



# A Parent's Guide to talking to children about safety

## **About Child Wise**

Established in 1991, Child Wise is one of Australia's leading not-for-profit child sexual abuse prevention organisations. Our vision is of a society in which children can grow up free from abuse and exploitation. Child Wise works to build awareness, deliver education, and provide the tools to empower individuals and communities around Australia so they can actively prevent child abuse.

## **Purpose of the Parent's Guide**

This booklet has been specifically written for parents and caregivers to assist you in talking to children about personal safety. As the primary protectors of children, parents and carers play an integral role in keeping children safe from harm. In order to prevent children from becoming victims of abuse, it's important that they are armed with the knowledge and skills to identify unsafe situations and to speak up if they ever have concerns.

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Child Wise values feedback and comments in order to improve our programs. Please contact us if you would like to make any suggestions regarding this guide.

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# Introduction

Children have the right to be and feel safe at all times. Talking to children from an early age about safety, their bodies, and how they can protect themselves, is an important part of keeping them safe.

Personal safety, also known as protective behaviours, is a powerful way to teach children about safety, risk taking, and what they can do when they feel unsafe. Children who are confident, assertive and have good support networks are less likely to be at risk of abuse or find themselves in dangerous situations. By building awareness of 'safe' behaviours, and teaching children empowerment strategies, protective behaviours aims to promote child resilience; and ultimately reduce child abuse in our community.



To create child safe communities, parents and carers need to learn about the issue of child safety and child abuse. The more knowledge parents have about child safety and child abuse, the greater likelihood they can create safe environments for children and prevent the occurrence of abuse or unsafe situations. Knowledgeable parents and carers can identify unsafe situations and potentially prevent interactions between their children and perpetrators of abuse. Learning the facts about abuse will also help stop parents and carers from overreacting to situations that may not pose a risk for children's safety.

As parents and carers, you can be highly effective instructors in protective behaviours for children. Research shows that children who receive consistent safety messages, both at home and at school, are more likely to be confident in responding to unsafe situations and to speak up if something happens that concerns or upsets them.

Child Wise acts as the Chair of the Protective Behaviours Victorian Reference Group, delivering a holistic approach to protective behaviours. You can find out more about our work and Protective Behaviours education programs on the Child Wise website: [www.childwise.org.au](http://www.childwise.org.au)



# Why speak with children about safety?

- Most children are abused by someone they know and trust – making it harder for them to speak up.
- Creating a child friendly space (in the home and in organisations) helps children to speak up – and personal safety is a key component of this.
- Most children don't speak about abuse that has happened to them.
- There were 272,980 notifications to child protection across Australia in the 2012/13 financial year.

It is always the responsibility of adults to protect children and ensure they are kept safe from harm - child abuse is never the child's fault.. Educating children in protective behaviours is about recognising that sometimes children be exposed to danger or may take risks that parents and carers are unaware of. Providing children with tools to respond to unsafe situations and to talk to adults about their concerns, will create more resilient children and safer environments for them to grow up in.

Speaking to children about their safety is a powerful way to build open communication with them. Making children feel confident to speak up and to ask questions when they feel uncomfortable is an integral part of keeping them safe.

Only a small percentage of children who are sexually abused will disclose it. This happens for many reasons: they may have been threatened; they may fear they will not be believed; they may feel too ashamed - believing that they deserved the abuse; or they may feel a pressure for secrecy. It's important to remember that disclosure for children is not the same as for adults – we cannot expect children to remember dates, times, locations, names, and then to explain them all in one conversation, as may happen when adults report a crime.

Disclosure by a child may not always be verbal - it can be expressed in many different ways. A child may reveal their abuse or lack of comfort through their behaviour, emotions, or body language. Many cases go undetected because parents and professionals are not aware of the signs and symptoms of child abuse; making it hard to identify when it has occurred and to respond appropriately to children.

# How to talk to children about safety

It can be difficult to find ways to speak with children about safety. One of the first steps is to ensure that you are prepared and knowledgeable about the issue. We recommend you take part in an education program on protective behaviours or general child abuse prevention, as this will help give you the skills to help protect your children. There are also resources about child abuse and wellbeing on the Child Wise website which will be useful to learn more about these topics.

If your child has participated in a program or lesson on personal safety or protective behaviours, this can be a good starting point for continuing the discussion at home. Asking them what they learned about safety is a good way for you to find out what they know. It also shows children that you are comfortable talking with them about personal safety, further reinforcing the message of speaking up about any concerns they may have.

Identifying situations when children feel safe, happy and content are great conversation starters. These can be used to initiate conversations about when the child does not feel that way, and to reinforce that there are the times that they should share their thoughts, feelings or concerns with you.

## The Safety Continuum

Using the 'Safety Continuum' is a good way to engage children. Children like to explore and take risks in their everyday lives. The Safety Continuum is a way to explain when this might become unsafe, putting experiences and situations on a scale:



Using examples, talk with children about each of these situations, and how they might respond to each one. For instance, fun to feel scared might involve trying a flying fox for the first time - because we know the flying fox is safe. Risking on purpose might be when they jump from a swing at the playground - you know it is a risk but it is unlikely you will get badly hurt. An unsafe situation might be if a stranger or someone they don't know well offers them a lift home in their car.

## Open communication

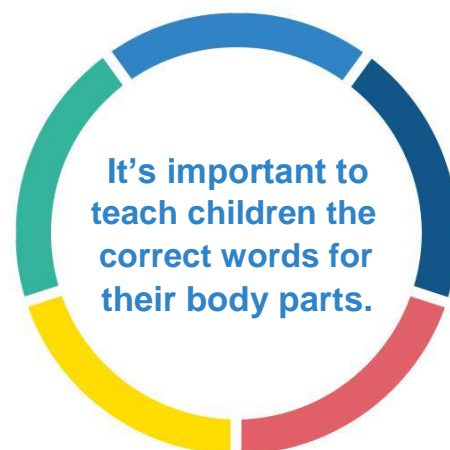
Giving children the language and words to talk about their body and how they feel will help them to communicate with you and with other adults caring for them. Whether it be about a fantastic day they had exploring the beach with friends, or about a situation or experience in which they felt uncomfortable, children who have the words to express how they feel and that are encouraged to speak about it, will be more likely to talk with you when it matters.

It's important to teach children the correct words for their body parts. Removing the taboo of talking about genitals is helpful in making children comfortable to raise concerns they might have.

Identifying appropriate and inappropriate touching is a good way to help children know when they might feel unsafe. An effective way to demonstrate this is to use the swimming bathers analogy: where their bathers go (and their mouths as well) are their own private body parts and no one should touch them there. The exception might be the doctor, but only where you as their parent or carer are there as well. You can then teach them to talk to someone they have identified as a safe person if anyone touches these private body parts, asks to look at them, or if the child is asked to touch someone else's private parts.

Children won't always want to use words to express how they feel, and if they have been traumatised they may be unable to do so. Children may like to draw examples of times when they feel happy, sad, worried, or scared. Encourage this and note the examples they use. Ask questions about the drawings, for instance:

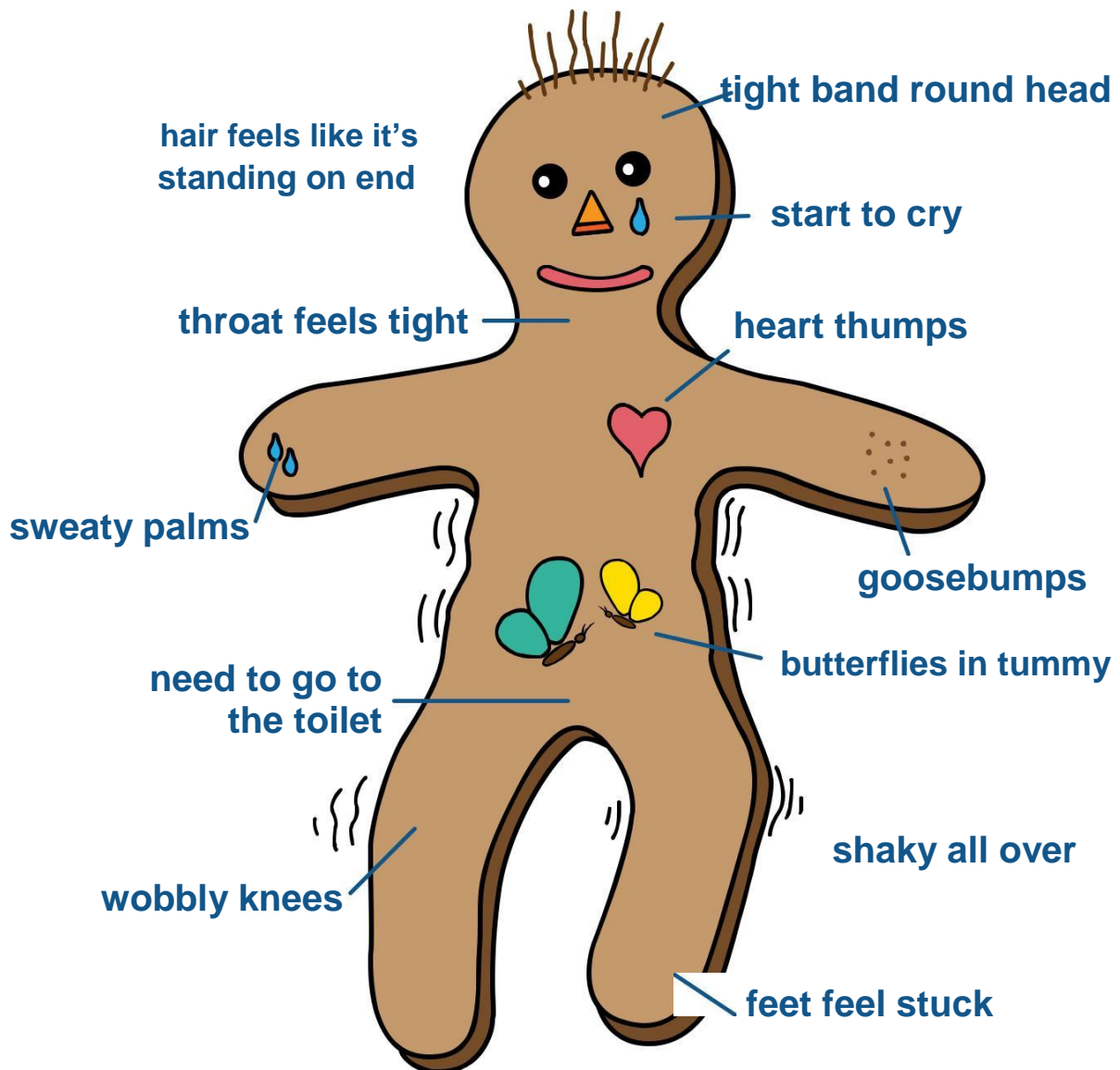
- What are the situations they've drawn?
- Who are the people in the picture?
- What are the feelings they are trying to convey?
- What colours are used and why did they choose them?



## Early warning signs

Talking to children about body signals and early warning signs is important to helping them identify moments when they feel unsafe. Physical indications of early warning signs can include:

- Butterflies in tummy
- Jelly legs
- Sweaty hands
- Goosebumps
- Heart racing





## One step removed

Children often enjoy being taught protective behaviours. One useful tool is the 'one step removed' scenarios. These make it easier for children to engage with the idea of safety by thinking about what someone else would do. For instance, instead of '*what would you do if...*', saying '*what could someone do when...*'. This is likely to limit the chances of distressing a child by placing them into the situation directly.

### Before having a discussion with your child

#### **Consider what you want to talk about**

- You don't have to go through all the information in one sitting - doing it over a few weeks will help to reinforce the message. Keep it fun!

**Learn about the issue yourself** - Know what the signs, indicators and impacts of child abuse and trauma are. That way, if your child seems distressed, you'll be better placed to identify it.

**Seek advice** - You don't have to do it alone, You can call and speak to one of the Child Wise experts, or find additional information online.

### Suggested age appropriate conversation:

It is important that you use the correct language when talking to your child, as outlined in the approaches below. If they hear you speak it, children are more likely to recognise it as part of every day life.

#### **18 months to 3 years:**

Begin to teach the correct names for all the body parts.

#### **3 to 5 years:**

Teach about private body parts, early warning signs, and how it is ok to say no to someone who touches you and makes you feel uncomfortable.

#### **5 to 8 years:**

Talk about the different types of touch and the safety continuum.



# Listen and act

It's estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 7 boys are victims of child sexual abuse. Despite this, research shows that most children need to tell three adults before someone believes them, and one third of adults wouldn't make a report if they suspected a child was being abused. However, through various stories of survivors, reports from child protection workers, and increase in media reporting about child abuse, we know that things in society are changing. The focus on acting upon disclosures of child sexual abuse is increasing as we learn more about the modus operandi of offenders and the damaging impact of abuse on children.

It is critical to a child's well-being and development that you listen and believe them, and to act on your suspicions or knowledge. It is also important that you observe the behaviour and actions of children – disclosure of abuse is not always verbal, and knowing the signs and symptoms children may show will help you to respond. Parents need to develop their "child safety lenses". These enable you to know what to look for and how to act if you have concerns. Importantly, you do not have to have hard evidence to raise or report suspicions of child abuse, you only need reasonable grounds for concern.

It's normal to want to know more about the incident and to try and find out as much as you can, but it's not your role to conduct an investigation. Let the child tell you in their own words what has happened. If you ask too many questions you might scare the child. If a child has any obvious injuries you should take photographs and/or get a medical examination to preserve evidence of the alleged abuse.

## When speaking with a child:

### Do...

- Listen carefully to what they are saying,
- Let them use their own words and don't ask leading questions,
- Tell them that they did the right thing by telling you,
- Tell them it is not their fault and that they are not responsible for the abuse,
- Let the child know what will happen next,
- Tell the child that you are pleased they told you,
- Advise authorities - either child protection or the police.

### Do NOT...

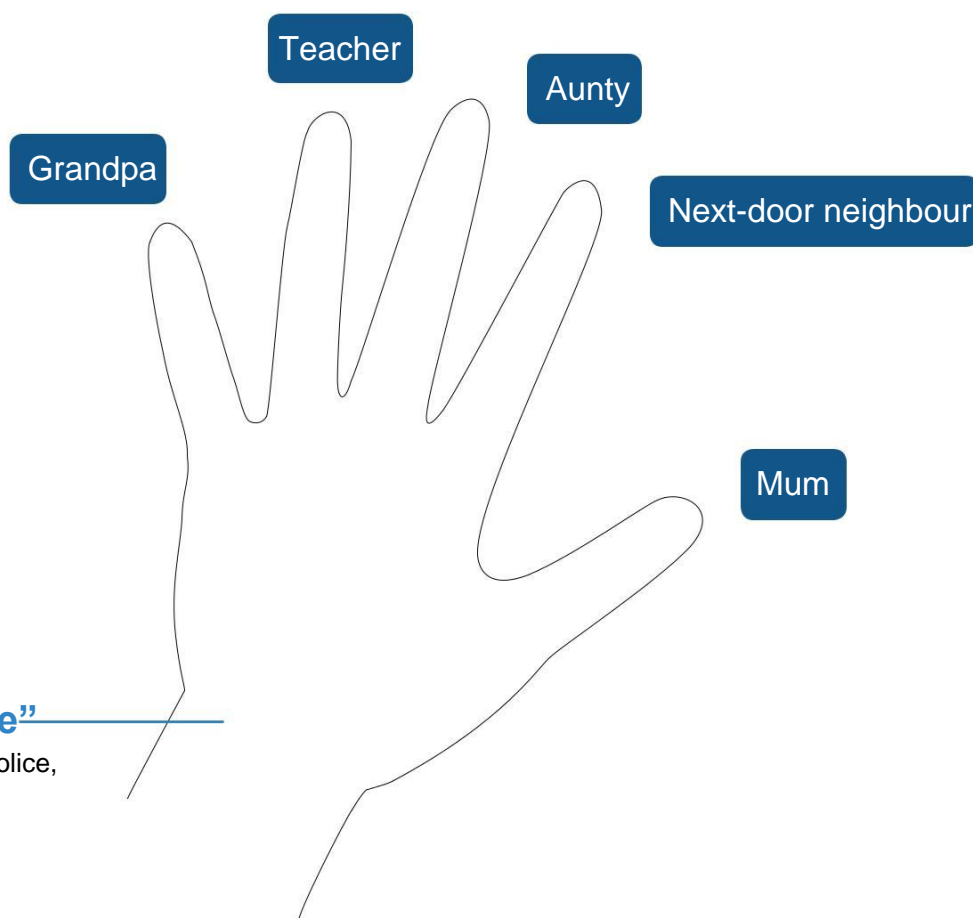
- Make promises you cannot keep, such as promising that you will not tell anyone,
- Push the child into giving details of the abuse. Your role is to listen to what the child wants to tell you or make observations - not to conduct an investigation,
- Indiscriminately discuss the circumstances of the incident with others not directly involved with the child,
- Don't leave the child to fend for themselves. As a parent or carer it is your responsibility to protect them.

# Developing children's safety network

Some children may not feel comfortable talking to their parents about things that worry them or make them feel unsafe. Don't take this personally – for instance, the offender might have threatened the child and they are scared for their parents, or the offender may be a member of the family themselves. Developing a safety network of other trusted adults for children will give them someone else to speak to when they feel unsafe.

The choice of people should be led by the child. They should be people who the child trusts and that can be easily contacted. Teachers or other relatives may be good choices. It's a good idea to tell these people or ask the child to tell these people that they are on their safety network so the child knows that the person will be welcoming if they do need to speak to them.

A great tool to use to remember the safety network is the 'network hand'. The thumb can stand for people at home (i.e. parents), and then each finger can represent another person the child can speak to. It's a good way for children to remember who these people are and to make the idea familiar to them.



## “Up Your Sleeve”

Emergency Contacts: Police,  
Kids Helpline etc



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