

SWFL

# parent & child

5 THINGS

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# How to talk with your kids about sex trafficking and exploitation

If you are like me, I dreaded talking about sexuality with my kids. Unfortunately, in this digital age, if we wait too long and don't share age-appropriate information, our children could learn a distorted view of sexuality from strangers or even predators.

We can all agree sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of children are horrific epidemics, ones we never want to personally affect our children. With Florida ranking third in the nation in reported cases of human trafficking, according to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Cyber Tip Line receiving over 18.4 million reports in 2018 related to child sexual abuse images, online enticement, sextortion, child sex trafficking and child sexual molestation, we have to be serious about engaging in age-appropriate conversations in order to educate and protect our children. Awareness plays a major role in prevention and intervention. Equipping our children with accurate information is essential.

Sgt. Wade Williams with the Collier County Sheriff's Office said, "One of the worst things a parent can do is give their child an electronic device without any restrictions and without having a discussion with them about what they will encounter online. You don't want the child predator to be the first person to teach your child through grooming techniques and exploit them. If you do not take an active role, it is almost certain that eventually your child will be exposed to harmful consequences, such as an online preda-

tor, cyber bullying, sextortion or lewd content. Electronic devices provide 24-hour access to your child, and many times a child is being exploited in the 'safety of their own home' while parents are present and completely unaware."

I hope this article gives you the courage and the tools you need to start the conversation.

## Talk with young children about body safety

Talk about "safe" and "unsafe" touching. A good example is teaching them that no one should touch them in any area that their bathing suit covers and that they should never touch anyone else in these areas or see pictures or movies that show these areas.

Use age-appropriate wording. You can discuss body safety without discussing sexuality.

Teach them the difference between healthy and unhealthy secrets. A good example is telling them a surprise party is a safe secret, because it will make people happy and they will be told at the right time. Secret touching is not OK. Develop open communication with your children by creating talking environments where they feel safe to be vulnerable without being judged.

Teach your children the proper names for their body parts. Children who know proper terms for their body parts have been educated by their parents and are usually aware of safe and unsafe touch, which would be a deterrent to a potential predator.

## Keep the conversation going

The best way to prepare children is to teach them to trust their instincts. If something seems too good to be true, it likely is. If something feels wrong, it probably is.

Slavery is a standard topic taught in school, and most kids believe slavery ended a century ago. Kids can relate to the concept of work without pay and not having the freedom to escape the situation. This is an excellent way to discuss the subject of human trafficking.

## Teach internet safety

Teach your child to never to give any personal information, never answer questions such as birthdate, address or social security number.

Place computers in a common area so that you can monitor. Chat sites are not appropriate for preteens, and many are not appropriate for teens. If you allow your child to go to chat sites, know which sites they are on and investigate the conversation threads. Many sites that sound like they're for youth aren't safe, like teen-chat.org.

Teens tend to overshare information. What seems harmless between friends can end up pinpointing your child's location, pattern of regular behavior, or potential vulnerabilities to a predator. Teach your teens not to overshare. Most cases of exploitation don't occur through a stranger abduction. Most victims met their offender online, engaged in numerous chats with them over time and were duped

Christy Ivie founded Christy's Cause in Estero in 2015 to eradicate child sex trafficking and exploitation through education, public awareness, restoration projects and justice initiatives. Details at [christyscause.com](http://christyscause.com).



into “willingly” leaving their homes to meet them or self-produce lewd content.

Sgt. Williams recommends parents pay attention to which apps are age-appropriate for their children. Apps like Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram are where the majority of child exploitation cases investigated by the Collier County Sheriff's Office occurs. These apps may not be appropriate for children.

Do not allow your children to be behind locked doors with a device as these are the most common locations where self-produced child sex abuse imagery occurs. Many cases occur at night while the child is alone in their room with their device.

Use parental protections on all your child's devices, including desktop and laptop computers. Apple devices have protection applications located under “Screen Time” in settings. Android devices have “Family Link.” Aside from these features, there are numerous parent protection apps that can also restrict access to obscene websites, set screen limits and locate your child's device.

Lock your child's ability to delete applications, change location sharing settings, or change the device or account passcodes without the parent passcode. Set time restrictions so that the device locks all apps at night while they are sleeping except emergency phone calls.

Most importantly, have a conversation with your child about what to do if they encounter things online that make them feel sad, scared, or are not appropriate. You can tell them mistakes happen but you will fix them together, so they don't feel judged. If they think you will react negatively, they might not disclose what occurred and this could be

dangerous to them. There's no foolproof way to prevent your child from being exposed to dangers if they are accessing the internet, so make sure they make the right decision if it happens.

## Always know where your kids are

Apple devices allow you to share your child's location with your device indefinitely. If using this feature on an Apple device, make sure to lock their ability to turn this feature off, which you can do under the “Screen Time” setting. Android devices have the location feature built into the Family Link app. This will allow you to locate your child's device in an emergency, in a large crowd, or just for peace of mind during normal daily activities.

## Stranger danger

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, stranger abductions are rare. About 115 children per year in the U.S. are victims of stranger kidnappings. Younger children are less likely to be targeted by strangers than teenagers. This is why it is important to discuss good touch/bad touch with your children. Most child abuse and sex abuse cases are committed by someone close to the child, like a family member or close friend of the family, not a stranger.

However, it is essential to talk with your children about strangers and teach them to trust their instincts. Children should not be left alone with unknown adults, and kids should always travel in groups, as there is safety in numbers.

## Know the warning signs of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation

Many children who are trafficked have a history of sexual abuse from earlier in their childhood. Noticing the warning signs can help children receive the services they need, so they are not further victimized.

Signs in younger children include gradual or sudden changes in behavior, cruelty to others and pets, recurring nightmares and disturbed sleep patterns, unusual interest in or knowledge of sex, fear of a particular person, loss of interest in friends, school sports or other activities.

Signs in older children include extreme and/or unexplained anger, running away, low self-worth, self-destructive behavior, promiscuous behavior, eating and anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts or attempts, signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

## Resource tools

Take your child's phone immediately if you believe a predator has contacted them. Save the phone and images for law enforcement.

For prevention, there are numerous helpful resources. SW FL Parent & Child will share them all online with this article. One example is KidSmartz, a child safety program that educates families about preventing abduction and empowers kids in grades K-5 to practice safer behaviors. Find it at [kidsmartz.org](http://kidsmartz.org).

Find more resources at [swflparent-child.com](http://swflparent-child.com). 

## RUN 4 THE CAUSE

**What:** A family-friendly 5K run and after-party to support Christy's Cause • **When:** March 27; run starts at 7 p.m., awards at 8 p.m., '80s after-party begins at 8:20 p.m. • **Where:** Ocean Church, 22100 S. Tamiami Trail, Estero • **Cost:** \$30 before February 27, \$35 after, and \$45 on race day; teams get a 10% discount • **Details:** Every runner receives a participation medal and swag bag that includes a T-shirt. Placement awards will be given to the best '80s themed team, top overall male and female runners and top males and females by age group: 5-10, 11-19, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59 and 60+. The '80s after-party will have food trucks, DJ and a kids' zone. • **Register online:** [christyscause.com](http://christyscause.com)