

# **RESPECT FOR YOU AND ME**

*Sexual Assault Prevention Strategies  
for Parents and Caregivers*

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Le Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions (COPA) is a not-for-profit agency with a long-standing and recognized commitment to fostering *safe, strong and free schools* in Ontario. COPA's wide range of practical, innovative and inspiring programs and multi-media resources are designed to reach out to all members of the school community: students of all ages, teachers, administrators and support staff, associated professionals, parents and guardians, community members and community workers.

These programs and resources are based on a coherent analysis and approach, recognizing that the principles of anti-oppression are fundamental to social change. COPA strives for the recognition and upholding of human rights—in particular, the rights of children and those who are marginalized.

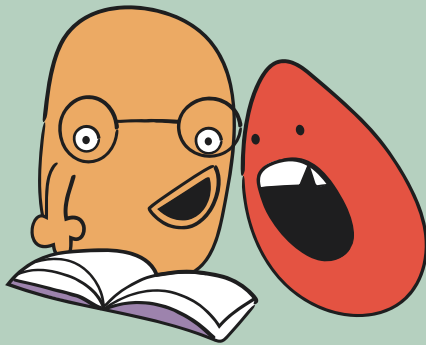
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Families come in all shapes and sizes and those who care for children can play different roles. We have tried to include everyone who helps care for our children. Usually, we use the words “parent” or “family member” to make sure this guide is about everyone who cares for our children. Whenever we use the word “parent” or “parents,” we also mean family members, caregivers and all guardians. And, finally, any time we use the word “children,” we mean children of all ages.

## INTRODUCTION

The family environment is where our children first learn. It fosters their development, sense of well-being and capacity to protect themselves from sexual violence. While children and young people under the age of 18 represent only 21% of the population, they make up 61% of victims of sexual offences reported to the police.<sup>1</sup> Girls are the most likely to be sexually assaulted and 47% of violent crimes committed against girls under the age of 12 are of a sexual nature.<sup>2</sup>

As parents, we can improve and support our children’s understanding of healthy relationships, so that they develop the tools needed to prevent sexual assault. We can analyze our own approach to assault prevention in order for this to happen. **A three step process will allow us to support our children in an open and informed way.**

### PERSONAL

1

Reflect on our own relationships and biases, as well as broader societal inequities to determine what factors enable child sexual assault.

### CHILD

2

Share our skills and abilities to help our children prevent, recognize and disclose sexual assault.

### COMMUNITY

3

Collaborate with school staff and engage community resources to provide consistent support.

Some of us have experienced sexual violence ourselves. We may have unhealed trauma and pain as a result. It is important to honour this part of our history and seek help as needed. **This will support us as we support our children.**

# WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

A sexual assault is not committed in one single way, following a specific pattern or in one set of circumstances. For example, the victim may or may not know the aggressor and the assault can be committed by one or more people.

## COMMON FORMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

- Catcalling
- Cyberharassment and exploitation
- Drug-facilitated sex
- Exhibitionism
- Incest
- Rape
- Sex with a minor
- Stalking
- Uninvited touching and sexual advances
- Voyeurism

Furthermore, the aggressor uses a combination of their physical, psychological and social power. **This imbalance of power is the common element linking all sexual assault.**

## ELEMENTS PRESENT

- Forced
- Power imbalance (gender, race, age, size, ability, etc.)
- Secretive
- Unwanted

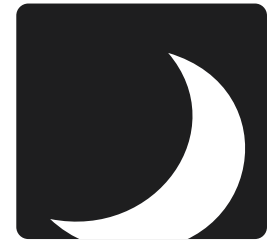
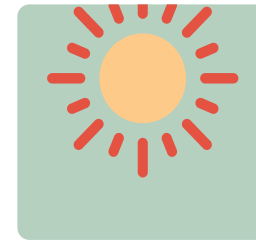
## TYPES OF FORCE

- Gestures and body language
- Implicit and explicit threats
- Implicit and explicit pressure
- Physical force
- Words

## SOCIALLY MARGINALIZED PEOPLES

- Black and racialized people
- Boys
- First Nations, Inuit and Métis people
- Girls and women
- Immigrant, refugee and undocumented people
- LGBTQ2S
- People with disabilities

Socially marginalized people are more vulnerable to sexual violence not because of inherent vulnerability, but because of structural and individual marginalization. People with multiple socially marginalized identities are at increased risk of violence and will experience violence at greater levels.



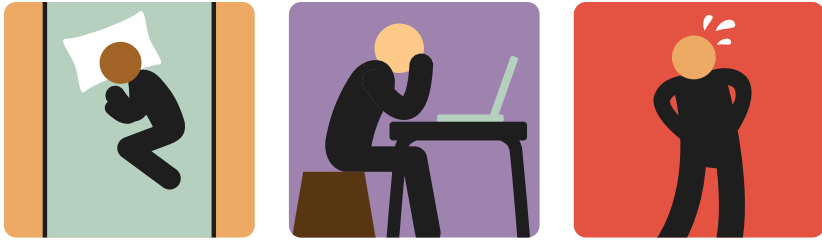
**A sexual assault can happen anytime.** Day or night.



**A sexual assault can happen anywhere.** In a familiar or unfamiliar home, at school, in a public space or even online. It can happen in all communities where there is oppression and inequity.



**A sexual assault can be committed by anybody.** A known aggressor such as a friend, acquaintance or caregiver, a teacher or coach; a person who has power from their social identity or identities; a person of any gender.



Sexual assaults have serious consequences for the people who experience them. The reaction to an assault is different from one person to another. **There is not one “normal” reaction to sexual assault.** The effects can be psychological, emotional, spiritual and/or physical. They can also be short- or long-term.

### IMPACT

- Anxiety or panic attacks, post-traumatic stress syndrome and other mental health issues
- Change in academic performance
- Change in behaviour or personality (such as social isolation, aggression, avoidance or passiveness)
- Fear, shame, guilt, self-blame, anger
- Intense emotions or lack of emotions, confusion, denial, disorientation
- Intrusive and unsettling memories and nightmares
- Physical injuries
- Problematic use of drugs or alcohol
- Sudden relationship problems
- Suicide, suicide attempt or suicidal ideation
- Stomachaches, headaches, eating disorders
- Trouble concentrating, sleeping problems
- Unexpected pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections

**Responsibility for sexual assault prevention too often rests on those who are most likely to experience it.** The single most effective prevention strategy is to readjust power imbalances. A society that considers everyone equal, regardless of sex, gender, race, age and ability, reduces vulnerability and prevents sexual assault.

## RAPE CULTURE

Sexual assault prevention is a community and societal responsibility. **Everyone has a role to play in prevention and intervention.** Sexual violence emerges out of collective conditions and beliefs that maintain power with certain social groups and marginalize others. A cycle of violence is created and then perpetuated, when negative beliefs, values and norms are passed from one generation to the next.

Sexist, misogynist, racist, homophobic and other discriminatory ideas, words and behaviours perpetuate rape culture that normalizes and minimizes sexual assault and violence. Establishing a culture of consent in our families and societies is a critical step in breaking this cycle of violence and secrecy. **A community approach involves the following key principles.**<sup>3</sup>

We can work with community members to **ADVOCATE** for the rights of children, and to fight against all forms of injustice. Parents' participation in school-offered violence prevention programs is vital to children's success.<sup>4</sup>

We develop our children's autonomy when we create opportunities to enhance their independence. The principal of **CHILD EMPOWERMENT** is critical to breaking down the beliefs and norms inherent in rape culture and helping children stand up for their own rights in the future.

Our children realize that they are not alone when they reach out to us or another trusted adult. We can continue to encourage this by letting them see us connect with family, friends and community professionals to form a **NETWORK OF SUPPORT** for both us and for our children.

## WHAT IS CONSENT?

Consent is at the foundation of all healthy relationships—especially those of a sexual or romantic nature. The principle of consent is the backbone of a flourishing society where sexual assault or any other form of violence is not tolerated.

Sexual assault includes all sexual contact or attention without consent. In a sexual assault, a person with more power than another uses that power to impose sexual contact or attention. In a healthy relationship, consent is an informed, non-coercive, explicit and authentic choice that is ongoing and can change as the activity, context or circumstances evolve. **Consent can also be taken back at any time.**<sup>5</sup>



Consent cannot be given if the aggressor abuses a position of trust, power or authority.



It cannot be given under pressure.



It cannot be taken from silence or the absence of refusal.



It cannot be given if the victim is unconscious or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

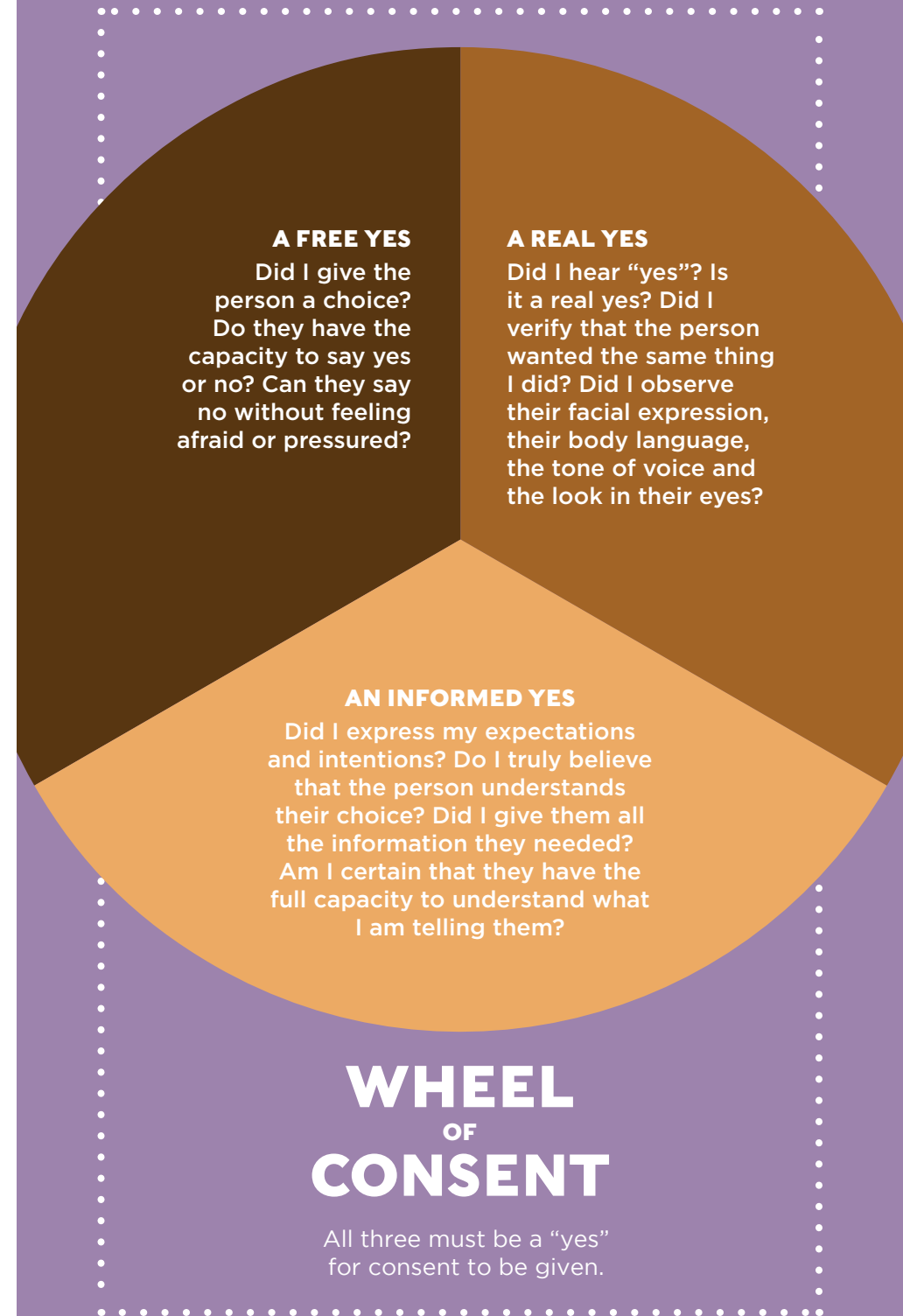


It cannot be assumed or implied.



It cannot be given if the child is under 16.\*

\*Consent can only be given under 16-years-old with close-in-age exceptions and if there is no preexisting relationship of power.



### A FREE YES

Did I give the person a choice? Do they have the capacity to say yes or no? Can they say no without feeling afraid or pressured?

### A REAL YES

Did I hear "yes"? Is it a real yes? Did I verify that the person wanted the same thing I did? Did I observe their facial expression, their body language, the tone of voice and the look in their eyes?

### AN INFORMED YES

Did I express my expectations and intentions? Do I truly believe that the person understands their choice? Did I give them all the information they needed? Am I certain that they have the full capacity to understand what I am telling them?

## WHEEL OF CONSENT

All three must be a "yes" for consent to be given.

## SELF-REFLECTION

The following self-reflection strategies can help us examine our own beliefs and behaviors, while understanding how we can strengthen our children's confidence and values.

- **Form positive parental behaviours by developing relationships based on a healthy emotional bond.** What types of behaviours do you regularly exhibit when interacting with your child? Are you role modeling healthy relationships between men and women?
- **Evaluate your position of power in your family and in the community.** Do you share power with others in your family and community?
- **Understand your child's learning preferences and style to create an atmosphere that stimulates their development.** Are you listening to their needs? Ask yourself and your child what you can do to better support them.
- **Examine your own approach to sexuality and consent.** What are the values you communicate outwardly?
- **Finally, take part in self-reflection before, during and after a difficult interaction.**<sup>6</sup>

**1 BEFORE:** Reflect on your sexual assault beliefs and unlearn societal biases and stereotypes.

**2 DURING:** Think of strategies *with* your child to better support their empowerment.

**3 AFTER:** Evaluate how it went. If necessary, re-formulate. Keep following-up.

Obviously, we aren't always given the time to properly prepare for something as challenging and emotionally complex as a discussion on sexual assault. Having a more complete understanding of your own beliefs can help you feel better prepared for whatever may come your way.

## SUPPORT AND EMPOWERMENT

We can take what we've learned from our self-reflection and use it to provide enriched support for our children. This support, both physical and emotional, can act as a protective factor against sexual assault.

We foster empowerment when we challenge gender and sexuality stereotypes and help our children better understand their bodies, their boundaries and the ideas of respect and consent. Empowerment is the process of becoming stronger, more confident and claiming your own rights while respecting those of others. **Empowerment is based on the following five values.** How can you show these values in your interactions with your child?

**1 COMPASSION:** Show empathy for others.

**2 COURAGE:** Encourage the strength of others.

**3 PRESENCE:** Listen with undivided attention.

**4 RESPECT:** Appreciate the qualities of others.

**5 POWER:** Share your power with others.

We encourage empowerment by adopting an approach that strikes a balance between personal and collective power. When we find ourselves in a position of power (as parents, for example) we can try to share this power by ensuring our children have opportunities to make their own decisions as much as possible and when appropriate.

We develop empowerment further by providing tools (such as information, skills, support, resources, etc.) that help people regain their power and prevent all forms injustice.



The following two lists can help you identify and reinforce empowerment for your children and in your family. Remember, every child and family is unique and some of these may not apply to your specific situation.

### COMMON SIGNS OF CHILD EMPOWERMENT<sup>7</sup>

- Your child feels sure of themselves.
- Your child feels safe at home, at school and in their community.
- Your child feels they have the support and protection of family.
- Your child doesn't have problems making friends
- Your child feels that they can excel in areas of their choice (school, sports, art, technology, etc.)
- Your child participates in extracurricular activities.
- Your child feels comfortable speaking with a trusted adult when they have a problem.
- Your child can assert their personal boundaries and respects those of others.
- Your child maintains close relationships with trusted adults.
- Your child has a positive and optimistic outlook on life.

### COMMON SIGNS OF FAMILY EMPOWERMENT

- A climate of positive communication, warmth and affection.
- Clear and consistent family rules.
- A structured home environment with well-established routines.
- Regular monitoring and discussion of media consumption (internet, TV, films, music, games, etc.)
- Strong emotional ties between you and your child.
- A good support network (extended family, friends, etc.).
- You are attentive to your child's needs and behaviours.
- You are aware of what matters to your child and are sensitive to this.

## REINFORCING RESILIENCE

It is important for parents to maintain a family atmosphere that takes into account the social, emotional and cognitive needs of children. Clear yet adaptable support from parents helps children establish healthy relationships that will carry them through life. **Here are some strategies that can help.**<sup>8</sup>

**ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES:** Everyone has the right to define their own personal space, time, and boundaries while respecting others. Discuss with your child how to honour their boundaries. Draw a connection between the ideas of boundaries and consent. This can include talking about how someone in a position of trust can abuse their power.

**RECOGNIZE AND NAME:** Teach your child to recognize and name their feelings. Make it clear that all feelings are welcome and have their place. This will help them learn about themselves by listening to their intuition.

**ASSERT INDEPENDENCE:** Find opportunities for your child to practice clear messages that reflect their own feelings and ideas, such as "No," "Stop," "I don't like this," and "Yes," "I like this".

**IDENTIFY TRUSTED ADULTS:** Help your child identify the adults in their life who they can ask for help. It is important that they know who to talk to if there is a problem or when they want to discuss something that bothers them. These role models maybe found in the family, at school or in the community.

## COLLECTIVE SUPPORT

Mobilizing both our families and community professionals helps to promote sexual assault prevention. Together, we can produce a consistent and continuous approach by linking family, school and community. This teaches children that they can find support in a wide variety of places, while re-establishing an environment of trust, security and well-being. **The following four principles can cultivate positive social conditions that in turn help to reduce the vulnerability of all children.**

1

**BREAK THE SILENCE:** Denounce sexual assault and speak openly against all forms of inequity, sexism, misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia and all forms of marginalization.

2

**COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE:** It is vital to have a coordinated intervention by family, school and community supports that addresses everyone involved in a sexual assault.

3

**ENCOURAGE RESILIENCE:** Positive role modeling encourages children to develop their assertiveness, self-worth and self-advocacy skills.

4

**POSITIVE CULTURAL CHANGE:** We can address various forms of oppression at once, as they are often interconnected. Disrupting all forms of violence and marginalization can address rape culture and foster a culture of consent.

## SEXUAL ASSAULT DISCLOSURE

If your child discloses, directly or indirectly, that they have been sexually assaulted, you can provide critical support by encouraging them to speak about it, with their own words, at their own pace and at a time that is right for them. It is also important to ask for professional help to ensure a process of healing. **The following strategies can help both you and your child during a disclosure.**<sup>9</sup>



**LISTEN:** A child who discloses sexual assault needs you to listen to them in an open and non-judgmental way. Encourage them to speak freely about the situation by practicing active listening. “I believe you. I’m listening. Tell me what happened.” Your child might worry about your reaction and expect that they won’t be believed. It takes a lot of courage to talk about such an uncomfortable event.



**MEASURED REACTION:** Avoid dramatizing or minimizing the situation. Be aware of your facial expressions, your body language and tone of voice, because your child will be paying close attention to them. They will notice any disparities between what you say and what you do. If your body language is not in agreement with your words, your child will be confused and, potentially, distrustful.



**PRAISE:** Children often feel responsible for what happened to them and it takes a lot of courage to speak about it. Acknowledge that strength, while explaining that disclosing to you was the right thing to do. Help them understand that the person who committed the violence is entirely responsible. “I want you to know that it is not your fault.” Name the problem and explain clearly that what happened was a sexual assault.



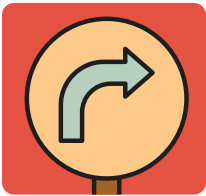
**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Protect your child's privacy and make sure that other children are not within earshot. The only people who should be present are the child in question and adults who will have to intervene directly.



**PUT YOUR WORDS INTO ACTION:** Assure your child that you will act fast to address the situation, but be careful not to promise things that are out of your hands. For example, "I'll make sure that person goes to jail."



**AFFECTION:** Adults are sometimes reluctant to show physical affection to a child after a sexual assault disclosure. In such a situation, the child may need additional affection and support, especially from their parents. At the same time, we can be aware of and respect the child's comfort, boundaries and independence.

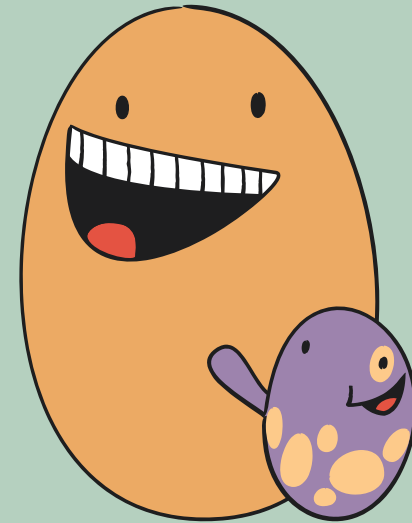


**AVOID CORRECTING:** The child may use slang or "inappropriate" terms to talk about genitals or sexual acts. This is not the time to teach them the right vocabulary. You might make them feel judged or shamed, and they may stop talking.



**AVOID CRITICIZING:** When a child reveals a sexual assault, don't say things like "I told you so" or "this would have never happened if..." Avoid all judgements, whether by your verbal language or body language. **It is of the utmost importance that a child who has experienced sexual assault understands that they are not responsible nor alone.**

Reach out to sexual assault support centres, children's organizations and other agencies to learn about community supports.



We foster *safe, strong and free* families, schools and communities when we adopt an approach that recognizes trauma and promotes both the individual and collective power of all marginalized people.

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This guide for parents and caregivers is part of a provincial sexual assault prevention initiative developed by COPA and funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

For more information about COPA's wide range of violence prevention education resources and programs, visit [infocopa.com](http://infocopa.com).



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