

Protecting our children

How to engage them in conversation about safety and discussions of sexual abuse

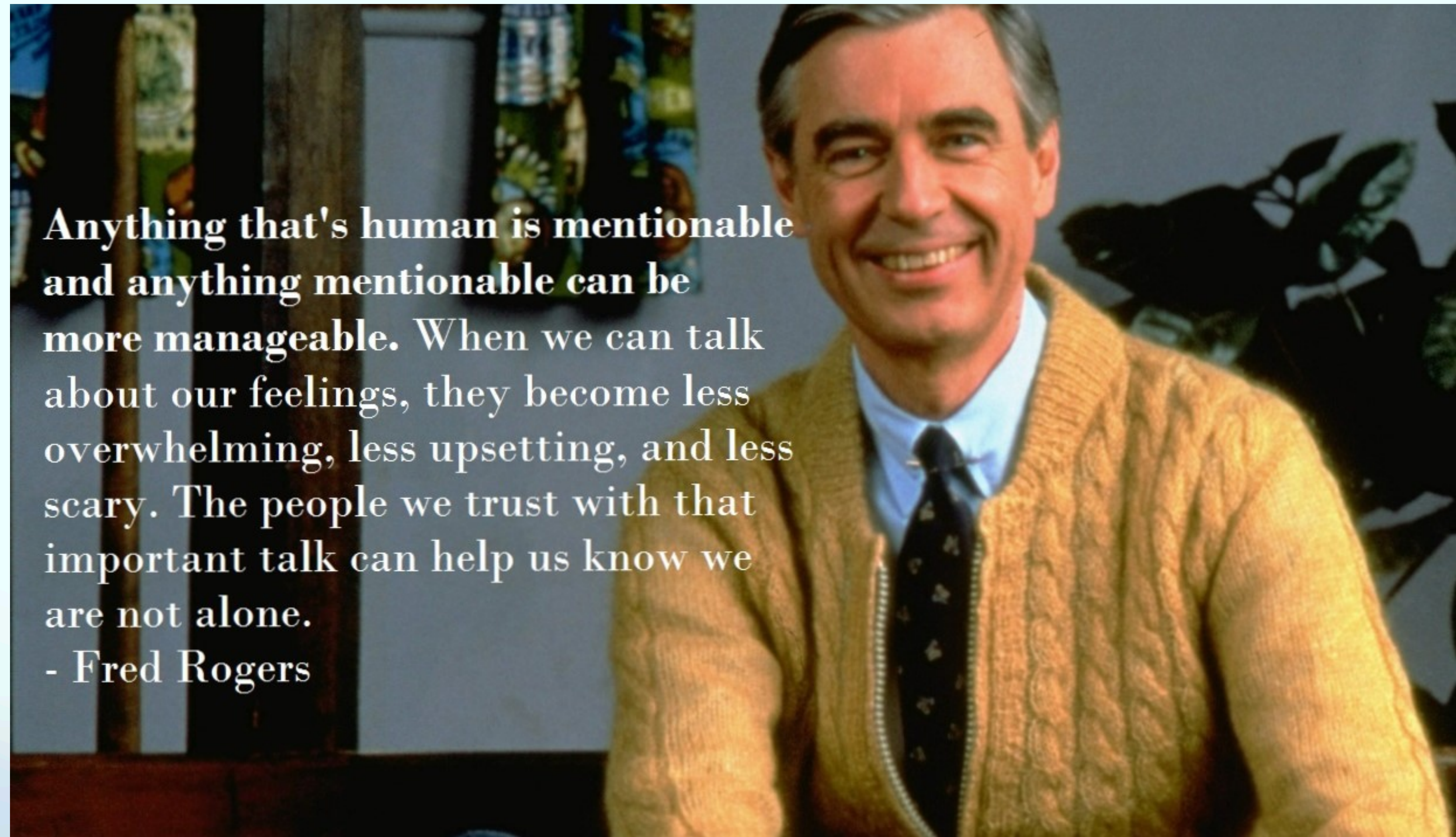
“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.’

James 1:5

“What is
mentionable is
manageable.”

We are often scared
to tell our children
harsh realities
about the world.

But when we
name things for
them, and they
know they are not
alone, it becomes
manageable.



**Anything that's human is mentionable
and anything mentionable can be
more manageable.** When we can talk
about our feelings, they become less
overwhelming, less upsetting, and less
scary. The people we trust with that
important talk can help us know we
are not alone.

- Fred Rogers

- This concept of what is mentionable is manageable is true for us as parents too.
- There is a wide range of emotions that you might be feeling - Fear, Anger, Grief, Betrayal, Anxiety, Shame, Regret, Sadness, etc. Notice what emotions you are feeling.
- It can be helpful to name of your fears. Name your worst case scenario fears, probable ones, unlikely ones - name them all. (Ex. Worst Case Scenario with Randall and Beth in This is Us).
- Then focus on the facts of what you know to be true in this present moment.
- Focus on what you can control.

Engaging your children around hard news

General Guidelines

- Maintain a calm, supportive presence. Be the non anxious presence in the room - your children read you well. Process your feelings as much as you can before telling them what is going on.
- Provide honest, factual information in an age appropriate way.
 - You are wanting to set the tone and pattern that your kids don't ever need to go outside of their relationship with you as the parent to find out the truth or important information. You want to be the source of their information, not their peers or the internet. Use clear, factual language without sharing unnecessary details.
- Acknowledge their feelings
 - Validate how they are feeling and let them know that it is ok to feel a range of different emotions. "It is ok to feel really confused and upset about this." Acknowledge how you feel as well.

Context Matters

- This conversation is going to look different for every family here. There are many factors to consider in how much you want to tell your children. Some of those factors are:
- **The ages of your children:** You do not need to say nearly as much to younger children as you do to older teenagers.
- **The nature of your family's and your child's relationship to the accused individual:** If your family had close relationships with the accused individual or you know he interacted with your children, you will likely say more. If your family was cordial but there was not a much of a relationship there, and you know he rarely interacted with your children, you can stay more general.
- How much you have already talked with your children about body safety, sexual abuse prevention, digital risks related to the internet, etc. Having had these conversations already might make the context easier to bring this up and allow you to be more direct more quickly.
- Your own **comfort level** for how much you want or feel your child needs to know. This doesn't have to be the same for everyone. It can also be different for siblings.

Defining terms:

Sexual Abuse, Pornography and Child Sexual Abuse Images (CSAI)

- The prevention training your church has adopted defines sexual abuse in this way:
 - **Sexual abuse** is any tricked, forced, manipulation or coerced sexual activity for the sexual pleasure of the abuser. Sexual abuse does not require touch and can be verbal or visual.
 - 1 in 4 females and 1 in 6 males will be sexually abused before the age of 18.
 - 66% of children who were sexually abused do not disclose until adulthood.
 - 90% of children who are sexually abused are done so by people they know and trust.
- The legal definition of **child pornography** is when someone records, photographs, films, develops, or duplicates material that contains a visual representation of a minor engaged in sexual activity. It is also referred to as child sexual exploitation.
- These images and videos document the exploitation and sexual abuse of children, and is also known as **Child Sexual Abuse Material or Images**.

Defining Terms - Grooming

- Grooming is a **pattern of behavior** that abusers use to gain access to children and youth.
 - 1. Abusers groom children by gaining access to the child, gaining their trust, isolating them, disarming barriers and preparing them for sexual interaction.
 - 2. Abusers groom the **gatekeepers** of the child (parents, family, friends, etc) by convincing them that they are helpful, trustworthy and kind so that they are seen as safe and welcomed in.
- **Typical Grooming Behaviors:** Gift giving; Making the child feel special/chosen and paying significant attention to them; Communicating like a peer rather than an adult; Attempts at repeated alone time with the child; Touching children and pushing physical boundaries (beginning as playful and becoming increasingly inappropriate and sexualized), etc

Point of Entry: Safety with Younger Children

- You might choose to not say much about the accused individual and this situation, and that is ok! Instead, you can introduce basic safety and sexual abuse prevention information to your child according to their age.
- Teach children the **anatomically correct name for their private parts**. Private parts are the areas on our body covered by a bathing suit. Name each private part for them. Age appropriate sexual education information builds on this. Most experts recommend providing a medical/technical explanation of sex around age 8. (Birds and the Bees resource talks about drip by drip - many small conversations).
- Teach **body safety rules**. These parts of our bodies are private and that means that no one is allowed to try to touch them, look at them or take pictures of them. You are not supposed to touch or look at other people's private parts. Name exceptions (like diaper changes, etc).
- Teach children **body autonomy**. 'Your body belongs to you. You never have to touch or show affection to anyone you don't want to.' This applies to family, friends, etc.
- Talk about the '**uh oh feeling**.' Name that sometimes, our body starts to realize that we feel uncomfortable with how someone makes us feel or is behaving in ways that don't feel ok to us. Come tell us if you feel this way.
- Talk about **Secrets v. Surprises**. It is never safe to keep secrets about private parts or touching. Surprises can be fun - like a party for a birthday, Secrets are not safe especially if someone asks you to keep a secret about looking at, touching or pictures of private parts.
- If someone tries to break the body safety rules, like other kids or any grown up, **come and tell us** right away. Offer reassurance that you will help, not be angry and will always believe them.

Point of Entry: Safety with Youth

- Everything we mentioned with younger children is foundational information for older children as well. Continuing to teach your children about body autonomy, sexual education information around puberty using anatomically correct language are all part of sexual abuse prevention at this age.
- **Digital Safety** becomes increasingly important. This is a huge topic that I am barely scratching the surface of this morning.
 - The concept of inappropriate content becomes more important. This is true of sexting & pornography, but also a lot of other content around self harm, eating disorders, etc.
 - It is so important that you communicate to you children that they will encounter inappropriate things online. We want our children to know that we WANT them to come to us when this happens. In order to feel safe doing that, communicate that they will not be in trouble for seeing something inappropriate.
 - Teach your children a firm boundary to **never share their personal information online**. It is best that they do not interact with anyone online that they don't know, teaching them that it is very easy for others to lie about who they are, their age, etc. People who don't tell the truth about who they are usually don't have safe intentions for interacting with you. Tell them it is never safe to meet up with someone who you have met online.
 - Whatever you put out into the internet can live on forever. You cannot take it back. According to a survey from 2016, 66% of teens and young adults have received a sexually explicit image and 41% have sent one.
 - The average age of first **pornography exposure** for boys is 8-9 years old. For girls it is 9-11 years old. Talk openly about what pornography is, the dangers of pornography and how it impacts our brains.

Research overwhelmingly shows that talking opening to children about sexual abuse prevention significantly increases the likelihood of them disclosing abuse if they experience it.

It helps them understand what abuse is, empowers them to speak up, and creates a safe trusting environment in which they can talk to their parents about hard or awkward things.

Point of Entry - Children

Talking about the accused individual with increasing levels of specificity

- Start with what you have already told them. If you haven't said anything yet, that is fine!
- "Last Sunday, you know that we learned some hard news about something that happened in the church. We told you that the accused individual who worked there was arrested because he did something wrong and inappropriate. Today we want to tell you a little more about what happened."
- We know that the accused individual was arrested because he had inappropriate pictures of children on his computer. (You can stop here if you want.) Those pictures showed children without their clothes on and showed their private parts. Taking or making pictures of private parts of children is not safe and is called sexual abuse.
- When the church found these pictures, they called the police. The police arrested the accused individual because what he did is a crime. Both the police and our church had to do everything they could to keep children safe.

- **CHECK IN:**

- Do you have any questions about what I just told you?
- I know that is a lot to hear. It feels like a lot to me and I have a lot of feelings about it. How are you feeling about what I just shared?
- We want to make sure that you know that taking pictures of private parts OR touching private parts is not safe or ok. If someone tries to see your private parts, tries to take pictures of them, or tries to touch your private parts, the most important thing to do is come tell us. We also want you to tell us if anyone tries to show you their private parts, pictures of their private parts or tries to get you to touch their private parts. We will always believe you and do everything we can to keep you safe.
- **If you are concerned about your child, ask directly.**
 - Was there ever a time where you felt uncomfortable around the accused individual?
 - Did the accused individual ever try to touch or see your private parts?

Point of Entry - Youth

Talking specifically about the accused individual with increasing levels of specificity

- A good entry point could be after the youth meeting tonight where they will be told in general terms what has happened.
- If you want them to know more specifically about the nature of the images and ask directly about their safety, begin by recapping what Spencer says or what you have already told them.
- 'We know now that the accused individual was arrested because he had inappropriate pictures of children on his computer. Those pictures showed children without their clothes on and showed their private parts. This is called child pornography and it is illegal and very unsafe. When the church found these pictures, they called the police.'
- You can decide the language you want to use. If you are uncomfortable with naming this as child pornography or sexual abuse, you don't have to use it. I am using it here because being vague about language can leave room for more confusion. We also know that if you don't engage your children around the topic of pornography generally, their peers will do it for you. If you have had conversations about pornography already, use that as a bridge here.
- Ask: Do you have any questions about what I just told you?
 - Answer honestly and let their questions guide you. It is ok to say, 'We don't know that yet.'

- Name their proximity to the accused individual
 - ‘As far as we know, you weren’t really around the accused individual very much. We still want to check in to see if he ever made you feel uncomfortable or was ever inappropriate with you.’
 - OR - ‘We know that you had interactions with the accused individual at church, and that he seemed to pay a lot of attention to you. Did he ever make you uncomfortable? I know it might feel awkward to talk about, but did he every to try to show you inappropriate pictures, take your picture, or touch you in a sexual way on your private parts?’
- CHECK IN: ‘Well that was intense! How are you feeling about all of this?’
- If they say nothing happened, its fine to give them an out at this point. Offer to watch an episode of their favorite show, or order take out and let them choose, etc.

How to respond if your child discloses something happened

- Listen and respond as calmly as possible. Try your best to not become overly emotional, panic or overreact.
- Be aware that children and teenagers often will give vague or partial disclosures. They are testing the waters sometimes to see how you will respond. Often they feel shame about what happened, or have been told lies by their abuser about what will happen if they do tell.
- Ask open ended questions: Can you tell me anything else about what happened? What happened next?
- Don't ask leading or highly specific questions that assume parts of what happened or put ideas or concepts in their head. Let them use their own words to tell you. This is not a fact finding mission.
- Reassure them that it is ok if they don't remember everything right now or want to tell everything right now. This is especially true if they start to shut down or withdraw.
- Name their courage and thank them for telling you. Tell them you believe them. Tell them it is not their fault that this happened.

- Do not promise that you will keep this information a secret.
- Pay attention to your child's capacity. If they seem done, wrap up the conversation. Normalize that they might not want to talk about it.
- DO predict for them what the next step will be.
- DO offer whatever care and comfort is normal for your relationship - affection, prayer, etc.
- Follow up with the care team here and report to law enforcement
- familysupportcommission@cgsonline.org

What do I do if my child shuts down?

- In Exodus, Hagar says to God, *'You are the one who sees me.'* Hagar was a slave, sold and given to Sarah, Abraham's wife so that she could have a son for Abraham. Hagar knew harm.
- We want our children to feel seen. 'Why is your face downcast?'
- If your child shuts down, name that. "It seems like this feels too hard for you to talk about right now. That is ok. Whatever you are feeling, we want to be a safe place for you. Why don't we take a break from talking about this right now. Let's check back in later."
- Shame, fear, exposure, avoidance all might be factors. Those are normal emotions for them to have.
- Be gentle and patient - consider what you need in moments like this.
- Pray that God will bring to light what needs to be known. Ask the Lord for wisdom to know how or when to circle back to the conversation.

Your words matter less than your presence.

You can fumble through these conversations and they can feel awkward and that is ok. You are laying the foundation that when hard things happen, you are their source for truth and for safety.

Tend to your own heart first.

There are many difficult emotions to tolerate, but the worst emotional experience is feeling like you have to tolerate difficult emotions alone.

What if he had images of my child?

- There are some in this community that might learn that the accused individual had sexualized images specifically of their child. This is devastating news for any parent.
- If you do learn that this is your child, there are other pieces to this conversation that you might need to have with them. You will have to choose if you feel like your child should know this. It is hard to predict how to do this without having more concrete information from the investigation.
- Know that the most important predictor of resiliency in children who have been abused is the presence of a supportive, believing caregiver. This is cause for great hope.
- Please don't walk this road by yourself. Reach out to the Family Support Commission or the pastors here to get additional support and guidance.

How to care for impacted families

- For families who have children impacted, it will matter to them how this is talked about. Speak about this situation in ways that protect their privacy and are sensitive to the vulnerability these families might be experiencing.
- It is natural to speculate and be curious, but try to resist doing so in a way that will feel like families are exposed. Let them know that you care and want to walk with them but let them offer the details they want you to know. Let them have control over who knows and what is known as much as possible.
- Try to express care without assuming how they might be feeling. There is a range of valid feelings families might feel - fear, sadness, anger, betrayal, exposed, shame, isolated, etc.
- I am praying that the harm is contained - that images were not distributed and that children were never sexually abused physically/in person.

The Lord will keep you from all harm - he will watch over your life;
The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and
forevermore.

Psalm 121:7-8



RESOURCES

NetSmartz®

Online safety program for children and families in grades K-12.

Empower

children to report unsafe behaviors or victimization

Engage

children to take an active role in solving problems safely

Encourage

children and adults in two-way conversations about safety and risky behaviors

