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With reports of students abusing peers in primary schools, how can parents help keep their kids safe?

Daryl Higgins, *Australian Catholic University* and Gabrielle Hunt, *Australian Catholic University*

An ABC [report on Monday](#) revealed a concerning rise in peer-on-peer sexual abuse within Australian primary schools.

Data on Victorian schools shows hundreds of such incidents were reported in 2022 and 2023, with many involving children under the age of ten.

The [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) also showed rates of sexual abuse inflicted by peers has been increasing. Overall, **18.2% of participants** aged 16 to 24 reported being sexually abused by a peer during their childhood, compared to 12.1% of those aged 45 years and over.

Parents may be wondering how they can protect their children at school.

One of the most effective tools parents have is open, regular and age-appropriate conversations with their kids.

Talk about boundaries and consent early

What should you be talking about?

It is crucial for parents to talk with their children about boundaries and consent **from an early age**. For younger children, this can be as simple as teaching them their body belongs to them and no one else has the right to touch them without permission. Asking if its OK for a hug, and respecting when children say “no” is a great start.

When discussing consent, it is important to highlight consent is not just about saying “no”, but also recognising and respecting others’ boundaries.

Peer relationships and trusted adults play a crucial role in a child’s life. Helping children identify adults they can trust if they need to talk about something is

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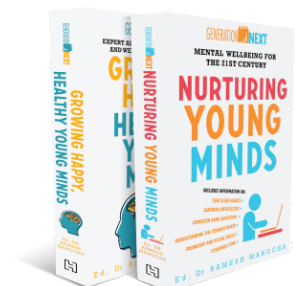
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also very important. Peers are often the first to hear of concerns or are often the recipients of disclosures, so fostering healthy friendships and teaching children to report to trusted adults is crucial.

Addressing peer pressure and secrecy

Children may feel pressured by peers or may be told to keep certain behaviours secret.

It is essential for parents to emphasise no matter who asks them to keep a secret, they should always share concerns or things they are unsure about with a trusted adult.

Parents can reinforce the message that if someone tells them not to tell, it is a “red flag”.

Children can often feel unsure or scared of whether what has happened is wrong. This is why encouraging openness and creating a nonjudgmental space for children to share is important.

Discussing online safety

Research shows exposure to harmful material, like pornography, is a contributing factor to inappropriate sexual behaviour among peers.

Being aware of your child’s internet use and educating them on how to keep themselves safe online is crucial.

What else can parents do?

While conversations with your children are vital, parents can also take practical steps to ensure their child’s safety at school. These include:

- **familiarising yourself with school policies:** understand the school’s procedures for reporting bullying, harassment and sexual abuse. Parents should ask about how teachers manage supervision during breaks or other occasions where children may be less well supervised
- **advocating for comprehensive sex education at your school:** when parents are involved in sex education it leads to better outcomes for children. Check what your school covers in the curriculum. Ask about what supports are available to parents, and how you can be involved
- **getting involved in your child’s social world:** knowing who your child’s friends are and staying connected with teachers can offer insight into troubling dynamics. Create opportunities for your child to talk about their friendships and school experiences regularly. And as they start navigating the digital world, it’s even more important to know who they are engaging with
- **teach assertiveness and confidence:** find ways to empower your child to speak up for themselves when they are unsure, or something feels wrong. Don’t leave this up to a class teacher to deal with in respectful relationship education. At home, you can encourage assertiveness in expressing their preferences and boundaries. You can also model how to stand up to peer pressure. Children can learn and be encouraged to say simple phrases such as, “stop, I don’t like it” or “no, I don’t want to”.

If there is a problem

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If you do come across an issue or problem, try and work with your school. Despite your distress, try not to be adversarial – rather pitch your conversation to the teacher or principal as “How can I help us work through this together?”

Parental involvement in education, can reduce the risk of child sexual abuse. If parents and schools can work together, they are **more likely to be effective** in keeping children safe.

Prevention requires vigilance, communication and support from both parents and schools. Parents play a crucial role in shaping their child’s understanding of what’s OK, what’s harmful, as well as boundaries, safety and consent.

By having ongoing conversations, staying informed, and working with schools, parents are the first step to creating safety for children – and supporting them if something goes wrong.

Daryl Higgins, Professor & Director, Institute of Child Protection Studies, *Australian Catholic University* and **Gabrielle Hunt**, PhD candidate as part of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, *Australian Catholic University*

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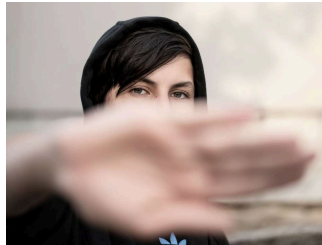
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