

Communication Skills for Safety Education and Abuse Prevention

People with Down syndrome are vulnerable to abuse due to:

- challenges with learning and memory
- prevalence of attention seeking behaviours = vulnerable to manipulation
- reliance on paid helpers for physical needs
- increased isolation/ separation from peers
- learned helplessness and compliance due to medical treatments and therapies
- Infantilization and assumed disinterest in sexuality

People with Down syndrome are vulnerable to abuse and loss of property. Safety communication skills must be taught preventatively and can be done so systematically. For support, contact Andrea Lee at Andrea@dsrf.org, the Down Syndrome Resource Foundation's comprehensive sexual health educator.

Guidelines for Safety Communication:

Start young

Incorporate learning into daily routines

Aim for small and regular conversations

Use visual supports

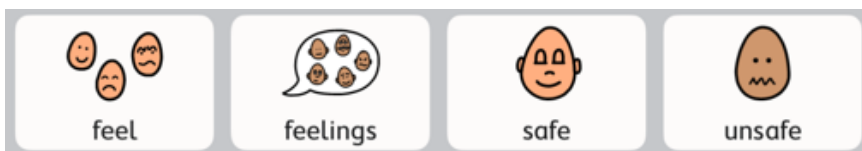
Concept One: What are my body parts?

Teach the anatomical names of all genitals. Practice this daily when working through toileting routines. People who know and can use the anatomical names are less likely to experience abuse. Make sure that anatomical names are included in the person's AAC device. Each detail about private parts must be taught (name, location, who can see/ touch).



Concept Two: What is safe vs. unsafe touch?

Use the descriptors of safe/unsafe touch but avoid descriptions of good/bad. Roleplay safe touch and relate these actions the word "safe". For example, high fives, being tucked into bed, or sitting on a parent's lap are examples of safe touch. Make sure that the words safe/unsafe are in the child's AAC. People who have strong concepts of safe/unsafe are more able to advocate for their own safety and refuse unsafe interactions.

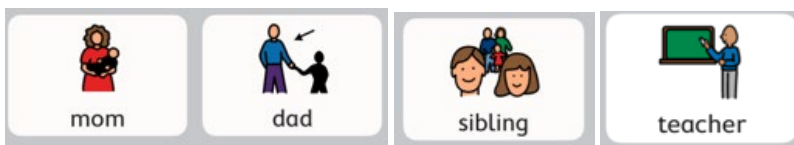


Concept Three: Who are my trusted adults?

The person must be able to name or otherwise identify each adult and peer that they interact with. All adults and peers should be included in the AAC device: this allows a person to report unsafe actions if they need to. Photos should be included whenever possible. Photo flash cards can be used if the child does not have an AAC device. People with developmental disabilities most often know the perpetrators of abuse when it occurs: the ability to identify people is a preventative safety skill.

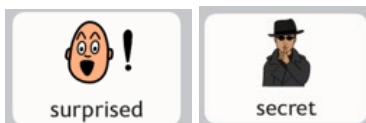


Work with the person to identify trusted adults. There should be at least one adult in the home, and one outside of the home, such as a counsellor or coach.



Concept Four: Surprises vs. Secrets

Both concepts involve withholding information. Surprises are short term (e.g. a birthday treat), and make everyone feel good. Secrets are indefinite, may make someone feel unsafe, and are used to prevent someone from getting in trouble. The concept of secrets is often used by abuse perpetrators to groom a vulnerable person and erode healthy boundaries. Explicitly teach these concepts. Do not allow secrets. Ensure that both of these words are in the child's AAC device.



Resources:

Websites:

- <https://www.dsrf.org/resources/information/relationships-sexuality/>
- <https://www.worththeconversation.com/>
- Where is the penis? Equipping AAC users- AAC in the cloud 2022

Books:

- Teaching Children with Down Syndrome about their bodies, boundaries, and sexuality topics. -T. Couwenhoven
- The girls' guide to growing up: choices and changes in the tween years- T.Couwenhoven
- The boys' guide to growing up: choices and changes during puberty – T. Couwenhoven