



Conversations with Children Imperative

by: Marilyn Van Derbur

There is a vitally important conversation that probably has never occurred to you. One of the most startling facts I have learned during the past 12 years of speaking, traveling, and reading thousands of survivor letters is how many older siblings are sexually violating younger siblings.

Research tells us that one out of three to four girls and one out of six boys will be sexually violated before the age of 18. The highest percentage are violated in their homes. Sibling incest is a serious issue that most of us have been unaware of. Just as a lock on a sliding door can help bring safety, there is something specific we can do to help keep our children safe from sibling abuse. But first we must understand the issue.

We cannot prevent what we do not understand

The estimates are that incest between siblings may be five times more common than paternal incest. Too many times I am told that parents did nothing because they said the abuse was just typical childhood behavior or they simply felt it was no big deal. Sometimes I hear "boys will be boys," as if boys can't be expected or taught to express their aggression or sexual feelings in a healthy, appropriate manner.

At what age do you believe most offenders sexually abuse? When they are 40 years old? 25 years old? At 18? The answer is 14 years old: 14-year-olds comprise the largest number of sex offenders of any age group! (Criminal Justice Source)

What can be done to keep your children safe?

Alerting and educating parents about the rampant sexual activity between siblings is one of the major reasons I wrote the book *Miss America By Day*. I don't know how to stop a man like my father, but I do know how to dramatically reduce sibling sexual activity. Since we now know how prevalent it is, it is our parental duty to do the things we recognize can help prevent this behavior.

One of the most effective ways of preventing sexual abuse among siblings is to talk about it. My urgent plea is that you sit down with all your children as soon as possible and talk to them about what is and is not appropriate behavior.

A mother in Ohio told me she couldn't talk to her daughter because she was only 8 years old. I told her that the average age a sibling is violated is 8.2 years. The most frequently reported age when the abuse began was 5 years old. (Sibling Abuse)

If you hear yourself going into denial thinking this could never happen to my son or daughter, please stop and realize, Yes, It could! I know now that it can happen in any family because most 13- and 14-year-old children don't comprehend the long-term consequences of acting out with children who are vulnerable. Many children are troubled by their sexual impulses and drives and need to be able to talk safely with adults about how to handle these strong feelings. It is up to us to teach our children-to talk about it.

Why you need to rethink your decision to have your teenager baby sit

Fascinating new research is coming out that gives us another reason for talking to our teenagers: We now know that teenagers often do not make the most responsible, reasoned decisions because this part of their brain is still developing. (Front line PBS)



The basic part of the brain that gives teenagers strategies and perhaps warns them of potential consequences isn't fully on board yet. This research reaffirms the importance of telling our children, in simple language, what is and is not acceptable behavior between siblings.

Ask your children questions

Do you know how your children feel about rape? For example, does your son believe there are certain circumstances in which rape is okay? Does your daughter think it is sometimes acceptable for a boy to rape her? You may be stunned by your children's responses, as thousands of other parents were, after reading their offspring's replies to a survey they took regarding sexual relationships.

Suggestions for how to begin conversations with children

After speaking in Binghamton, New York, at a black-tie fund raising dinner for a children's advocacy center, a patrician looking man came up to me and said, "Okay. You've convinced me that I should talk to my kids, but you're going to have to help me with what I say."

This is how I might begin a conversation if my daughter Jennifer were 11 or 12 years old today. Jennifer, I read something today that I could not believe. I had to read it again just to be sure I had read it correctly. It's about a survey of what children between the ages of 11 and 14 believe about sex. It's short. May I read it to you?

I would read each statistic and then ask, How do you think your friends would answer that? (Wait for an answer.) What are your thoughts? One example: Do you believe it's okay for a boy to rape a girl if they have been dating for more than six months? (You may be stunned by their responses.)

This survey is an excellent introduction into how your children think about these subjects. You might be making assumptions about their beliefs that are not true. What better way to plunge right into it than by using this survey? (Twenty percent of the girls and six percent of the boys taking the survey said they had been sexually abused.)

Parents know that kids need to hear the same messages over and over again. We have to tell them many times to put their dirty clothes in the hamper, not on the floor. Corporations know that the way to motivate customers to buy their products is to repeatedly capture their attention in order to sell them on why they want a particular product. And what are they willing to pay to do that? A 30-second commercial during the 2003 Super Bowl was \$2.2 million. That was for air time only. It can easily cost an additional million dollars to produce the commercial.

If a corporate sponsor is willing to spend \$2.2 million to have you hear the 30-second message they want to send, they must have validated how important words are. Most corporations will run the same ad over and over again until we say "It just keeps going and going and going" (Energizer Bunny) or "Just do it" (Nike). No advertiser thinks you are going to remember their image if you hear it only once.

Talking with children means sharing your values and involves continuous, repetitive discussions as different opportunities arise.

One question changed my life forever. It is a question every parent should ask every child

Where sibling abuse should be discussed with all children together, this conversation is a one-on-one: "Has anyone ever touched you in an uncomfortable way?" I know that only



a rare few children will answer yes to this question. Most will say no. But no doesn't always mean "no," even when children are asked a direct question. If, when your child says "no," you give a huge sigh of relief and indicate by word or gesture "oh, I am so glad," you are sending a dangerous message.

Your child may have just been testing how you would respond. If you express ineffable relief, he or she will be unlikely to ever tell you if something happens. Consider this response instead: If you ever do want to come and tell me something, just remember that we can always work things through together. Most kids don't tell because they feel ashamed. There is never anything to be ashamed of. I love you so much. There is nothing that could ever change that.

Whether your child is 5, 15, 25, 35, or 45 (I was 48 when I told my mother), do initiate the conversation. By asking that question, you may open a door for a discussion now or in the future. You have to ask; children don't tell.

Please talk with your children tonight. You will find your own way to express the thoughts. What is important is that you do it. Now!

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