#netsmart

A handbook for grown-ups on how to protect children from sexual abuse on the internet

Save the Children
Sweden

The internet has become a natural part of children's everyday lives - a place where they play, meet friends and learn many new things. Through the internet, the outside world has become more accessible for children, -but at the same time, children have become more accessible for the outside world. Wherever children are, there will also be people who want to make contact with them for sexual purposes, who will violate children's integrity and commit serious acts of abuse. Such crimes are becoming more and more common - and increasingly serious.

For parents and other significant adults who live or work close to children, it may seem difficult, even impossible, to keep up with what our children do online and thereby difficult to know how to protect them. But there are many ways of supporting and guiding children on the internet so as to prevent them from getting hurt or into trouble.

Basically, it's all about sharing children's activities on the internet with them. It should be just as natural to ask them "How were things on the internet today?" as asking how football practice was or how things were at school.

This handbook is a compilation of advice from child psychologists and the police and also the personal narratives of people who have been subjected to abuse. We hope this book will make it easier for adults to talk to children about the risks of the internet. We also hope it will inspire you and help you to be part of children's everyday activities on the internet.

The more we know, the more we are involved, the more we talk about the sexual abuse of children that happens on the internet, the better we will be able to protect our children.

Elisabeth Dahlin
Secretary General, Save the Children Sweden

Children and the internet

Essentially, it's a natural and positive thing that children want to communicate with other people on the internet. Online is a fantastic place to find new friends and make contacts.
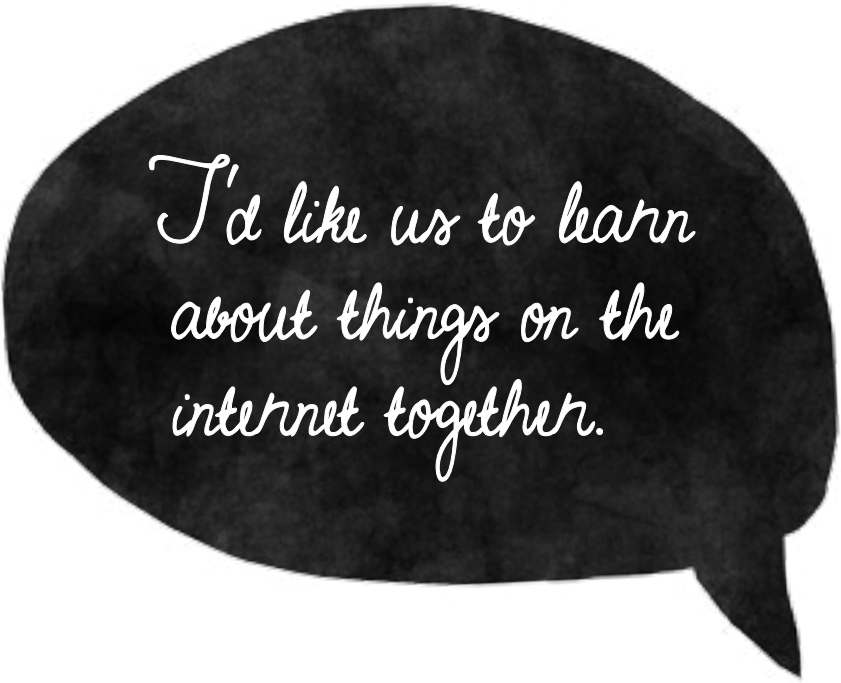
But parents and other significant adults - and the children themselves - need to be aware that the internet also implies risks. We need to be especially aware that there are people who try to make contact with children for sexual purposes and who like to frequent the websites that are popular among them. Children who have difficulty assessing contacts, who suffer mental ill-health or who have insufficient social support are especially vulnerable. At the same time, we know that any child can be subjected to abuse on the internet.

We might find it difficult to talk to children about what they do or who they meet on the internet, especially because children are often more knowledgeable than adults and sometimes use expressions and abbreviations that we don't understand. But it's not a matter of being an expert - it's more a question of establishing a relationship where talking about the internet is as natural as talking about everything else that happens in everyday life.

We would never just let our children loose in a city. In effect, the same principle should apply for the internet. Even if the internet is a digital world, it is made up of and populated by real people.

Which friends did you meet on the internet today?

I'd like us to learn about things on the internet together.

Selfie esteem

Incidents, contacts and relations in the digital world form a child's identity and self-esteem, in the same way as in real life. A new variant of the term self-esteem has been coined: **selfie esteem**. This term describes the way we build up self-confidence and self-esteem through the feedback we get on the internet when we post and share photos. Through explicit feedback in the form of number of likes, followers and comments, from a very early age, children get affirmation that is hard to match in the real world. This also means children adapt to fit in with the prevailing norm for photos, for instance, by posing in a certain way to get more likes.

Affirmation is a human need and it works like psychological oxygen for our brains, no matter how old we are. This need is exploited by people who use the internet to look for children for sexual purposes. They frequent the places where children are and know how to exploit the desire for affirmation from other people that all humans have.

Talking about selfie esteem from this perspective could be an easier way of discussing the matter with children instead of setting up bans and boundaries. Parents and other significant adults will always serve as an example for children and often, it's not what you say but what you do that children copy.

Talk to the child and ask questions like: What does a like actually mean? What does it feel like if you don't get any likes? Which photos do we post and who actually sees them? Try asking yourself the same questions! This can be a good way of understanding children better.

Sexual abuse
on the internet

What is sexual abuse on the internet?
Sexual violation and abuse against children means any form of sexual act forced upon a child by another person. Abuse can be categorised as either physical or non-physical. Much of the abuse that takes place on the internet starts off as being non-physical but through blackmail and threats, later becomes physical. One example of non-physical abuse is when a child is told to pose in front of a webcam. Sometimes things can go so far that children are forced to physically abuse themselves while the perpetrator watches. This is often called virtual rape so as to distinguish it from physical rape.

What does grooming mean?
The activity of becoming friends with a child, especially over the internet, in order to try to persuade the child to have a sexual relationship. In many countries, grooming is a criminal act.

> No matter whether abuse is physical or non-physical, the child in question is a victim of serious sexual violation and acts of this kind are criminal offences. The consequences for the child are the same, no matter whether the abuse took place on the internet or not.

How common is this?
Data from different countries show that the number of reports of exploitation of children for sexual posing has increased dramatically and that the crimes reported to the police are only a small proportion of all the crimes committed. Although the exact number is unknown, millions of child abuse images are estimated to be circulating on the internet. These are images that involve the representation of a child engaged in real or simulated activities. When it comes to the cases of sexual abuse of children that are reported to the police, there are major gender differences. In most cases, the victim is a girl and the perpetrator a man. However, there are many indications that fewer cases of sexual violence against boys are reported to the police and comparable data on forced sexual intercourse and other forced sexual acts among boys are only available for a very small number of countries.

How does it happen?
Groomers seek out places on the internet which they know are used by many children and they often pretend to be someone else and uses false names and profile pictures. The first contact usually takes place in a chat room or some similar social forum. After that, the groomer often tries to move the conversation to a more personal place, often with a webcam, and in that way gain more freedom of action and access to private information such as the child's address, telephone number, friends and family. A groomer often tries to build up a relationship and trust by pretending to have similar interests. Usually, the initial contact is positive and affirmative but with subtle manipulation and unspoken threats; then it changes and takes on a sexual nature.

The internet also enables the perpetrator to share photos of children.

I'm really happy you showed me this!

Young children

The younger a child is, the easier it is for adults to create prerequisites for safe and positive use of the internet. That's why it's important to sit next to children and get involved as soon as they start to discover games, films and all the other interesting things on a smartphone, tablet or computer. For many children, this starts when they are just two years old.

Most adults agree that television should not be used as a babysitter. We should have the same attitude when it comes to tablets and mobiles. In the same way that we don't let our children walk around alone in a city, we mustn't let them out alone on the internet. By taking an interest and being involved, we can teach our children that the internet is something we share with them. By asking questions and making comments, we can show that it's natural to talk about what's happening on the screen and it lays the foundation for a positive and open dialogue when the child gets older. Quite simply, it will make it easier and more natural for children to talk about their experiences - both positive and negative - on the internet if adults share their virtual world.

A good way of sharing the internet is to choose games, apps and films together with children, in the same way that we choose a goodnight story at bedtime. Just like when we read a storybook together, we can sit together in front of the screen and make it a time to feel safe and snug. Let children show and talk to you about what's going on in the game or film, and show them that you are interested and want to learn more about it. When they ask for help to read or navigate on the screen, we should encourage them: "That's good you ask" or "I'm really happy you showed me this!" By doing so, we will reinforce positive internet behaviour which we want our children to continue with when they start school and later on during their teen years. Children learn by doing things the right way!

How do children get caught up in that sort of contact?
It can be difficult for an adult to understand how a child can get caught up in such destructive contact. The perpetrator is often subtle and will try out different strategies. One common a method used is to get children to send a photo or film of themselves which is later used as blackmail when the pepetrator threatens to spread the picture to friends and family. Even after sending just one picture, many children feel shameful and guilty which stops them from talking about it and this is something the perpetrator is very aware of. The child gets caught in a kind of "shame trap".

At the same time, we must remember that children are naturally inquisitive and are curious to explore sex and sexuality, something that often starts much earlier than adults might hope. The child's own curiosity - i.e. the child taking the initiative to make contact - often gives rise to feelings of guilt and shame which makes it harder to ask for help.

Is the child displaying any warning signs that you should notice?
The most important thing for parents and other adults is to be perceptive and notice changes in a child's wellbeing and behaviour. Different sleeping or eating habits, not going to school or leisure activities, or mood swings are some examples. But in some cases, the child gives no indication at all that something is wrong. It's important to be aware that there is no universal indication given by all children who are subjected to sexual abuse on the internet. Ask the child if you are worried and don't just ask once. Be patient, don't go away, show you are interested - but try to do so on the child's terms.

Be involved when children use the internet. By showing our interest, we teach children that the internet is something we share with them.

When children reach the age of 4 or 5, we can start to talk about the risks of the internet - that there are people out there who are not honest, who pretend to be someone else, who want to do ''bad things''. But it's important not to frighten children. Things that trigger fear also trigger curiosity. The best way to talk to children about difficult and dangerous topics is to be objective and not load the words with our own fears. For example, you can say:

''There are people on the internet who pretend to be nice but who are dishonest and want to harm children''.

''I want us to explore the internet together, in the same way as I hold your hand when we cross a street. This is to protect and teach you about the internet so that later, when you are older, you can find your way around yourself and be sure which people you can and can't have contact with''.

But even if you give warnings and talk about risks, the best way to help children of pre-school age is for them to use the internet together with an adult. That enables us to give proper guidance and prevent their getting into trouble later on in life

- Try not to use a tablet as a babysitter. Instead, let it be something that you and the child explore together.

- Take an active role when your child chooses apps, games and films so as to build up a feeling of togetherness in front of the screen.

- Encourage children to include you in their internet activities.

- Talk about the risks without frightening the child. Fear can trigger curiosity.

Good and bad secrets

One good piece of advice is to teach small children the difference between good and bad secrets. Presents you receive at special occasions, such as celebrating your birthday or Eid are examples of good secrets - these are things that make people happy. You don't tell other people about good secrets. Bad secrets are things that upset you or give you a stomach ache. You are allowed to tell people about bad secrets - even if someone has said you mustn't.

Talking about good and bad secrets is one way of getting children to talk about unpleasant things they have experienced - either on the internet or in real life.

Children of school age

Once children have moved on from preschool, they enter a wider world with many new impressions and contacts, and this applies to both the internet and real life. For children who have learned early on to share their everyday activities on the internet with adults, it's natural to continue to do so during their school years.

Even though children become more independent, can read for themselves on the screen, and are sometimes better at technology than adults, they must understand that we care about what they do and who they have contact with. Many children are active on social media and chat with other people through games, from as early as the age of seven, making it even more important to have an adults hand to hold on to.

In the same way as we ask our children how things were at school or at football practice, we can ask them questions about their day on the internet. "What was it like on the internet today?" or "Which friends did you meet on the internet today?"

Another way of opening up a conversation is to ask children for help and let them be the experts: "Do you think I can post this picture?" "Can I write this?" or "What do I do if someone I don't know contacts me?" By asking that sort of questions, we teach children to think about the flow of information, pictures and people that are on the internet and to understand that this flow doesn't just happen "automatically" - it's something we decide ourselves and must control. We show children that we have internet boundaries and help them understand that they have boundaries too.

When we talk to children, we must make it clear that there are people on the internet who want to harm children and that not everyone is the person they make themselves out to be. In the same natural way that we warn children about strangers on the street, we must warn them about people they don't know in the digital world.

Explain that it's difficult to know on the internet who is good and who is bad and that it's impossible to be sure who is sitting in front of the other screen - a picture is just a picture. Explain that anyone can use another person's name or photo so as to hide their real identity. Take the opportunity to tell children that photos can be spread on the internet at the speed of lightning and that they mustn't post or send photos of themselves - or anyone else - without being sure that it's all right to do so and that it feels ok.
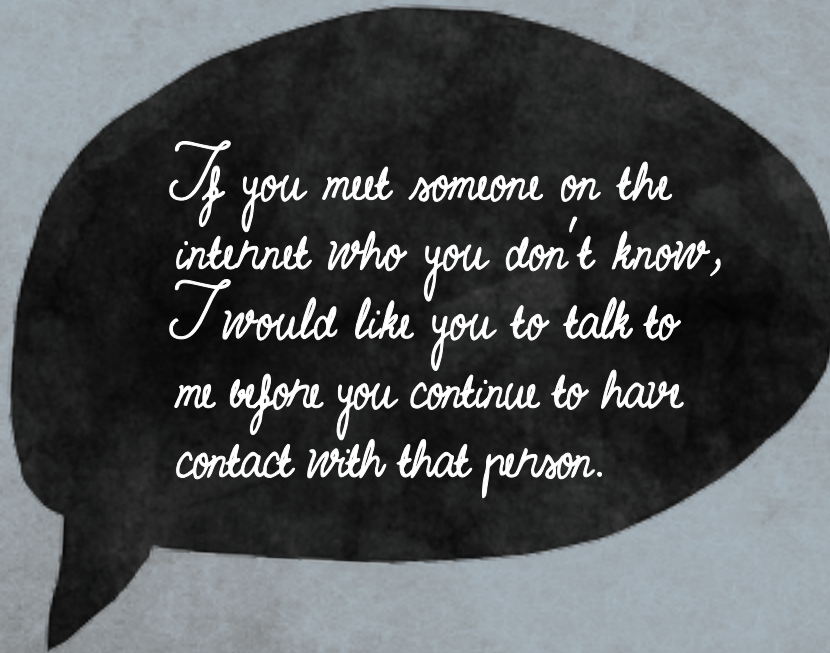
But banning things is seldom the most effective method. It's better to say: "If you meet someone on the internet who you don't know, I would like you to talk to me first before you continue to have contact with that person". A good opportunity to bring up these issues is when there are reports in the media about sexual abuse on the internet. It can feel more natural then.

Whether the child is ready to talk in more concrete terms about sexual abuse on the internet depends on age and personal maturity. It can be hard for very young children to grasp what you're saying while it is easier for older children who have learnt about the human body and sexual development to understand what it's all about. Irrespective of age and maturity, it's important to teach children things like "You always have the right to say no on the internet" and "You must say no if something you don't like happens".

Another way of protecting children of school age is to teach them never to give out their full name, address and telephone number when they are on chat sites or when setting up an account on social media. Because children on the whole are honest, they tend to fill in all the information that is requested. This is an area where parents and other significant adults can help them to think differently. You can also remind children that a picture on the internet won't go away simply because they remove it themselves; it may have been saved by other people and can then remain on the internet forever.

It could also be a good idea to talk to your child's school, after-school club and sports clubs about their policy for publishing names and photos on the internet. The more information there is on the internet, the easier it is for perpetrators to deceive and exploit children.

> *If you meet someone on the internet who you don't know, I would like you to talk to me before you continue to have contact with that person.*

- Ask children what's happened or what is happening on the internet, just like you ask questions about other aspects of their everyday life.

- Ask your child for advice about how you should behave or act on the internet. This can start up a conversation and/or make your child begin to think.

- Explain to the child that people who want to harm children often pretend to be someone else, a person with a false name and profile picture.

- Talk to children about not posting or sending pictures of themselves if they aren't happy about doing so.

- Teach children never to give out information such as name, telephone number and address on chat sites or social media.

Teenagers

Just as with younger children, we need to show teenagers that we care about what they do and who they meet on the internet. Ask them "How were things on the internet today?" just like you ask about their day at school. Try to ask open questions that will trigger a conservation with the child. But we can't expect long, detailed answers - and we just need to accept that. Teenagers are often busy creating their own lives and they may not want to share their experiences with adults.

Even if you as a parent or significant adult meet some resistance, it's important to keep on asking and showing them you are interested. Don't be afraid to nag. We mustn't forget that the teen years is a period when children still need our support and involvement in their lives and on the internet. It's during these years - when their sexuality is forming

and they have a strong need to be noticed and liked - that children are at greatest risk of being subjected to abuse on the internet. Perpetrators are very aware of teenagers' need for affirmation and they exploit that when they make contact on the internet, through for example, flattery and positive comments about the child's appearance.

Being curious and exploring new areas is a natural part of a child's development. We must be aware that it is not always the children who are contacted by someone; sometimes they themselves actively look for new and "exciting" contacts on the internet. We also need to have a more nuanced picture of victims and perpetrators and forget about the notion of a "dirty old man". The perpetrator can just as easily be someone of their own age.
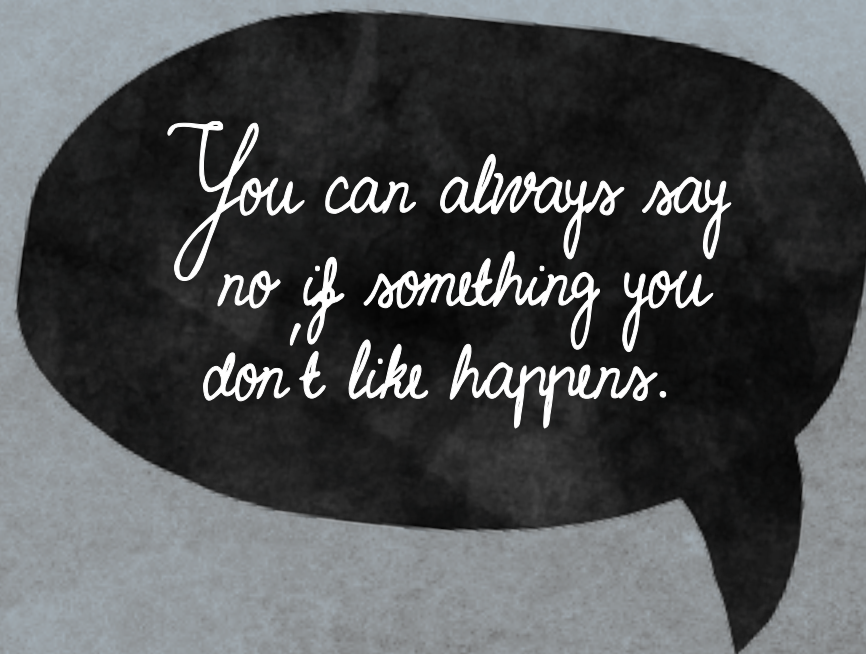
Many teenagers are aware of the risks but it is still hard for them to link the matter to themselves and their own contacts. Explain that there may be people they have contact with on the internet who are not the persons they pretend to be - it could

be anyone at all hiding behind a name or a photo. Talk about boundaries, say that a no always means no, and that they always have the right to drop a contact if things don't feel right. Tell your teenagers that they don't have to give their name, send photos or show themselves via a webcam. One useful piece of advice is never to turn on their webcam until the other person has done so.

Talking about sexual abuse on the internet in more concrete terms may feel tricky, both for adults and for teenagers. But the difficult or embarrassing part of the conversation may be of crucial significance for protecting the child from sexual violation and abuse. That is why we adults must take on the challenge, leave our comfort zones and talk about these difficult topics. A good time to talk about this matter, which may feel more natural, could be if it is mentioned in the media. Share your own thoughts and feelings about what you hear on the news, but try not to make the child feel guilty. Remind youngsters about their right to their own bodies: "You know that everyone has control over their own bodies and that you can say no? It's you who decides what is ok". Also remind them that no one is allowed to take photos or spread them without permission, that this is a crime and that it's never too late to talk about it, even if the child has already sent a picture or if something has already happened.

Feelings of shame, guilt and fear may stop the child from talking about unpleasant incidents on the internet, and this is something perpetrators exploit. That's why it's good if there's another adult the child can turn to. If you are a parent, try to think of someone else who could be of support to your teenager on the internet - an older sibling, a relative or some other significant adult who can ask the right questions in such a way that the child dares to open up. At the same time, remember that you could be that sort of adult for other children. Talk about the internet with other significant adults, both to help you with own your thoughts and to show that you are willing to talk to other people's children.

You can always say no if something you don't like happens.

• Carry on taking an interest in what the child does on the internet even if you meet with resistance. Don't be afraid to nag.

• Remind the child that he or she always has the right to say no and drop a contact if it doesn't feel right.

• Teach children that they don't have to give out any personal information, turn on the webcam or send pictures.

• Have the courage to talk about sexual abuse and violation even if it feels embarrassing and difficult.

• Find another significant adult who could be of support if your child doesn't dare or want to talk to you.
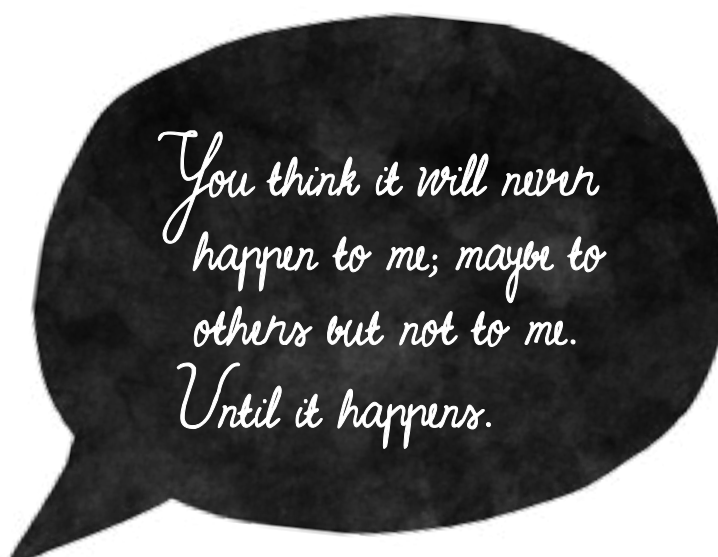
SCHOOL COUNCELOR

DAD

BIG SISTER

TEACHER

COACH

GRANDPA

Sara was subjected to sexual abuse on the internet

Sara says:

''I think for many people the internet is about affirmation. It's fun to get attention and be noticed by someone, and that's why it happens. He contacted me on a site where my friends hang out. At first, he gave me loads of compliments but pretty soon, he started to say things about me that weren't true, and then before long, he started threatening me, saying, ''You're fat, you're ugly, prove that you aren't! He said he would be satisfied and stop nagging if I sent a picture. But instead of stopping, he wanted us to start talking on Skype although he promised he wouldn't film me.

I blocked him but he found new ways of contacting me, from other accounts. By now, he had found out my full name, he knew where I lived and he had found a list of my sports team so he could see who my friends were. He said that he had added them on Facebook and started a chat where he was going to show the films of me. I tried to do some of the things he wanted me to do so he would stop threatening me. But I also refused; the things he wanted me to do to myself made me feel bad, both physically and emotionally. He was totally cold and didn't care what he did to me, and he made me do things to myself. I started having problems sleeping, I stopped going to school, I felt sick all the time. He kept making threats and saying the things he would do if I didn't turn on the webcam. Show your body, he said. I trusted him when he said it would be the last time; as a child, you trust adults. But it was never the last time. I wanted to report him but on the pages I found, it said that it was only a crime if you are under 15. I had just turned 15. So I thought it wasn't a crime and I didn't report him.

> You think it will never happen to me; maybe to others but not to me. Until it happens.

For me, the worst thing that could happen was that my family would find out - although now I think that would have been the best thing. But I was so ashamed. What I needed to know was that what had happened was not my fault, that it's a crime to do what he did to me. I want everyone to know that you must tell someone and ask for help from your mum, dad, the police or someone else. In the end, I contacted an organisation on the internet and told them what had happened. I wish I'd done that much earlier. You think: it will never happen to me; maybe to other people, but not to me. Until it happens.''

Sara's father says:

''Children don't want to let their parents down. I think it can be dangerous if parents say things like ''That mustn't happen to you'', because what if it's already happened and your child doesn't want to let you down by telling you. Instead you must talk to your child, be on the same websites as them, and so on. Talk about the internet right from the start, when they are small. What happened to my child made me so angry. But I wasn't angry with my daughter. I'm angry and disappointed in myself and it's important to make that clear. This happened in my family while we sat in an adjacent room and this is something that can happen to anyone. Be perceptive and watch out for any changes in your child's mood or behaviour and take your concerns seriously. There's nothing shameful about talking to other parents and asking them what they do. On the contrary, that protects our children.''

If you are worried

So what do you do if you suspect something is wrong? How do you draw the line between protecting children and breaching their integrity? Parents and adults can easily be overcome by anxiety. Here are a few common pitfalls to think about and avoid so as to encourage an open dialogue with the child.

Try not to anticipate events. Even if you suspect that some form of abuse has taken place, don't assume that is the case until you know for sure, both for your own sake and the child's own sake. If you fear the worst and then it turns out your suspicions were unfounded, the original problem can suddenly feel trivial. But the situation may still feel very serious for the child and as an adult, you need to listen and offer support.

Whatever is causing your worries, it's important to take the matter seriously. As an adult, it's sometimes your job to go against your child's will and be prepared for conflict. It's tempting to act like a police officer and start investigating the matter so as to dampen your anxiety. But instead of going straight from thoughts to action, it may be better to explain to the child what your thoughts are and what you would like to do before you actually do anything concrete, such as installing a firewall on the computer or creating a profile on a page where the child hangs out.

Talk about sexual abuse on the internet, explain that it's a crime to force a child to do things and make it clear that the child is not to be blamed for what has happened or is happening. Show that you care and that you are there for the child. You may not get any answers the first time you ask questions and maybe not the second time either. Children's feelings of guilt and shame often make it hard for them to talk about what has happened. It may be difficult for them to turn to a parent or another significant adult which is why it's important to show the child that there are other alternatives.

Remember that you as an adult don't need to carry your anxiety alone. Talking to other adults can be a great help. However, if you have happened to see a suspicious conversation or if your child has told you about an incident, it's important you report the matter. Sexual abuse of children is a crime and if there are suspicious circumstances, the police must investigate the matter.

Also read:
"Respect! My body! – A handbook for grown-ups on how to talk to children about body boundaries and sexual abuse."

This publication can be downloaded on Save the Children´s Resource Centre, togheter with other publications on how to prevent and respond to sexual violence.

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http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/respectmybody

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