: "Foolishness is tied up with the heart of a boy." And the apostle Paul was inspired to write: "When I was a babe, I used to . . . think as a babe, to reason as a babe; but now that I have become a man, I have done away with the traits of a babe."—1 Corinthians 13:11.

A child cannot understand the full meaning of sexual acts, nor can a child imagine the consequences that will follow over the years.