

A P A R E N T ' S
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Sexual Assault

axis

Real Talk about Sexual Assault

We all pray that our children will experience a world safe from harm. We do our best to love and protect, but what do we do when things are out of our control? Sexual assault is a serious and scary thing, and we need to talk to our kids about it. As parents, we should equip our kids and ourselves with practical tools to tackle the unthinkable.

The National Center for Victims of Crime [reports](#) 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse. If our children haven't experienced abuse, chances are they've got a friend who has. So it's our job to learn how to love our kids through it, whether it's a firsthand experience or preparing them to be a better friend to victims of abuse.

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault is any form of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the consent of the victim. It's a big umbrella term that includes much more than rape—it can be attempted rape, uninvited touching or fondling, forcing the victim to perform sexual acts, or any other case of unwanted physical contact. **Above all, it is *never* the victim's fault.**

Sexual assault usually falls into [one of three categories](#):

1. Penetration crimes.
2. Contact with intimate body parts.
3. Exposure of intimate body parts.

[Each state](#) varies slightly in its definition of what sexual assault is, but when it comes down to it, there is no excuse for unwarranted sexual acts.

How do I talk about it with my kids?

It's never too early to discuss sex, boundaries, and consent. Start these conversations when your kids are young so they know it's all right to bring these topics up. The key is to adjust your tone, specifics, and level of depth based on your child's age.

One of the best ways to start a conversation is to look for opportunities to do so. Pay attention to the media, video games, YouTube videos, or even stories your child sees or hears at school. Actively search for ways to generate conversation between you and your child. If your family watches something on TV that shows some form of sexual assault, ask your child for their opinion on what happened. Or if they see a post on social media that discusses the topic, use their technology to relate with them. This can lead to a more natural discussion of a rather tough topic.

But it's also important to address the topic directly and intentionally. It's easy to assume that if our kids are under a certain age or if they haven't brought it up with us, they're simply unaware of it and everything is fine. But the truth is that that's often *not* the case. We think it's safe to say that when it comes down to it, most (if not all) parents would agree that they'd rather have awkward conversations about it that either prevent assault from happening or help their kids come to them first than have painful, heartbreaking conversations *after* something terrible happens and regret not bringing it up sooner. So it's crucial to talk openly about it *before* something happens.

When you bring it up, talk about not only what sexual assault is, but also signs or circumstances to look out for. Young people are innocent (a good thing), so they often can't conceive of others bad intentions, let alone recognize inappropriate things as they're happening (more on this in the following section). Though sad, it's important to bring up the fact that [93% of victims](#) know their perpetrator. It could be a friend, classmate, a relative, or someone they trust. Making sure our children know the reality of sexual assault is the best thing we can do for them, because it gives them the ability to look out for themselves. And if it feels awkward, that's perfectly all right! These conversations are tough; let them feel welcomed by your humility about the subject.

In addition, it's important to talk to your kids about loving others who have experienced sexual assault. Most people don't know what to say or do when a friend confronts them with a story of abuse. First, talk about the great honor it is for a friend to disclose that with them. Help your child understand how much they are loved and trusted with that information—this can also show your child that you have confidence in them to do the right thing when talking with a victim. Encourage them to use language of love and support with their friend, like this:

- “Thank you for telling me this.”
- “I’m so sorry this has happened to you. You did not deserve this.”
- “I am always here for you.”

It's vital to teach our children how to love others well, because that's how God calls us to serve. [Proverbs 17:17](#) gives a great example of strong friendship. Show your child that community is a powerful tool that God's given us to lift each other up in times of trouble. Friends love at all times, and *especially* when someone's been hurt.

— How do I prevent it?

A quick note: You have loved your child in the best way you can. A child's assault is not the fault of poor parenting or preventative measures; the only one to blame is the offender. With that being said, there are ways to help prevent sexual assault from happening.

1. Talk about consent.

Our kids need to know what it means to give consent, and what the boundaries are within the realm of sex. **No means no, end of story.** We touched on this a bit earlier, but let's dive in. We need to start these conversations young so that our kids understand that they have control over their own bodies. No matter who it is, if someone is uncomfortably close or begins to touch in an inappropriate way, no means no. Clearly define consent for your child so that they can be prepared if a situation were to arise in which they'd need to use firm language or to defy an authority figure. Because many assaults occur in a relationship where one party has power or authority over a lesser party, equipping your children with the courage and permission to resist and defy authority is critical to their ability to understand and confront an abuser.

Consent is verbal permission to do something. If this is not present, then it's assault.

Consent is *not* assuming that a person's clothing or behavior condones sexual activity. For our girls especially, we need to make sure they understand that there is never an excuse for assault. If drugs or alcohol are involved, there was not consent. If they've been pressured into something, there was no consent. Assault is not their fault. For our boys,

they must understand that there is never, ever any justification to take advantage of a girl, especially if she's made choices (drinking or drugs) that make her unable to consciously object to sexual activity.

Of course, we want to encourage our children to stay clear from situations that could leave them in a vulnerable place. But the truth of the matter is, sexual assault can happen anywhere. Our kids should know that without verbal permission, the offender has no right to continue. For our girls and boys, help them to understand what consent *is* and *is not* so that they can treat others with respect. Encourage your sons to be protectors of the vulnerable, not complicit bystanders.

2. Be a safe place.

Create a safe space for your child. If your home is safe and comfortable, your child will be more likely to open up about difficult subjects. Part of creating a safe space is making known the importance of openness and honesty. **As parents, we want our children to know that no matter what they do or say, they are loved and heard.** We're a safe place and they will not be penalized for telling the truth. (For more, check out our [Parent's Guide to Making Your Home a Safe Place.](#))

Love your child well by making time for them. Set aside a few minutes each day without any distractions (i.e. phone nowhere to be seen) to ask about school, their friends, and their emotions. Take interest in their interests. We have to create an open space for communication so that when more serious issues take place, they immediately know to whom they can turn. Finding the balance between friend and parent can be tricky, but it starts with caring about the little things.

If we're a safe place for our kids to come to, we can look out for warning signs with clarity. This could mean seeing when a boyfriend becomes controlling or forceful over time, adults who get too close to our children, social gatherings or parties that could be unsafe, or any other situation in which your child discloses something concerning. Don't be afraid to discuss difficult topics. When we're a safe place, nothing is off the table, and our kids know that we won't react out of fear or anger, but out of love, protection, and wisdom.

3. Encourage your child to trust their gut.

If something seems off, it probably is. This can start with everyday happenings like roughhousing between siblings that goes a little too far, playful teasing among friends that turns hurtful, or feeling uncomfortable at a social gathering. We want our kids to know that if they're feeling uneasy, it's completely valid to leave. If they know that hurtful words are unacceptable, they'll be more likely to recognize when something's gone too far. If they know that "light hearted" teasing is never an excuse for inappropriate touching, they can be empowered to leave the situation immediately.

In these situations, we need our kids to trust their emotions because those feelings are real. The Holy Spirit can prompt us to flee a situation that might become harmful, or it might simply move in a subtle way that notifies our bodies that something just isn't right. Teach your children to recognize and trust the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Give them an example from your life when the Holy Spirit prompted you to act and describe exactly what that felt like. That way, our kids can then look out for themselves and others when something just doesn't seem right.

How do I equip my children to resist assault?

With younger kids, teach them:

- **The names of their body parts.** Teach your kids proper names so they can feel comfortable asking questions later.
- **Some body parts are private.** God made their body special, but some of those parts are private and for their eyes only.
- **That they can say “no.”** Kids grow up knowing that they are to obey adults. When talking about private parts, let your young kids know that it's OK to refuse any form of contact that's uncomfortable.
 - With this, teach kids the [“No! Go! Tell!” strategy](#). Say “no” firmly to inappropriate touches, get away, and tell a trusted adult.
- **Not to keep secrets.** Let your child know that they can always be honest with you—*especially* if someone has told them to keep something a secret or if they think they'll get in trouble for speaking up. In fact, you're proud of their honesty no matter what, even if they confess to you something they've done wrong.

With older kids, talk about:

- **Looking out for themselves.** Our kids often think nothing bad can really happen to them. Teens feel invincible; danger always happens to other people, not to them. Talk about the importance of boundaries and knowing how to respond if a boundary is crossed before it goes any further.
- **Healthy relationships.** Our teens need to know what a healthy relationship actually looks like so they can resist potential assault. Give an example of your own marriage, a strong friendship, or any other relationship that displays healthy qualities.
- **Using their voice.** Your child has a voice; encourage them to use it. If they are uncomfortable, it's important to voice that in the moment rather than staying silent.
- **Consent.** We talked about this in the last point and it's an important one to revisit. We need our kids to have a solid definition of consent so that they can protect themselves if a situation were to arise with the potential for assault.

What do I do if my child has been sexually assaulted?

1. Believe them.

They're likely feeling a great deal of guilt and shame, even though it was not their fault or within their control. If your child comes to you with something sensitive, it's important to make sure they're heard and commended for doing the right thing in coming to you. It was just as hard for them to come to you as it was to hear, and the best response you can give is letting them know that you have [full confidence](#) in their word, even if they're saying that someone you love or trust has done something inappropriate.

Note: There are some cases, though few and far between, in which someone wrongfully accuses someone else in an effort to hurt them or their reputation. If you're not sure that your child can be trusted or if you find it hard to believe that the accused would behave thus, you still owe it to your child to investigate their claims and keep them away from the accused, even if you can never be fully sure what happened. It's not worth taking the risk

that they were, in fact, telling the truth. You know your child better than anyone. If they are sincere and trustworthy in other situations, you can be confident they are telling you the truth in this situation.

2. Be strong.

This may seem like a lot to ask of a parent who's just heard such shocking news, but this is exactly what your child needs. If they've been left in a vulnerable, scary place, they'll need you more than ever. **Your kids are counting on you for support.** [It's normal to feel angry,](#) shocked, anxious, helpless, or fearful if your child comes to you with this. But now is an important time to process your emotions as best you can so that you can be the support your kids need.

3. Reaffirm their worth.

Affirm in your child that they're loved and brave in coming to you with this. They may feel like "damaged goods," but this event has not changed who they are in the slightest. As parents it's our job to remind our kids of who they are in times of doubt, and sexual assault does not reflect poor character of the child; it only reflects poorly on the offender. We want our kids to see their value in every way, despite how low they may feel after a traumatizing assault.

4. Tell them they're safe.

Our children need to know they're safe from harm. **Assure your child that you will do everything you can to protect them.** After sexual assault, it's hard to know who to trust or how to move on from such deep pain. Everything they've known about their world has been turned upside down, and it's frightening. Tell your child that you won't let any more harm come to them. They did the right thing in coming to you, and you will do everything in your power to protect them.

5. Get help.

You may consider taking [proper legal action](#) against the offender. If you decide to report the incident, [contact local police](#). This may seem intimidating to you or your child, but take comfort in knowing that specially trained officers will be able to guide you through the process every step of the way.

You can also call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673). This hotline will direct you to speak with someone from your local sexual assault service provider.

If your child has been sexually abused, you may observe changes in behavior such as sleeplessness, appetite loss, aggression, depressive symptoms, self-harm, or other major changes. We can offer our children all the love and support we can, but if signs persist it may be time to seek further help. Talk with your child about seeing a counselor. Therapy may seem scary to them, but talk about the helpful tools it can offer for sexual assault survivors.

What do I do if my child is accused of (or confesses to) committing sexual assault?

1. Build trust.

A child who has been accused of sexual assault may feel confusion toward the situation.

With young children, they likely did not know that what they did was inappropriate. When they don't understand why they've been accused of something—or if they do understand, but fear the consequences—they likely won't know who they can trust. As a result of this fear, the child may not disclose every detail or be completely honest about the facts of the situation.

Tell your child that you're for them and want to help them, but you can only do so if they can be completely open about what's happened. When appropriate, use it as a [teachable moment](#) (such as a 5-year-old child who unknowingly looks at or touches another child's private areas). Rather than saying, "don't do this," talk about *why* that's inappropriate.

2. Tell them you love them.

If your child regrets something he or she has done, the emotions to come are surely going to feel burdensome. But first and foremost, **we need our kids to know that we love them no matter what**. It's OK to say that what they've done was wrong, but clearly state that you love them and will stand by their side.

3. Get help.

As hard as this situation is, a child is not likely to outgrow inappropriate sexual behavior over time on their own. Family therapy is a good way to start healing conversations. If your child is not ready for family therapy, you may consider individual counseling for them instead. Either way, they're likely working through emotions of shame and guilt, and counseling will help them face those in a healthy way. It is also highly possible that, if your child abused someone, he or she was likely a victim of abuse in the past. Therapy and intense counseling can get to the root of the problem and hopefully provide healing and restoration.

4. Help them seek reconciliation and forgiveness.

Simply confessing to you is not enough; God is clear that we need [to confess our sins](#) to those whom we've sinned against, and your child needs to do so as well. It's scary, humiliating, and painful, but true repentance also leads to restoration, freedom, and healing—for both your child and the victim.

First, help them put themselves in the other person's shoes and feel what they might have felt. Ask how they would feel if someone did that to them. Once they've confronted this, give them to process and grieve their actions. When they're ready, go with them to apologize. Show that you'll fight for them, even when they screw up, just as Christ fought and died for us [while we were yet sinners](#). Later, help them process their apology. If the person didn't forgive them, remind them that that's his/her prerogative; what's up to your child is that they do as God asks of them, regardless of the other person's reaction.

5. Enforce new boundaries.

As part of the process, you may need to calmly but firmly explain to your child that because sin occurred, there are consequences. One of those consequences is that they'll need to re-establish trust and responsibility. But continually remind them you're doing this because you love them and want what's best for them.

What does God's Word say about it?

The Old Testament is pretty clear on sexual assault and how to act when boundaries have

been crossed. Let's start with [Deuteronomy 22:23-29](#). Deuteronomy is full of laws for God's people, and this section of text [protects women](#) in particular against assault. The passage gives three possible scenarios:

1. If a man **sleeps with** a virgin woman engaged to be married, they should both be stoned to death. The man deserves death because he slept with a woman promised to another man. The woman deserves death because she did not cry for help even though she was in a town (i.e. a place where her cries would be heard), which indicates that she did not resist and was a willing participant.
2. If a man **rapes** an engaged woman, he should be stoned to death while she is protected from harm. Scripture compares this scenario to someone who attacks and murders his neighbor—helpless despite cries for help. The man finds the woman out in the country and forces her to lie with him (she screamed but was not heard), so it is considered rape. He pays a price while she is protected.
3. If a man **rapes** a woman not engaged to be married, he has to pay the dowry, take her as his wife, and never divorce her. The wording is a bit different in this verse: It says that they are “discovered,” which implies some form of mutual responsibility that's different from the previous scenario. But the man is still held responsible because he is the one who captured her. The fact that he must marry this woman notes that she is now under his care and he's got to provide for her (important in a culture in such a patriarchal culture).

It's important to note the use of language in each of these scenarios. God's Word differentiates between sexual immorality and rape. Sexual immorality places responsibility on both man and woman, while rape is solely blamed on the perpetrator. God makes it clear that in cases of assault, a price must be paid and the victim is not blamed. Our God is a God of justice and mercy: justice for the offender and mercy for the innocent. God sees the woman who's been defiled and values her enough to save her from any shame. She is not shunned for what's happened to her because it was out of her control. In fact, her reputation is restored in full. She is not used for man's pleasure and quickly discarded, she's loved rightfully through it. When our children are hurt, they're not left high and dry. Our merciful Father tenderly cares for our children and sees them in their distress.

Though this law was in place, [2 Samuel 13](#) shows the sin of human nature. Amnon, the son of King David, was in love with his half-sister, Tamar. In a conniving scheme, he tricked Tamar into tending to him while he was “sick.” When she arrived to help, he overcame her despite her cries. He wasn't really sick after all. After violating Tamar, Amnon actually hated her—yes, his feelings turned to hatred as quickly as his feelings of love came—and ordered her out of his home. Scripture says she lived as a “desolate woman” after that. Why then, had God's Law not protected Tamar against such a terrible thing?

The saddest part of this story is that Tamar was told by her brother Absalom to keep silent about the incident. Absalom took “revenge” by killing Amnon (which could be argued also served his own purposes, since the two men were vying for King David's throne), while Tamar was left with the repercussions. People don't often get it right, but God promises to [heal the brokenhearted](#). He sees us in our pain, even when the world around us seems to scream otherwise.

So what can we learn from Tamar? We can use the pain we see in this story to learn how to love our children more tenderly than Tamar was loved. There are also two really important

[characteristics](#) to take from Tamar. First, she knew right from wrong. There was no question that she knew what Amnon demanded was inappropriate. She actually tried to convince him to propose marriage to her rather than force himself upon her. We need our children to be outspoken and clear about their boundaries as well. Second, she has a strong voice. Tamar does not stay quiet while this is happening; she yells out repeatedly, telling Amnon of the dishonor he'd be committing. Sadly, she was eventually overcome, but she exercised the power of her voice. Our sons and daughters have that voice, too, and we should encourage them to use it, even when they feel helpless. You never know when someone's protest might make the difference.

Sin, dysfunction, and pain flourish in silence and isolation, and Satan knows it. He knows how vulnerable we are when we feel like outcasts, unworthy, defiled, and unlovable. The enemy loves darkness because that's where he can make our secrets, shame, and hurt torment our every thought. But when we begin to step into the light, Satan is no match for the redeeming power of Jesus. Ephesians 5:8-16 tells us that we're children of light. Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, and everything illuminated becomes a light. Fear, guilt, depression, and pain have no place to hide in the light of the Lord. This exposure can only lead to life, forgiveness, and restored joy from the Lord. As scary as it is to speak up, we need to. And we need to help our kids feel safe enough to.

Perhaps most importantly, God's Word talks clearly and often about how He protects the meek, the downtrodden, the mourners, the orphan, the widow, those in distress, the "alien" (i.e. the immigrant or refugee), the helpless, the victim, the sinner.... He desires that [none should perish](#), that *all* should come to repentance. He also says that He [hates wrongdoing and loves justice](#), and that [vengeance is His](#). As you equip your kids to resist those who would do ill to them and to discern right from wrong, also remind them of exactly Who is on their side, fighting for them tirelessly and ceaselessly.

If your child has been the victim of others' lusts, this God knows every tear they've cried, every pain they've felt, and took it upon Himself through the cross. He's with them through it all, He's *for* them, and He desires that they once again flourish in His love. Help them learn to forgive their abuser, knowing full well that God will bring about true justice in His perfect timing.

If your child has been accused of or has committed some sort of assault, take heart. Your child is *not* beyond God's grace and redemption; he or she is included in the "all" that God desires to come to repentance, and He is working toward that end goal. Continue to pray for your child, speak truth over them, shower them in love, but also allow them to experience consequences for their actions. Help them become the image-bearer God desires them to be. And remember that only God can turn helpless situations into stories of beauty, redemption, forgiveness, and flourishing.

— How do I teach my children to respect the sexual dignity of others?

- **Discuss empathy.** To respect others' sexual dignity, we first need to be empathetic toward people's emotions and opinions. This means being aware of how a person is feeling, why they feel that way, and responding respectfully.

- **Talk about expressing emotions.** If we want others to be empathetic toward us, we need to be willing to share our feelings, too. For boys specifically, manliness does not mean aggression. Our boys should know that it's ok to share their emotions, express when they're upset, and find healthy outlets for their feelings. This translates to relationships with the opposite sex, because it shows them that they can have open communication (whether it's a friend or significant other).
- **Define sexual harassment and encourage them to [speak up](#).** We want our kids to learn how to recognize when something inappropriate is happening and actually speak up. For example, if a student places his hand on a girl's leg in class without her permission, it's considered sexual harassment. Let's raise vocal kids who speak up when something isn't right.
- **Teach your sons to be moral leaders.** Whether it's politicians, athletes, or celebrities, "bro culture" has created an environment in which wealthy and powerful men believe they are entitled to a woman's body. **They are not.** Model appropriate speech and behavior for them to follow. There's never an excuse for "locker-room talk." Encourage them to be an ethical voice to confront and call out inappropriate speech and behavior among their friends.

Discussion Questions

- How do you define "consent"?
- What does our culture say about sexual assault?
- Can you think of an example of sexual assault? Or do you know someone who has experienced sexual assault?
- If you witnessed harassment, what would you do?
- How can you be a friend to someone who's gone through sexual assault?
- What are some ways you can protect yourself from sexual assault?
- What do you think about the sexual violence you see on TV or in movies? Is this ok? Why or why not?
- How can you act respectfully toward guys/girls?
- What do you think defines a healthy relationship?
- How can you establish good boundaries in a relationship?
- How can I be a safe haven for you?
- Do you feel comfortable coming to me with anything, including something you think might be wrong or bad?

Recap

- Sexual assault is any form of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the consent of the victim.
- "Consent" is verbal permission to do something. If this is not present, it's assault.
- We need to start these conversations when our kids are young so we can raise them to protect themselves and others from harm.
- If your child has been sexually assaulted: believe them, be strong, reaffirm their worth, assure their safety, and get help.

- If your child is accused of sexual assault: build trust, say “I love you,” and get further help.
- The Bible shows both what *to do* and what *not to do* when it comes to sexual assault. God sees the sexual dignity of His people, which is why there are clear consequences for offenders, and protection for the abused. In Tamar’s story we see that sometimes, human sin deeply hurts the lives of others.
- The Bible also shows us how to distinguish right from wrong in sexuality, and that our kids have a voice – so they should use it!
- Teaching our kids about the sexual dignity of others starts with empathy and caring for the feelings of other people. We want to instill strong values in our kids so that they can grow up to pursue healthy relationships.
- To have that healthy relationship, we need to model what that looks like practically.

Final Thoughts

The [#MeToo movement](#) has spurred a chain reaction over the past few years. It advocates that “you are not alone,” and that’s the same message we want to show our kids every day. From the small parts of their lives—like hearing about their soccer practice or art project at school—to the big parts—talking about faith and relationships—we need our kids to know that they’re *never* alone.

Sexual assault is scary, but there are ways we can prepare ourselves as parents to prevent it from happening. It starts with honesty and ends with love. When our kids feel safe to verbalize, process, and emote, they’ll know who they can turn to in times of need. We need to pray for our kids daily, not only that they’d remain safe from harm, but that they’d continue to grow in the love we model for them and stand up for others who need support.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Shame-Free Parenting](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Tough Conversations](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Suicide & Self-Harm Prevention](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Depression & Anxiety](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to the Sex Talk](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Making Your Home a Safe Place](#)

If you’d like access to all of our resources, both current and yet to come, for one low monthly or yearly price, check out the [All Axis Pass](#)!

Additional Resources

- [Good Pictures, Bad Pictures](#) (for ages 7+) and [Good Pictures, Bad Pictures, Jr.](#) (for ages 3-6) by Kristen Jensen of [Protect Young Minds](#) (these books are more specifically about pornography, but their techniques for bringing up inappropriate images can transfer

over to talking about sexual assault)

- "[What Is Sexual Assault \(and What Isn't\), According to the Law](#)," Self
- "[Teaching children to protect themselves from sexual abuse](#)," Gorana Hitrec
- "[What Should I Do After A Child Tells?](#)" Stop It Now!
- "[Tips for Talking with Survivors of Sexual Assault](#)," RAINN
- "[Talking to Your Kids about Sexual Assault](#)," RAINN
- "[Help for Parents of Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused by Family Members](#)," RAINN
- "[Women of the Bible say #MeToo](#)," The Christian Century
- "[What to do when your child is accused of sexually inappropriate behavior](#)," *The Washington Post*
- "[Families of Juvenile Sex Offenders](#)," American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

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