

Teach your child The Underwear Rule.

About one in five children falls victim to sexual violence, including sexual abuse. You can help prevent this happening to your child. Teach your child The Underwear Rule.

The Underwear Rule

The Underwear Rule is a simple guide to help parents explain to children where others should not try to touch them, how to react and where to seek help. What is The Underwear Rule? It's simple: a child should not be touched by others on parts of the body usually covered by their underwear. And they should not touch others in those areas. It also helps explain to children that their body belongs to them, that there are good and bad secrets and good and bad touches.



How to teach The Underwear Rule?

The Underwear Rule was developed to help parents and carers start a discussion with their children. It can be a highly effective tool to prevent against sexual abuse. The Underwear Rule has 5 important aspects.

1. Your body is your own

Children should be taught that their body belongs to them and no one can touch it without their permission. Open and direct communication at an early age about sexuality and “private body parts”, using the correct names for genitals and other parts of the body, will help children understand what is not allowed. Children have the right to refuse a kiss or a touch, even from a person they love. Children should be taught to say “No”, immediately and firmly, to inappropriate physical contact, to get away from unsafe situations and to tell a trusted adult. It is important to stress that they should persist until someone takes the matter seriously.



In the book, the hand always asks Kiko for permission before touching. Kiko grants permission. When the hand wants to touch inside the underwear, Kiko says “No!”. Parents or carers could use this sequence to explain to children that they can say “No” at any moment.

2. Good touch – bad touch

Children do not always recognise appropriate and inappropriate touching. Tell children it is not okay if someone looks at or touches their private parts or asks them to look at or touch someone else’s private parts. The Underwear Rule helps them to recognise an obvious, easy-to-remember border: the underwear. It also helps adults to start a discussion with children. If children are not sure if a person’s behaviour is acceptable, make sure they know to ask a trusted adult for help.



In the book, Kiko refuses to be touched inside the underwear. Parents can explain that some adults (such as carers, parents or doctors) may have to touch children, but children should be encouraged to say “No” if a situation makes them feel uncomfortable.

3. Good secrets – bad secrets

Secrecy is a main tactic of sexual abusers. That’s why it’s important to teach the difference between good and bad secrets and to create a climate of confidence. Every secret that makes them anxious, uncomfortable, fearful or sad is not good and should not be kept; it should be told to a trustworthy adult (parent, teacher, police officer, doctor).



In the book, the hand encourages Kiko to speak out if somebody wants to touch Kiko in any inappropriate manner. This sequence can be used to discuss the difference between a good secret (such as a surprise party) and a bad secret (something that makes the child feel sad and anxious). Parents should encourage children to share bad secrets with them.

4. Prevention and protection are the responsibility of an adult

When children are abused they feel shame, guilt and fear. Adults should avoid creating taboos around sexuality, and make sure children know whom to turn to if they are worried, anxious or sad. Children may feel that something is wrong. Adults should be attentive and receptive to their feelings and behaviour. There may be many reasons why a child refuses contact with another adult or with another child. This should be respected. Children should always feel that they can talk to their parents about this issue.



The hand in the book is Kiko’s friend. Adults are there to help children in their daily lives. Preventing sexual violence is first and foremost the adult’s responsibility and it is important to avoid putting all the burden on children’s shoulders.

5. Other helpful hints to accompany The Underwear Rule

Reporting and disclosure

Children need to be instructed about adults who can be part of their safety network. They should be encouraged to select adults whom they can trust, are available and ready to listen and help. Only one member of the safety network should live with the child; the other should live outside the immediate family circle. Children should know how to seek help from such a trust network.

Known perpetrators

In most cases the perpetrator is someone known to the child. It is especially difficult for young children to understand that someone who knows them could abuse them. Keep in mind the grooming process that abusers use to win the trust of children. Informing parents regularly about someone who gives gifts, asks to keep secrets or tries to spend time alone with a child must be a set rule in the house.

Unknown perpetrators

In some cases the perpetrator is a stranger. Teach your child simple rules about contact with strangers: never get into a car with a stranger, never accept gifts or invitations from a stranger.

Help

Children should know that there are professionals that can be particularly helpful (teachers, social workers, ombudspersons, physicians, the school psychologist, the police) and that there are help lines that children can call to seek advice.

Why The Underwear Rule?

About one in five children falls victim to some form of sexual abuse and violence. It happens to children of every gender, every age, every skin colour, every social class and every religion. The perpetrator is often someone the child knows and trusts. The perpetrator can also be a child.

You can help prevent this happening to your child.

Good communication with children is the key. It implies openness, determination, straightforwardness and a friendly, non-intimidating atmosphere.

The Underwear Rule can help you with this.

A child is never too young to be taught The Underwear Rule because abuse can happen at every age. If you find it uncomfortable to talk about this subject with your child, please remember that it is probably more difficult for you as an adult than it is for a child.

What to do if you suspect abuse?

When you suspect your child has been abused, it is very important not to be angry with your child. Do not make your child feel as if they have done something wrong. Do not interrogate the child. You could ask what may have happened, when and with whom, but do not ask why it happened. Try not to be upset in front of your child. Children can easily feel guilty and may hold back information. Try not to jump to conclusions based on little or unclear information. Reassure your child that you will do something about it, and contact someone who could help, like a psychologist, child care specialist, doctor, social worker or the police. In some countries special helplines and centres responsible for helping child victims of sexual violence have been set up. They can also guide you and should be contacted when a child is a possible victim of sexual violence.

Where to find material and information?

The Council of Europe has developed material to help parents teach the Underwear Rule. It includes:

- a TV spot (an animated cartoon)
- a book that parents can read to their children aged 3-7
- posters and postcards

All this material can be downloaded at www.underwearrule.org
The Underwear Rule is part of the Council of Europe «One in Five» campaign to stop sexual violence against children. You can learn more about the other prevention and protection measures that we promote at: www.coe.int/oneinfive



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