

## Safety begins at home!

Parents are the most important influence in a child's life and as such, it is important for them to speak to their children in an **open, non-threatening, positive** way about the issue of safety and abuse, and give them tools to prevent it or get help if in a dangerous situation. Below are guidelines to assist parents in supporting the safety of their children:

- Safety and abuse-prevention **does not have to be scary**. Rather, you can teach your children in a positive and empowering way about healthy boundaries, personal space, and privacy.
- **Personal safety should be an ongoing discussion in the home:** The topic of personal safety is easier to accept and internalize if it is brought up naturally in everyday conversations like at the supermarket, while giving a child a bath or getting them dressed. A child whose family talks calmly and freely about safety, boundaries and personal space is more likely to feel comfortable telling his parents if something happens to him.
- Teach your child **accurate names for their body parts** (including their private areas). In a situation of abuse, this knowledge will enable them to speak up and explain what happened in a way that will be understood.
- Teach your child about **appropriate and inappropriate touch**:
  - No one, not even a person in a position of authority or a close relative (except for a doctor with your permission), has a right to touch them **in their private areas or in a way that feels uncomfortable**.
- **Open communication:** Let your child know that they can always speak to you **and that they can tell you things they know you don't want to hear or uncomfortable**. Let them know that you will love them, no matter what.
- Abuse cannot exist without secrecy, so **establish a no-secrets policy**. If your children know that **no one** is ever allowed to ask them to keep a secret from you (even within the family), they are much more likely to tell you when someone asks them to keep a secret (a prime strategy of abusers). Children need to know that even if someone threatens to hurt them or someone else if the secret is shared, they need to share it with you and that you will protect them. Teach children the difference between **surprises** (Something good and happy that will soon be shared – such as a birthday party) and **secrets** (something someone shared with us that we are never allowed to tell. Secrets often make a child feel bad or scared).
- **Respect your child's autonomy and privacy:** A child who is routinely forced to give hugs to adults (even ones they care about – e.g. Bubby and Zaidy) to “not hurt their feelings” is much less likely to understand the difference between hugging when he doesn't feel like it and letting someone touch them inappropriately. Allowing a child to decide who touches him and when (obviously not in the case of health needs or an emergency) gives a strong message that he is respected and that he **doesn't have to show affection in a physical way**.



- This also applies to privacy. A parent who knocks before entering the bathroom or bedroom while the child is undressed shows the child that his privacy is important and respected. This will contribute to their self respect and boundaries, and will raise a red flag if someone tried to cross those boundaries
- Teach your child to **speak up!**
  - Speak up and ask about things (touch, behavior, language) that seems strange or confusing, **even if it doesn't seem to break any rules**
  - Say 'NO' **loudly** and try to get away if someone touches them in an area or way that is inappropriate and/or makes them uncomfortable.
  - Say "no" and "get away," **even to someone close to them** and even to someone in a position of power or authority
  - Speaking up is not *lashon hara* or an *aveira*, but rather a *mitzvah* of *pikuach nefesh*
  - Speaking up to get clarity or help is not “tattle tale-ing”
  - Not to listen to anyone who tells them to keep secrets from their parents
  - Not to be afraid of threats from anyone who touches them inappropriately or threatens their wellbeing or privacy
  - Not to feel bad if they have a hard time speaking up. It is a hard thing to do and it might take a few tries.
  - If they aren't comfortable speaking, they can write to you or draw a picture, or express themselves in other ways that they are comfortable and that you will understand.
- Provide **good supervision**: In our insular communities, parents often feel comfortable letting their kids go out without supervision or with the supervision of other kids. However, a child under the age of 12 or so cannot take responsibility for the well-being of other children. Certainly children under the age of 6 should never be left without the supervision of a competent adult or teenager whom you trust. However, as mentioned, most cases of abuse are committed by someone the child knows, so even if your child is being supervised by someone you trust, other safety rules and precautions should still apply. Specifically:
  - Think twice before leaving your child unattended and vulnerable
  - Make sure you screen people you leave your children with (e.g. babysitters, *chessed* providers, bar mitzvah teachers, piano teachers, friends). Methods you can use are:
    - Reference checks
    - Google search
    - Home visit (Before a child has a sleepover)
  - Let those you leave your children with know that you are an involved parent who has your finger on the pulse.
    - Ask careful questions about their behavior and their child care
    - Let them know that you and your child have open communication
    - Show up every once in a while unannounced for a spot check
    - Let them know that you or a friend might show up at some point 'to get something'

- If you have any questions about what is going on with your child in that situation, ask the person watching them and your child
- When leaving your child, try to do so only if more than one adult is present – e.g. both parents are home
- Give your child clear guidelines and behavior expectations – where he is allowed to go, who is going to be there, who shouldn't be there, what they are allowed to do, and how to reach you if they need help. Let them know you are available and they can call you at any time. Remind them about rules about boundaries and safety.

