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Teaching your children about sexual abuse

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Reporter: Katherine Rufener

In light of the recent scandal at Penn State, now is a good time to think about how you would handle witnessing sexual abuse and how to watch for warning signs in your own children.

Many of us were taught these lessons in school and many of your children may already be learning them: good touch, bad touch and how to tell the difference.

St. Joseph County schools use a program called "Little Bear" through SOS that teaches kids the difference between appropriate affection and inappropriate touching or language.

It can be an uncomfortable subject to talk to your kids or teenagers about, but there are ways to make it easier.

Director of the Family Justice Center Sareen Dale says it's important to have a conversation about what to do if your children feel uncomfortable around someone and tell them that in some cases, it is okay to tell an adult no.

"If you frame it from a perspective of safety, then it is no different from fire safety or stranger safety ... any part covered by your bathing suit is a non-threatening way to put it," Dale said.

The reported number of sexual abuse cases are down from past years. In fact, the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire recently completed a study that shows child molestation has decreased 61 percent from 1992 to 2009. However, the current statistics are still startling.

"One in three girls and one in five boys will be a victim of some kind of, some unwanted sexual advance before they turn 18," Dale said.

So how can you tell if your child may be suffering from sexual abuse?

First, trust whatever feelings you get about the situation. "If you feel that something isn't right, think about it. Take action on it. Don't just ignore those feelings. They're there for a reason," Dale urged.

Look for warning signs. Your child may have lost interest in things they normally would like. They may show physical signs or be frightened of a particular person or place.

If you witness a child being abused, take action immediately. In fact, you're required by law to report the abuse to law enforcement or the Department of Child Services. You can even leave an anonymous tip if you choose. The Department of Child Services' number is 1-800-800-5556.

And with the recent media coverage of the Penn State scandal, now is the time to talk to your kids.

"They are probably hearing at least some of what's going on," SOS Project Coordinator Becky Callender said. "... whether you think they are, or not."

To learn more about preventing sexual abuse, click on the Big Red Bar.