We all can take steps to help make our communities safer, but sometimes we don't know how. As a parent or caring adult, you have a unique opportunity to equip the next generation with the skills and tools to create safer communities. This fact sheet provides some tips and information on how to be an ally in sexual violence prevention.

What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence exists on a spectrum. It ranges from inappropriate comments to sexual harassment to sexual assault. Any form of sexual violence has a basis in imbalances of power, where the more powerful person commits harmful acts and behaviors against another person who has less power.

ATTITUDES & BELIEFS	VERBAL EXPRESSIONS	PHYSICAL EXPRESSIONS
Racism Sexism Ableism Xenophobia Homophobia Transphobia	Cat-calling Bragging Rape/Sexual Jokes	Sexual Assault Sexual Abuse Non-consensual Sexual Touching

What is prevention?

For a long time, efforts designed to tell children how to protect themselves have been thought of as "prevention." Asking children to protect themselves by "just saying no" or staying away from strangers and certain activities is an ***ineffective form of prevention called risk reduction***. This puts responsibility on the potential victim to avoid their own sexual assault instead of holding potential perpetrators accountable for their actions. Risk reduction also ignores the realities of how sexual violence occurs.

Effective sexual violence primary prevention focuses on shifting harmful social norms that uphold power imbalances and allow sexual violence to occur. Prevention aims to change existing harmful spaces rather than asking people to navigate them, with the ultimate goal of creating safer, more equitable communities. See the chart below for a better understanding of the differences between these two strategies.

Parents and caring adults are in a prime role to directly help break harmful patterns and shape healthy social norms for the next generation.

Primary Prevention

VS.

- Places the responsibility on everyone in the community to eradicate the root causes of sexual violence
- Educates on creating safe spaces
- Addresses multiple risk factors of sexual violence perpetration
- Focuses on changing the root causes of sexual violence
- Changes the social norms that allow sexual violence to happen
- Addresses all forms of sexual violence

Risk Reduction

- Places the responsibility on the potential victim to prevent violence against themselves
- Educates on navigating through existing harmful spaces
- Does not address risk factors of sexual violence perpetration
- Focuses on individual acts of sexual violence, but not the root causes
- Educates a potential victim on how to stop an attack in progress
- Focuses on some forms of sexual violence

What prevents someone from committing sexual violence? What causes them to commit sexual violence?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have identified factors that may decrease (protective) or increase (risk) someone's likelihood of committing an act of sexual violence.

Protective Factors

- Empathy and concern for how one's actions affect others
- Parental use of reasoning to resolve family conflict

Risk Factors*

- Emotionally unsupportive family environments
- Family environments characterized by physical violence and conflict
- Adhering to & enforcing strict, traditional gender role norms

What Can I Do?

Luckily, sexual violence is 100% preventable! When we start early, we can instill positive social norms in young people to help create safer, more equitable spaces. Ultimately, we want to reduce the likelihood that someone may *commit* sexual violence and build a society that doesn't tolerate harmful power-based behaviors against others.

"Can I play with you? Can I hug you?"

Children learn from seeing what you do and how you act! The formative years of childhood can provide all of us with opportunities to talk about consent and establish healthy boundaries. It's never too early to have conversations on these topics with the children in your life. These discussions can happen without mentioning sex. When the topic of sex does come up, it's important to note that children will receive messages about sex from other sources, like media and their peers. Even though sex can be an uncomfortable topic to discuss, you can take this as an opportunity to play a positive role in teaching the children in your life about safe and consensual behavior. Having open conversations about consent and boundaries teaches children how to respect others and how to handle rejection.

Try

- **Help them understand.** Use familiar situations as examples to help them understand. "Even though you played with them yesterday, that doesn't mean they want to play all the time. Everyone can make choices to do what makes them feel comfortable. Sometimes you don't want to play with me, and that's okay." This can easily be re-framed for situations involving physical touch.

- **Allow children to set their own boundaries and determine who gets to touch them and who doesn't.** Not only does this instill the concept of consent early on, but it also supports them in understanding that others' boundaries should be respected. Ask before you hug a child, and encourage others to do the same. Similarly, allow your child to choose whether or not they give relatives a hug or kiss at family gatherings.

Rethink Gender Reveal Parties: Moving Beyond Pink & Blue!

The anticipated birth of a child is exciting and something we want to celebrate! A common event that can be hosted prior to the child being born is a gender reveal party. But what is really being celebrated when we host gender reveal parties? Do the colors they wear, the roles that they have, and their interests— a girl that likes learning about cars and a boy that likes musical theater— affect the love and respect we have for our children?

Gender reveal parties often set up certain expectations before birth which can inadvertently reinforce gender-based power imbalances. This doesn't mean all traditional aspects of femininity or masculinity are bad! Gender varies from community to community and is a cultural construct that has changed and continues to change over time. These roles become problematic when society says we are limited to expressing ourselves in specific ways. When our social practices start to assign characteristics, or expected characteristics, to our youth before they are even born, the risk for sexual violence perpetration and victimization becomes higher. These practices ultimately reinforce the power imbalances we're trying to end! We can eliminate this by getting rid of those social expectations early and creating new social norms that allow everyone to express their identities, regardless of whether those identities conform to traditional expectations for the gender they were assigned at birth.

Try

- **When picking out decorations, try to use colors that don't reinforce gender roles** so the focus of the party is not on the colors or things the child is expected to like. Opting for adorable animal decorations can help limit accidentally reinforcing rigid gender stereotypes.

Resources

NSVRC- I Ask How to Teach Consent
https://www.nsvrc.org/i-ask-how-teach-consent-early

NJCASA- Exploring Empathy's Role in Promoting Positive Social Change
https://njcasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Empathy.pdf

Planned Parenthood- For Parents
https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents

NSVRC- Healthy Sexuality Resources
https://www.nsvrc.org/saam/2012

njcoalition
against sexual assault