

Protective Behaviours

Protective Behaviours refers to behaviours which enable children to recognise situations in which their personal space and sense of safety may be compromised. An example; when a child is asked to touch an adult in a way they feel uncomfortable with – a child is able to say 'no', move away, and (possibly) tell a safe adult in their life.

The aims of working with your children on protective behaviours are:

- ▶ To help children and young people to protect themselves because protective adults cannot be with them every minute of the day
- ▶ To give children (and adults) permission to talk about problem or difficult situations they face.
- ▶ To empower children with the right to feel safe and act to keep themselves safe.
- ▶ To increase self esteem and confidence for children who learn how to empower themselves in otherwise potentially powerless situations.

Spending time with children discussing, learning and practicing protective behaviours can be an extremely empowering experience for a child, and can also strengthen the parent/carer/child bond.

Topics that may be discussed in Protective Behaviour Counselling/Education

1. *Private Parts*

Increasing understanding that no one is allowed to touch or see their private parts, and they are not allowed to touch or see other people's private parts, except in certain circumstances and as long as they feel safe.

2. *Rules around Touching*

It is not ok for me to touch others private parts/ it is not ok for others to touch my private parts/we all have a right to feel safe.

3. *Trust and Safety Network / Stranger Danger*

Identifying adults in their life that they can confide in if they needed to talk to someone and the rules around talking to or going with strangers.

4. *Good and Bad Secrets*

How to differentiate between good secrets and bad secrets.

5. *Feelings*

How to identify what feelings are and how they make our bodies feel.

6. *Warning Signs*

How to identify warning signs in their body that let them know they may not be safe.

7. *Boundaries*

Understanding how everyone has their own personal space around their body, and that no one is allowed to enter that space unless they have permission.

Tips For Discussing Protective Behaviours With Your Kids:

- 1) It can be useful to start any discussions with reassuring the child that they haven't done anything wrong, and that they are safe, and that you would like to spend some time talking about ways you and they can be safe and happy and feel good.
- 2) Ask your child what 'safety' means to them, and use as many everyday examples as possible to talk about the times they do and don't feel safe, exploring what they can do in those unsafe times to help them feel safe again.
- 3) Share your experiences with them (age appropriate level of disclosure), emphasising that we all have times when we don't feel safe.
- 4) When we discuss safety with children it is important that we do not leave them feeling afraid and disempowered, but instead that we provide them with awareness of their own safety and help seeking strategies regarding what to do if they feel unsafe.
- 5) Listening to children and carefully observing their body language will allow you to pick up on any signal from your child that something is not ok. Children may not be able to tell you that they are feeling unsafe or something is not ok for them.
- 6) Parents quickly learn to avoid asking a child, 'How was your day?' as they get the universal answer, 'Fine' and when asking, 'What did you learn?' get the answer, 'Nothing'. Parents who comment on a child's body language, 'You look sad, happy', etc., have more chance of opening up the channels of communication to allow the child to share.
- 7) The most important factor when discussing safety with your child is keeping the communication channels open, letting your child know they can talk to you about **anything**. It is also vital that you help your child identify a 'safety network' of trusted adults who they can talk to if you are unavailable.
- 8) You could use 'Even if...' or 'What if' questions to discuss safety with your child, e.g.. How could you keep yourself safe even if you heard a strange noise at night? Someone bullied you? You got lost? Someone was late in picking you up from school? Someone you don't know asked you to go somewhere with them? Using 'Even if' questions removes the child from their actual reality and may be less likely to frighten them.
- 9) Children need to know the importance of their 'body signals' or 'early warning signs' that act like an internal alarm bell to tell us when we don't feel safe, and also to have strategies for what to do when the alarm bell rings.
- 10) It is important to resist the language of 'stranger danger' with children, as the reality is that many people who pose a risk to children may not be strangers at all, but may be well known to the child. Instead, children need an awareness of their own feelings of safety and skills to seek help in times when they do not feel safe.
- 11) Make the learning fun! For example, using games, art, craft, humour, physicality. Young children especially respond to these ways of learning and it can reduce the level of fear significantly.
- 12) Always finish discussion/activities with reinforcing that children CAN have power to keep themselves safe, and providing lots of praise and encouragement for their efforts, abilities and solid plans for keeping themselves safe. Ending positively, with an understanding that they are safe now and can stay safe, is really important.