Every day, all across Quebec, thousands of children are involved in activities outside the home. The majority of these activities are fun, positive and help children learn and grow into healthy adults. Just as we recognize the importance of ensuring that physical environments do not pose any safety risks to children, we must also do the same in preventing child sexual abuse.

An integral part of safety is teaching children to set and respect personal boundaries. By doing so they will learn to protect and take care of themselves. Individuals who present a risk to children usually begin by breaking down these boundaries.

It is crucial that children feel that the significant adults in their lives accept them, care about them and would go out of their way to ensure that they are safe and well. Children with a healthy sense of self-esteem are less vulnerable to becoming victims of abduction, aggression or exploitation.

- Make sure your child understands that he can always talk to you and has the right to say NO! to anyone or in any situation that leaves him feeling scared, confused or uncomfortable;
- Let your child decide the physical proximity with which he is comfortable. He will gradually learn to trust his instincts;
- Create opportunities to spend quality time together doing something of your child’s choosing, be it daily, weekly or monthly. This will not only increase your child’s emotional attachment but also strengthen your relationship. Children often talk more comfortably while engaged in an activity they enjoy;
- Discuss with your children the difference between a “kept” secret and a “spoken” secret;
- Teach your child the difference between a good and bad touch.

Children should not be forced to give affection to an adult or teenager if they do not want to do so. Be alert to signs your child is trying to avoid someone and listen carefully when your child tells you how he or she feels about someone.

A Safe Environment

One of the best ways to protect children is to surround them with adults who are concerned for every child’s welfare and safety. Nine times out of ten, children are abused by people they know. While the majority of adults who work with children do not harm them, there are some individuals who will abuse their position of trust and offend against children. Therefore, it is important for child-serving organizations to implement a comprehensive screening process for applicants that include the following measures: criminal background checks and in-person interviews, reference checks, ongoing observation.
KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE IN ORGANIZED ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE THE HOME

Here are some helpful tips to help ensure that your child’s activity is occurring in a safe environment:

- Inquire as to the existence of measures against harassment and sexual assault, as well as the procedures to follow if ever an adult believes that a child is the victim of these crimes;
- Do not hesitate to speak up about situations or behaviours that you deem inappropriate. Anyone who has reasonable grounds to believe a child has suffered or is at risk of suffering abuse or is in need of protection is obligated to report the suspicion to child welfare and/or law enforcement;
- Be present and get involved so that you can meet the various coaches or other individuals who are around your child. As an active participant you will have a better opportunity to observe how the adults in charge interact with your children;
- Be wary of closed or private training sessions or meetings;
- Be wary of adults that provide unwarranted gifts, trips or show excessive affection to a specific child or small group of children.

Parents and guardians should be alert to these indicators of sexual exploitation:

- Sudden changes in behaviour: extreme mood swings, withdrawal, fearfulness and excessive crying;
- Regressive behaviour: Bedwetting, nightmares, fear of going to bed or other sleep disturbances;
- Difficulties concentrating, tendency to isolate himself, lack of interest for activities once preferred;
- A sudden acting out of feelings or aggressive/rebellious behaviour;
- A fear of certain places, people or activities, especially being alone with certain individuals;
- Self-destructive behaviour – the child is physically harming himself and sharing feelings indicating a lack of self-worth;
- Physical symptoms – the child shows physical signs of abuse in the genital area (e.g. itching, bleeding, discharge).
KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE IN ORGANIZED ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE THE HOME

Many victims of sexual abuse hesitate to denounce their offenders. Why?

- Feel they will not be believed;
- Feel shame and embarrassment;
- Fear judgment;
- Have been threatened with violence or his family has been threatened;
- Want to continue practicing their activity;
- Do not want the offender to get into trouble;
- May feel responsible.

What you can do if you suspect your child was molested:

- As difficult and worrisome as it may be, try to remain calm and be reassuring, supportive and non-judgmental. Avoid interrogating him. Keep in mind that your child is closely observing your reaction;
- Don’t hesitate to tackle the subject promptly and in an honest manner; openly discuss any doubts and worries you may have with your child;
- Respect your child’s pace; encourage him to talk freely without rushing him;
- Show him that you understand. Keep in mind that the first person your child confides in will play a critical and determining role ... his ability to trust adults once again is being re-established;
- Reassure him and praise him for doing the right thing by telling you;
- Assure your child that he is not responsible for what happened;
- Promise him that you will protect him and get the proper help for him.

For more information about our personal safety workshops, offered year-round, please contact our offices or visit our website at www.missingchildrensnetwork.ngo