Straight Talk About Child Sexual Abuse:

A Prevention Guide for Parents

Raising a child comes with many responsibilities. Among them is the need to protect your children from sexual abuse. Keeping them away from known sex offenders in your community is one step, but since most cases of sexual abuse are never reported, how do you know who is safe? An estimated quarter to a third of sexual abuse incidents involve family members. Nearly 60 percent involve people that you or your child know and trust through school, sports, and other community activities. Less than 10 percent are strangers.

The average age of reported sexual abuse is between 9 and 10, which means that infants, toddlers, young children, and teens are all considered at risk. Children with physical or developmental disabilities are at significantly greater risk of sexual abuse. Children who are D/deaf are two to three times more likely to be sexually abused than their hearing peers.

The good news is that confirmed cases have been going down as awareness has increased. Yet the risks remain real, so parents and guardians need to jump into action and take specific steps to strengthen safety and reduce opportunities for abuse. This guide will give you the information and skills you need to do just that. So don't put off talking to your kids because you feel you don't know enough, don't know what to say, or how to approach the subject. Armed with this new information, you can confidently help your child grow up safe and free from sexual abuse and its devastating consequences.

What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse includes any sexual contact between an adult and a child or a teen. It can also include sexual contact between children when one child is more powerful than the other because of age (usually 3 years older or more), size, or intellectual development.

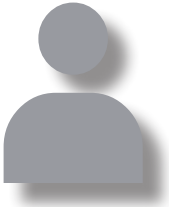
Child sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching acts. Both are damaging to children and teens and are against the law.

Abusive touching behaviors include:

- Fondling or rubbing up against a child's genitals, buttocks, or breasts
- Penetration of the child's mouth, anus, or vagina by the abuser or with an object
- Coercing a child to fondle him/herself, the abuser, or another child

Abusive non-touching behaviors include:

- Exposing oneself to a child in a lewd way
- Inappropriately viewing or violating private behaviors of a child or teen (e.g., undressing, bathing)
- Taking sexually explicit or provocative photographs of a child
- Showing pornography or sexually suggestive images to children
- Talking in sexually explicit or suggestive ways to children in person, by phone, by Internet, or via text messages



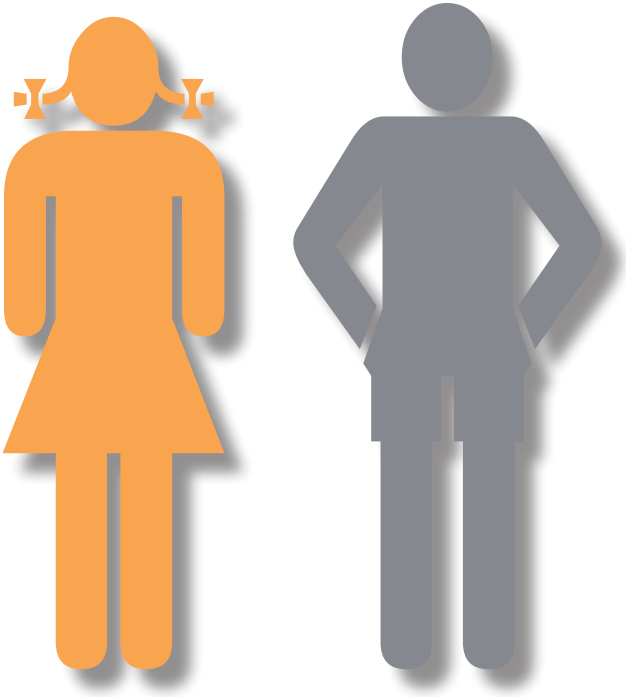
Who Sexually Abuses Children?

The majority of adults who sexually abuse children appear friendly and likeable; they mostly look and act like everyone else. Many work diligently over time to earn the trust of children, parents, and other adults. They often build up to the abuse slowly, beginning with "accidental" touching, then move to cuddling, horseplay, wrestling, backrubs. They may use suggestive comments or jokes or present sex play as a game. Most children and teens do not fully understand what is happening, and when they do, many are led by their abusers to believe they are to blame for what has happened, making it difficult for children to tell.

Those who sexually abuse are a diverse group; a third or more are juveniles themselves. Different types of abusers can present differently, but here are some behaviors that can indicate poor personal boundaries and that should be concerning. If you see these, it doesn't prove that the person is abusing. It should, however, cause you to observe their behaviors around children or teens more closely. If something doesn't seem right, trust your instincts. Talk with your child or other parents about any concerns you or they have, and, if warranted, report your concerns.

Are you aware of someone in your family or circle of acquaintances who:

- Finds opportunities to be alone with a child or teen when adults are not likely to interrupt (e.g., car rides, special trips, babysitting)?
- Ignores a child's verbal or physical cues that he or she doesn't want to be hugged, touched, kissed, or tickled?
- Doesn't respect a child's or teen's privacy in the bathroom or bedroom?
- Gives a child or teen money or gifts for no particular occasion?
- Discusses or asks a child or teen to discuss sexual experiences or feelings?
- Doesn't appear to have adult friends and prefers to spend free time interacting with children and teens who are not his or her own?
- Seems to have a different "special" child or teen friend of a particular age or appearance from year to year?
- Views child pornography through videos, photos, or the Internet? The majority of men convicted for possessing child porn also admit to having committed "hands on" offenses. Viewing, possessing, or producing child pornography is illegal.

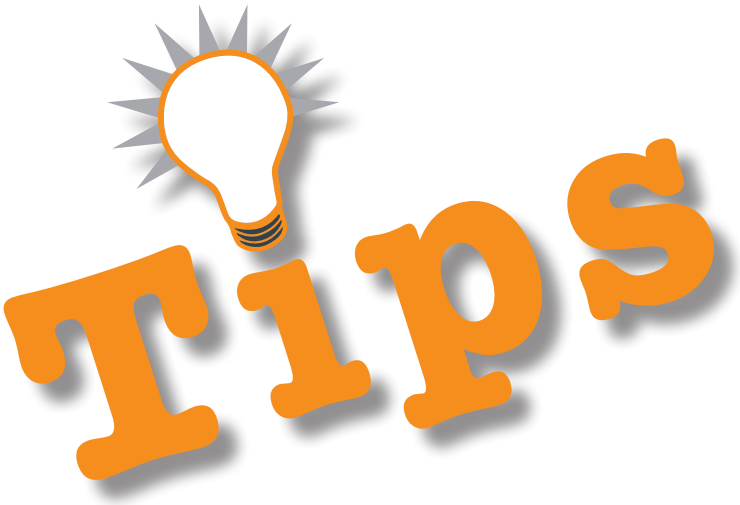


Do Children Engage in Problematic Sexual Behaviors?

While sexual behaviors in children are "developmentally expected" and a normal part of growing up, sometimes children are involved in activities with one another that can be inappropriate, concerning, or abusive. You can learn to assess situations by asking yourself:

- Is this behavior causing a problem for the child or other children?
- Is one child larger in size, older, stronger, or more popular?
- Does one child have greater mental, emotional, or physical ability?
- Does one child appear to have been coerced into the activity through threats, bribes, or physical force?

If you are concerned about any problematic sexual behavior of your child that includes these, please see the resources at the end of this booklet and seek advice or a referral for assistance.



Tips to Help Protect Your Child

The vast majority of sexual abuse occurs when a child or teen and an adult are alone. One of the ways you can significantly increase your child's safety is to increase supervision and choose group activities rather than "one child/one adult" situations. Many children, however, benefit from and want to participate in private lessons or mentoring programs where one-on-one relationships are key, e.g. music lessons, tutoring, sports coaching, Big Brothers Big Sisters.

If you choose to enroll your child in these programs, be sure to approach the instructors or mentors confidently and tell them you want to reduce your child's risks of sexual abuse, just as you know they do. Ask what their policies are around leaving doors open during lessons, allowing parents to observe or drop in.

Share this booklet with them or suggest they learn more by visiting **www.enoughabuse.org**. Let them know you are an informed and vigilant parent. Encourage your child to tell you if they have concerns about interactions with any adults or children.

Waiting to have "the big conversation" with your child at 12 is too late. Begin weaving these prevention messages in everyday conversations with your child as early as three. Remember, it's easy when you start early and talk often.

1. "All parts of our bodies are good and we can speak about them respectfully. It's best to use the right names for private parts, like penis, vagina, breasts, buttocks or butt." (Be aware, parents, if you are too embarrassed to use those names, your children will likely follow your lead and also be too embarrassed to tell you if someone is being sexually inappropriate or abusing them.)

2. "Grown-ups and older children have no business 'playing' with your private body parts. Sometimes grown-ups need to help young children with washing or wiping these private parts, but that's not the same as playing with them. Sometimes doctors need to examine you. But it's never without a nurse or parent in the room and it's never a secret."

3. "Grown-ups and older children never, ever need help from children with their private parts. If someone asks you for this kind of help, tell me right away, even if it's someone in our family or someone we know. If anyone shows you their private parts, pictures of private parts, or asks to take pictures of your private parts, you can tell me. I promise I will listen and not be angry. If you ever feel 'mixed up' about secrets, feelings, or private body parts, tell me and I will help you."

4. "It's important that you do not touch anyone else's private parts. It could make them feel upset, confused, or angry and could get you in trouble. If you are wondering about these things, come tell me and we can talk about it."

5. "Surprises are fun for children but secrets are not okay. Surprises are secrets meant to be told, like a surprise party. But other secrets can be dangerous because they don't let me know if you're safe. If a friend is playing with matches, someone offers you drugs, or someone asks you to help them with their private body parts, I won't be able to keep you safe unless you tell me about it."

Pediatricians suggest additional ways that might help reduce the risks of sexual abuse.

1. Begin talking to your child about personal space and privacy by age 3 and about sex before age 10.
2. Only allow those you have trusted and have known for many years to provide toileting and bathing care for your child.
3. Encourage children's independence in toileting and personal self-care.
4. Discourage bathing with siblings and adults once your child starts elementary school. Supervise bathing before this time.

Speak to Your Children About Boundary Violations by Adults in Schools

Children and youth are very special people. Because they have less life experiences, they are more vulnerable and need to be protected, whether it is at home, school, or in the community. Adults are given the responsibility of keeping children and youth safe. We want them to know that while most adults are caring and can be trusted, sometimes adults can have other problems that make them turn out to not be very safe. We want children to understand how adults should be treating them, and that if an adult acts in inappropriate ways, they should tell their parent, caregiver or another trusted adult about it.

Parents must be aware that some individuals who are sexually attracted to children or teens choose to work in schools and other youth-serving or faith-based organizations. It gives them "cover" as they carefully identify children and teens they believe will be easy targets for sexual abuse. Adults in positions of authority or trust who intend to sexually abuse often "groom" children by engaging in boundary violating behaviors that can lead to sexual abuse.

The good news is **we don't have to wait for sexual misconduct and abuse to occur before we stop it.** As a parent, when you are aware of behaviors that violate the appropriate boundaries between adults and children, you can take action to stop these behaviors before they can ever escalate to sexual abuse.

Being made aware of boundary-violating behaviors lets children and teens know they never have to accept any behaviors from others that make them feel uncomfortable, even from adults in positions of power or who are well-liked or popular. It lets you as parents know how to support schools and youth organizations as safe havens where your children can learn and grow without the threat of sexual abuse and its devastating and often lifelong consequences for their physical and mental health.

Here is a list of boundary-violating behaviors which parents should know about and make their children aware of. You know your children and teens and their level of development best. Explain these behaviors to them in a way they can understand and watch out for. Encourage them to tell you if they experience or see these behaviors occurring between an adult and them or another child, whether at school, in a youth-serving organization, or in the community. Tell them that no matter what they share with you, you will believe them, and you will not be angry with them.

Do you or your child see or know about an adult in a school or youth organization that:

1. Makes comments about a student's body or physical appearance, either directly to students or to other adults in the school. For example, "You're so pretty," or "Oh, I see you're really developing."
2. Makes sexual comments or dirty jokes, suggestive gestures, or flirts with a student.
3. Gives gifts to selected students that violates school policies on giving or receiving gifts. Selects a student for special privileges, e.g. sending on personal errands.
4. Shares their personal phone number or personal email address with a student instead of using school-based phone and email systems.
5. Sends private, non-school related text messages to students or responds to text messages from students after school hours or during nighttime hours, unless it relates to their educational plan and with parental permission.
6. Follows or "friends" students on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, or other social media sites.
7. Takes pictures of students and shares them without parental permission.
8. Tells students very personal things, or secrets, or shares stories about their adult relationships, marriage, or sex life.
9. Asks a youth about their romantic life or relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend.
10. Confides in and offers support to a student in a way that isolates a student from their friends or family.
11. Uses pet names or words like, "baby," or "darling" to refer to a particular student, or allows students to call them by their first name or a nickname, if that is not usual school culture.
12. Touches students in a way that goes beyond a pat on the back or high five, such as lingering hugs, engaging in roughhousing or provocative physical games with students, or inappropriate touching, e.g. stroking hair, back massages, etc.
13. Asks young students to sit on his or her lap or hand holds with older students.
14. Kisses a student, gives them a lingering hug, or enters their personal space in a way that makes the student feel uncomfortable.
15. Showers with students after athletic practices or events, undresses around students, or violates their privacy in the bathroom or changing rooms.
16. Offers a student a ride in his or her car, unless in an emergency situation. The "rule of three" should be followed, where one adult and one student are not alone together.

17. Shares a room overnight with students when traveling for any field trip or sporting event.
18. Invites students to off-school events or trips or invites a student to hang out after school without other adults or students—at the school or elsewhere.
19. Closes or locks doors when meeting with a student before or after class or covers classroom windows so that interactions with students will not be seen or interrupted.
20. Uses their cell phone or camera in locker rooms or restrooms to take pictures of students.
21. Sends inappropriate pictures of themselves or others to students or asks students for pictures of themselves.
22. Gives or sends pornographic materials to students.
23. Offers a student or students any alcohol, vape pens, cigarettes, or drugs.
24. Acts as a boyfriend or girlfriend or dates a student or other child or youth, no matter how old they are.
25. Engages in any sexual activity with a student *no matter the age of the student*. Even if a student believes such a relationship with an adult in a school or youth organization is okay, the adult's actions are wrong and *should be reported.*

This list is not exhaustive and there may be others you can think of. As you are discussing boundary-violating behaviors with your children, tell them if they are ever confused about any behaviors of adults, they can come and speak to you. Let them know that you will not be angry with them; you will listen to them, believe them, and do everything to make sure they are safe. When discussing this with your child, if they say that an adult in a school or youth serving organization has been acting inappropriately with them, you as a parent can contact the school or youth serving organization leader and make them aware of their employee's behavior.

If you learn that an adult or child in a school or youth serving organization has acted in a way that you believe may constitute sexual abuse, towards your child or another child, you should call the Department of Children and Families to report the abuse. You can also call the police! Behaviors 1 through 11 on the list above may not rise to the level of reportable abuse, but may be early signs of grooming. Behaviors 12 through 25 should be reported immediately.

- Contact the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families at (617) 748-2000 or visit **www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-children-families/locations** to locate the nearest office during business hours, 8:45am-5pm, Monday-Friday.
- After hours, call the Massachusetts Child Abuse Emergency Line at (800) 792-5200, 24/7.
- To report information regarding possible child sexual exploitation, e.g. child sexual abuse material, sex trafficking, enticement for sexual acts, sex tourism, or unsolicited obscene material sent to a child, contact the CyberTipline at 1-800-843-5678 or visit **https://report.cybertip.org/**

Keep Your Child Safe Online

What is Online Child Sexual Abuse?

- **Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)**, previously referred to as child pornography. Posting, sharing or viewing these materials is a form of child sexual abuse and is illegal.
- **Sexual solicitation of a minor.** Solicitations are defined as requests to perform sexual activities or sexual talk, or to give personal sexual information.
- **Online enticement,** including "**sextortion,**" where an abuser blackmails, extorts or coerces a minor into sending self-generated child sexual abuse material, including photos or videos.
- **Grooming**, where an abuser, who may or may not know the child or teen in real life, befriends them online and builds their trust with the intention of sexually abusing them.
- **Sexual deepfakes**, where someone uses A.I., a nudify app or other technology to create or modify an image or video of an identifiable person to make it look sexually explicit. Creating and sharing sexual deepfakes of children is illegal in most states.

Did you know?

- Before the age of 18, **one in five children** will be exposed to some type of in person or online sexual harm, and more than half of these instances will occur between peers. (Finkelhor et al. 2024)
- In 2024, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received approximately **100 reports of financial sexual extortion (sextortion) each day.** (WeProtect Global Alliance 2025)
- CSAM continues to be created and distributed at unprecedented rates. In 2025 alone, NCMEC received **21.3 million reports** that included more than **61.8 million images, videos** and other files related to suspected child sexual exploitation, **1.5 million** of which involved the use of **A.I.** (NCMEC 2026) These numbers actually reflect a decrease from 36.2 million reports in 2023, due to end-to-end encryption making it harder for online platforms to detect and report CSAM.
- **1 in 17** adolescents report being victims of deepfake sexual imagery. (Thorn 2025)
- **Online enticement of children continues to rise,** with NCMEC receiving **1.4 million reports** of online enticement in 2025, a 156% increase from 2024. (NCMEC 2026)

Now that you know, what can you do?

The key is to **supervise** your child's internet activity and ultimately help them become a responsible user. After educating yourself about technology and the internet, it is very important to **start a conversation** with your child about the benefits and risks of using technology. Work together with your children to establish **age-appropriate ground rules for internet usage**.

By involving your children in the discussion about rights, responsibilities, privacy, and personal safety, not only will they be more likely to follow your family's rules, you will also be helping them develop their own knowledge and personal standards of internet safety. Stress to your children that the **rules are to protect them**, not to control them. As technology changes and your children grow older, you will want to **revisit your family's ground rules and continue educating your children** on how to protect themselves, their private information, and how to be responsible users of technology.

- Talk to your children about what sites and apps they use, and ask them to show you their **privacy settings**. They should not allow people they don't know in real life to view their content or send them messages on social media. They should never enable location services on social media sites such as Snapchat, which can allow followers to see where they are posting from.
- Tell your children that they should **never add as a friend**, follow or connect with **anyone they do not know in real life**. Just because someone's profile picture makes it appear they are your child's age doesn't mean they are. Predators often pose as children to meet children online.
- Explain to children that they should **never post or share photos of themselves not fully clothed**. Explain there are bad people who will use those pictures in bad ways, and that once a picture is posted on the internet, it can never be deleted.
- Explain to your teenagers that they should **never take nude pictures of themselves** and/or send them to anyone ("**sexting**"), even someone they are dating, or a friend. The person who receives the photos could share these pictures online without their permission ("**revenge porn**").
- Explain to your children that they should **never post information online that would allow someone they don't know to find or stalk them**, including their home address, an identifiable place where they go often, or a picture of the outside of your house.
- Tell them **NEVER to agree to meet a stranger or a "friend they met online" in real life**. Teach your kids to let a parent or trusted adult know if anyone online asks them to meet in person.
- Consider purchasing third-party filtering **software to block harmful websites** from being accessed on your child's computer, tablet or smartphone. You can also customize parental settings on your computer and/or browser. These filters will change and evolve as your children grow.
- Remember that it is impossible to always monitor children's internet usage. As appealing as it is to rely on restricting access and monitoring software, it is important to keep in mind that **the more involved your child is in discussions of online safety, the more likely they will take those lessons to heart** and apply the same concepts when they are not being monitored.

For more information for parents about keeping children safe on the internet, resources aimed at teaching children how to be safe on the internet, reporting information, and resources related to sexting and cyberbullying, visit: **https://enoughabuse.org/get-the-facts/internet-safety/.**

How Can I Tell If My Child Has Been Sexually Abused?

Physical signs of sexual abuse are not common, but here are some you can look for. These signs to not always mean abuse has occured. Children can suffer from injuries or medical problems that might be the cause. If you see any of these, explore with your child and pediatrician what might be the reasons.

- Trouble walking or sitting
- Complaints of pain upon urination
- Irritation, abrasions, swelling, skin tears, bleeding, or infection of genitals or anus
- Unexplained injuries around the mouth
- Roughened or calloused area between buttocks
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Teenage pregnancy

Children can often show changes in behavior for any number of reasons that cause them stress, e.g. bullying, poor grades, family problems, etc. If you see behavior changes, don't assume sexual abuse has occurred. Ask your child to tell you what is bothering them, no matter what you think is the cause.

- Headaches, stomach pain, or chronic pain
- Change in appetite or significant weight gain or loss
- Bathroom accidents
- Sleeping problems or nightmares
- New words for private body parts that were not learned at home
- Sexual activity with toys, dolls, or other children
- Mimicking adult sexual behaviors, e.g. French kissing, "humping"
- Asking not to be left alone with a certain adult, child, or babysitter. Ask your child what it is about that person or what they do that makes your child not want to be around them. Even if the child is not ready to provide details, seriously consider ending your child's contact with that person.
- Mood changes when left with a certain person (e.g., going from talkative and cheerful to quiet and withdrawn)
- Cutting, burning or self-mutilation
- Suicidal behavior

What Can I Do If I Think Sexual Abuse Has Occurred?

Say to your child: "You seem upset. I'd really like for you to tell me why, so I can help you. No matter what you tell me, I love you and I won't get angry." Some children may not be ready to tell, but just knowing that you are there when they are ready may give them the confidence to eventually disclose.

If your child tells you that someone is abusing them:

- Remain calm in your words and actions. Responding in an upset way may make the child feel badly that he or she told and could make them stop sharing information.
- Tell your child: "I believe you. You're not to blame. You're brave to tell me. I will protect you."
- Ask open-ended questions, e.g. "It's important that I know what you know. Tell me what happened."
- Don't plant ideas in your child's mind about what you think may have happened or give your child words to use to describe what they are telling you. This could undermine any future interview or investigation.
- Don't ask your child to repeat multiple times what they have told you.
- Contact your local Child Protective Services, Police, or Child Advocacy Center for help to determine next steps to take, such as arranging for medical treatment or for the child to be interviewed by a professional skilled in this area.
- Make a plan for safety so the child will not be left vulnerable to the alleged abuser's actions if they learn or suspect the child has disclosed.
- Get support for yourself. Being involved in a disclosure of sexual abuse can be upsetting and you may want to seek confidential support from a trusted family member, friend, or professional.

If you are too upset or unsure about handling your concerns or your child's disclosure, it's best to reach out to a professional who can help.

Treatment:

For healing to begin, the child first needs to be kept safe from further abuse. Any physical symptoms resulting from sexual abuse usually heal quickly and completely. However, the emotional trauma many children experience may be more long-lasting and usually requires that they receive support from a mental health professional. See treatment resources that follow.

Reporting, Prevention, and Treatment Resources

Reporting suspected child sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility - whether you are a mandated reporter or a private citizen.

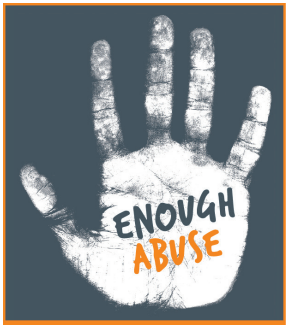
- To report child abuse, contact the Department of Children and Families at (617) 748-2000 or visit **www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-department-of-children-families/locations** to locate the nearest office during business hours, 8:45am-5pm, Monday through Friday. After hours, call the Massachusetts Child Abuse Emergency Line at (800) 792-5200, 24/7.
- To report information regarding possible child sexual exploitation, e.g. child pornography, sex trafficking, enticement for sexual acts, sex tourism, or unsolicited obscene material sent to a child, contact the CyberTipline at 1-800-843-5678 or visit **https://report.cybertip.org/**.

To learn how you can prevent child sexual abuse:

- Visit Enough Abuse® at **www.enoughabuse.org**. See "Get the Facts" to learn more about child sexual abuse. Strengthen your school or organization's abuse prevention policies through our **Safety S.T.A.R.S.** program. Join **Citizens to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse** to get updates on MA child sexual abuse prevention legislation. Subscribe to our e-newsletter to learn more about our work to prevent child sexual abuse.
- Take the Pledge to Prevent® child sexual abuse at **www.pledgetoprevent.org.**
- For information about preventing child sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations, visit **SafeKidsThrive.org.**

For counseling, treatment and support services:

- Massachusetts Children's Alliance: (617) 573-9800 or visit **machildrensalliance.org** to find your nearest Children's Advocacy Center.
- MASOC: for counseling and support for children with problematic sexual behaviors and their families, contact MASOC (413) 540-0712 or visit **www.masoc.net**.
- Behavioral Health Urgent Care Program at Cambridge Health Alliance, for mental health support: 833-222-2030 or visit **https://www.challiance.org/services-programs/mental-health-and-substance-use/psychiatry-crisis-services.**
- Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children: (617) 587-1500 or visit **www.mspcc.org.**
- Boston Area Rape Crisis Center: (800) 841-8371 (24/7) or visit **www.barcc.org.**
- Massachusetts Office of Victim Assistance: (617) 586-1340 or visit **www.mass.gov/mova.**
- Massachusetts Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers: (413) 427-6903 or visit **www.matsa.info**.



end child sexual abuse

For additional information, contact:

Enough Abuse®

www.enoughabuse.org

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