



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

Characteristics of Child Sexual Offenders

Most people have a hard time thinking and talking about child sexual abuse, but if we're going to prevent it, we must all think, talk, and take action about it. The Keeping Kids Safe series was created to help parents and primary caregivers learn concrete ways to keep children and teens safe from sexual abuse. The series introduces key concepts and age-appropriate ideas and activities for protecting the children you love and helping them learn and build skills and knowledge that will reduce their risk of being victimized.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse is defined as an adult or older child's sexual contact with a child, which may or may not involve physical contact. Sexual abuse can include things such as intercourse or sex of any kind, sexual touching, exhibitionism, sex trafficking, or owning or producing child pornography (Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, n.d.).

Child sexual abuse is a pervasive issue in the United States and the world. It is a threat to the wellness of a child's physical, emotional, and psychological safety and can lead to long-term emotional, psychological, or behavioral problems.

PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

While the characteristics of child sexual offenders can vary greatly, there are two important things to note:

- **A single child sexual offender “profile” does not exist.** Offenders are diverse in terms of background, education, religion, ethnic heritage, sexual orientation, and age.
- **Offenders are often known to their victims.** Child sexual offenders are commonly thought to be strangers who act out against random children. In most cases, however, the offender has some sort of relationship with their victim ranging from a close relative to an acquaintance.

Minding Our Language

In this series of fact sheets, we have chosen to use the inclusive words *they*, *their*, and *them* as singular, nongendered pronouns.

Families and parents come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A *family* may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. *Parents* may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else.

When we use the words *family* and *parent* in this fact sheet, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.





CHARACTERISTICS OF OFFENDERS

While there is no distinct, complete, or accurate description of a child sexual offender, research shows some traits that may be more common in sexual offenders (Institut National de Santé Publique Québec, n.d.; Arévalo et al., 2014). The following list of characteristics is not exhaustive. In addition, just because one or more of these characteristics is true for an individual, it does not mean they are a sexual predator, nor does it make them more likely to offend against children. This is simply a list, gathered from research of common characteristics found in individuals who have been identified as perpetrators.

Research shows that child sexual offenders may exhibit a variety of characteristics. They may be more likely to:

- Experience depression or low self-esteem.
- Struggle with loneliness, social anxiety, or poor social skills.
- Experience feelings of powerlessness.
- Struggle with alcoholism.
- Lack empathy.
- Have passive personalities.
- Have a fear of intimacy
- Have strained, poor, or lack meaningful relationships with adults.
- Move or relocate frequently.
- Have a history of poor parent-child relationships.
- Have a history of being sexually abused as a child or having experienced other forms of abuse or neglect. (However, not everyone who has been sexually abused will abuse other people.)
- Often not have a criminal background.
- Relate or feel they relate better to children than adults.
- Seek out multiple opportunities to engage with youth.
- Rationalize their abuse as actually helping or protecting a child.
- Put themselves in places and situations where youth are present. (Offenders may frequent an arcade or join a social media site or gaming platform where they will regularly be engaging with youth on a peer level.)

(Institut National de Santé Publique Québec, n.d.; Arévalo et al., 2014)





EQUIP YOUR CHILD TO LEAD THE BEST LIFE POSSIBLE

Most parents' goals include keeping their kids safe and equipping them to lead the best lives possible. This can seem like a daunting task. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention, stay vigilant, be actively involved in their lives, and make informed decisions about things that could affect their safety. Even if these efforts seem scary or overwhelming, being prepared and vigilant are key steps in both protecting your child and helping them build the skills and competencies that will help them stay safe.

This does not mean that you must prevent your child from going anywhere and from doing absolutely everything. It is a reminder, instead, to use common sense, pay close attention to the people and events around your child, set appropriate boundaries, and stay tuned in. You can do a lot of things to protect your child that shouldn't prevent you and your child from living and enjoying the world around you.

REFERENCES

Arévalo, E., Chavira, D., Cooper, B., & Smith, M. (2014). *SAFE (Screening applicants for effectiveness): Guidelines to prevent child molestation in mentoring and youth-serving organizations*. Friends for Youth, Inc.

Institut National de Santé Publique Québec. (n.d.). *Perpetrators*.
<https://www.inspq.qc.ca/en/sexual-assault/understanding/perpetrators>

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network. (n.d.). *Child sexual abuse*.
<https://www.rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse>

FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about keeping kids safe, check out these other Michigan State University Extension resources:

- **Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming and Fair Environments** (<https://bit.ly/36CwUk7>)—The Be SAFE curriculum is designed to help young people aged 11 to 14 and adults work in partnership to create environments that are physically and emotionally safe. It draws from extensive research from a variety of key disciplines, as well as from evidence-based bullying prevention programs. Be SAFE includes engaging activities that promote social and emotional learning and development, address and prevent bullying, and foster positive relationships with peers and adults. Designed for use in out-of-school time settings (such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Scouts, and after-school programs), Be SAFE also applies to middle school settings.
- **Keeping Kids Safe series** (<https://bit.ly/3jG8JFo>)—The fact sheets in this series are designed for parents and adults who work with kids from birth to age 17. They cover issues related to body ownership, boundaries, and safety; consent; identifying and communicating about feelings; monitoring and limiting technology use; sharing about kids on social media; and recognizing and preventing grooming by child sexual predators. There are currently eight titles in the series:





- Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 0 to 5: <https://bit.ly/3zLjmhG>
- Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 6 to 11: <https://bit.ly/3f8ecEH>
- Keeping Kids Safe: Ages 12 to 17: <https://bit.ly/3zRbWJB>
- Keeping Kids Safe: The Downside to “Sharenting” on Social Media: <https://bit.ly/3f9toBI>
- Keeping Kids Safe: Preventing Grooming by Child Sexual Predators: <https://bit.ly/3ib4vXZ>
- Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Children: <https://bit.ly/3BWYRFc>
- Keeping Kids Safe: How Child Sexual Predators Groom Adults, Families, and Communities: <https://bit.ly/3f8F7jM>
- Keeping Youth Safe Virtually: Best Practices: <https://bit.ly/2Vl9Cvr>

These resources also contain helpful information on keeping kids safe:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). *Family media plan*. <https://bit.ly/3iE9Wf1>
- Darkness to Light. (n.d.). *Resources*. <https://www.d2l.org/resources/>
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2018). *Preventing child sexual abuse resources*. <https://bit.ly/34zyAYW>

Acknowledgments

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