

Protecting our Children

A Parent's Guide- Talking About Sexual Violence and Abuse

PNG Business Coalition for Women

2025



Introduction

As children grow, you won't always be there to see who they're with or what they're doing. While you do your best to protect them, there are limits, especially when you're away for work or other responsibilities.

Your children may be surrounded by caring individuals and those who could take advantage of your trust. Sadly, cases of child sexual abuse are widespread both globally and in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

Globally, it is estimated that **1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys** experience sexual abuse before the age of 18 (World Health Organization, 2020). In PNG, a **2015 UNICEF study** found that **1 in 4 young people** (aged 18–24) reported experiencing sexual abuse as children (UNICEF, 2015). According to data from the International Centre for Advocates Against Discrimination (ICAAD) Track Gender Based Violence (GBV) dashboard for PNG, 79.5% of child victim cases of GBV involves sexual violence (ICAAD, N.D.). Reports of child sexual abuse continue to appear in national news almost daily.

These figures highlight the urgent need for parents and caregivers to talk openly with their children about sexual violence and how to stay safe.

This guide will help you have important—but often difficult conversations in an age-appropriate and supportive way.

In this guide, you'll find:

- Key facts and definitions about sexual violence and abuse
- How to recognise warning signs and respond appropriately and sensitively
- Guide to discuss these topics with children of different ages
- Family and Sexual Violence (FSV) Community Referral pathway

Legal Framework

PNG laws such as the Criminal Code Act, Lukautim Pikinini Act, and Family Protection Act, criminalizes child sexual abuse, mandate reporting, and provide legal protection for children who are at risk. PNG is also bounded by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to safeguard children from sexual violence.

1. Key Facts and definition

1.1. What is Sexual Violence, and Sexual Abuse

The terms ‘abuse’ and ‘violence’ are usually used interchangeably, however, there is a slight difference between them.

According to Sian Ferguson, a female freelance writer for Healthline and the Washington Post, “violence may refer to one-off acts, while abuse usually refers to a prolonged pattern of behavior where one person tries to control another’ (Ferguson, 2023).

Therefore, sexual violence is an instant act that involves unwanted sexual behavior while sexual abuse refers to a prolonged pattern of sexual behavior that occurs without consent.

1.2.What is Child Sexual Abuse?

- Rape
- Touching a child’s private body
- Making a child touch someone else’s body
- Sexual contact with a child
- Watching or photographing a child or animal in a sexual situation
- Someone exposing his or her body to a child
- Someone exposing a child to pornographic materials
- Talking to a child in a sexual way

1.3.What Age is Considered a Child?

Individuals between ages ranged from 0 and 18 are considered as children under the National Child Protection Policy (2016-2030).

1.4.What is the Consent Age in PNG?

PNG Statutory Law on Rape (Criminal Code (Sexual Offenders and Crimes Against Children) Act 2002) indicates that:

- Females under the age of 16 cannot give consent
- Males under the age of 14 cannot give consent
- Boys under the age of 17 cannot consent to another male

1.5.Where does Child Sexual Abuse Occur?

Child Sexual Abuse can happen anywhere including family homes, school, in communities, public places, sport venues, playgrounds/parks etc.

1.6.Who Can Be a Perpetrator?

A perpetrator is anyone who carries out a harmful, illegal or immoral act to cause threat, fear, or harm to another person or thing (in this case-person).

Anyone can be a perpetrator of Child Sexual Abuse including close family members (parents, siblings, cousins, uncles and aunties, grandparents), neighbors, acquaintances, friends, teachers, etc.

1.7.Predatory Characteristics of Perpetrators

Most perpetrators generally appear to be friendly, not scary looking or mean people, and are quite known to victims. Therefore, it is quite hard to identify perpetrators hence as a parent, carefully monitor your child's movements, actions, and behaviors.

1.8. Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse/Violence

Physical Health Impacts	Mental and Emotional Impacts	Social Impacts
HIV and STI	Psychological trauma	Social Isolation
Pain	Low self-esteem	Accessing drugs and home-brew
Illness	Guilt/Shame	Lack of ability to trust anyone to build relationship with.
Unwanted Pregnancy	Suicide	Leave school

1.9.What happens when parents don't talk to their children about Child Sexual Abuse/Violence?

- Children will not be aware of their rights
- Children will be easily influenced to believe that sexual activities are normal and acceptable
- Abuse cycle continues
- Children will not be able to report any sexual activities that they encounter
- Children will not be able to identify whether they are being sexually abused

2. How Can I Have These Conversations in an Age-Appropriate Way?

Having a conversation with children about Sexual Abuse/Violence is a very struggling engagement because most parents think it is inappropriate to talk about the issue with their children, especially when they are very young. Therefore, it is important that you explore some effective ways to discuss these difficult concepts with your children.

The aim of this section is that parents can hold conversations with their children in a neutral manner throughout childhood and adolescent stages of their children's life.

Children and parents should openly discuss the issue without being ashamed or being blamed.

2.1.Establish Open Communication

The most important thing to do before having the conversation is to foster trust. Create an environment where your child feels safe discussing any topic, including uncomfortable and frightening topics.

To do these:

- Be responsive toward your child to gain his/her trust
- Use everyday opportunities to talk with your child about sexual abuse/violence
- Use age- appropriate language
- Use different communication strategies for your vs older children

2.2.Explain Private Body Parts

- Before you delve into explaining each of the private parts, let your child know that private parts should stay private and no one else should force or attempt to look, touch or feel them.
- Explain to your child what their caregivers/babysitters or as a mom/dad can do and cannot do to them.
- Differentiate to your child about his/her private and public parts of body and emphasize that private parts are theirs alone.

Example....

“Our private parts are the parts of our body that are covered by our clothes. They stay private, just for you. We keep them covered in public spaces, markets, school and the living room” (S. Wassenaar, 2024).

2.3. Explain Safe and Unsafe Touches

Explain to your child that no one should touch their private body parts except to keep them safe, clean and healthy.

There are three types of touches according to *Safe and Unsafe Touches- Lesson 2* (Child Protection Unit, 2020):

Types of hugs	Meaning	Examples
Safe touches	Touches that keep children safe. This type of touches makes them feel loved, safe, and important	Hugging, shots from nurse, pats on the back, arm around shoulder, and high five
Unsafe touches	Touches that can cause injury or pain to children’s body, cause harm, and instill fear	Hitting, pushing, pinching, kicking someone, inappropriately touching someone else’s private body parts
Unwanted touches	Touches that can be considered safe, but a child might not want from a particular person or at a particular moment	Hug, push, tap on the back of a child

2.4. How can I talk about Child Sexual Abuse with my children?

To help you have conversation with your children about private and public body parts in an age-appropriate way, an organization called Heart Women and Girls highlighted some useful tips in their *‘Talking to Kids About Sexual Violence’* (Heart Women and Girls, n.d.). Refer to the following:

Infants & Toddlers

- Teach them the difference between “my body, your body.”
- Use correct terms for body parts.
- Teach them how to say “no” and respect their wish when they do.

Ages 3 to 5 (Preschool)

- Welcome their many questions and answer them calmly.
- Use books and videos to assist in your discussions.
- Share the ONLY instances where their private parts can be seen and/or touched. Explain that no one should physically hurt them, especially in their private parts. Discuss who can see and touch them, such as doctors or dentists (the mouth is private too), with a parent present.
- Help them identify adults they can reach out to if they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Talk to your child about the difference between a secret worth honouring and a secret that is unsafe to keep. Be mindful of your body language and tone.
- Teach them the difference between shame and modesty. While many religious traditions call for keeping certain body parts private and maintaining modesty, they should not feel shame around their bodies or bodily processes. » Reintroduce the concept of consent and boundaries

Ages 6 to 8

- Be more forthcoming and detailed in the information you offer, without blame or shame.
- Teach them about puberty by age 8.
- Talk about and practice setting boundaries.
- Remind them about unsafe secrets.

Ages 9 to 12 (Puberty)

- These years are full of many physical, emotional, and social changes and are crucial to creating a safe, judgement-free space for your child as he/she navigates through an often-confusing time.
- Give accurate and more in-depth information on their bodies, sexuality, and relationships.
- Help them practice decision-making.
- Familiarize yourself and your child with local resources such as hotlines, crisis centres, and other social services so that they know what resources they have access to.
- Respect their privacy.
- Talk about what they see in the media and teach them to think critically of the messaging they are receiving.
- Discuss what a healthy and unhealthy relationship looks like (both in friendships and in intimate relationships).
- As your kids become more social and independent, they may have friends confide in them, possibly about an abusive relationship or an act of sexual violence. Teach them how to be a resource for their friends and how to identify the instances when they should reach out to a trusted adult.
- Delve deep into a discussion about consent- how to give it and how to honour it. Use hypothetical scenarios to demonstrate what consent is and isn't and remind them that to give consent is one's right and to honour consent is one's responsibility.

3. Identifying Warning Signs

Teach your children to recognize unacceptable behaviors that might indicate that someone is trying to cross their boundary.

Some warning signs to tell your children:

- Someone being overly secretive (a family member telling your child not to tell you anything they do to them)
- Insisting on taking them to a place that no one is around, or asking them to see them alone
- Making them feel uncomfortable through their words, actions, pictures, movies, etc.
- Someone continuously telling your child to do something your child asks them not to do
- Someone touching them inappropriately

4. Indicators of Child Sexual Abuse

All individuals are different; hence signs of being sexually abused vary. According to Mayo Clinic (n.d.), here are some indications that your child might be experiencing sexual abuse:

Emotional/ Psychological	Physical	Sexual
Withdrawal from friends or usual activities	Unexplained injuries	Sexual behavior or knowledge that is inappropriate for the child's age
Changes in behavior-aggression, anger, hostility, changes in school performance	Genital or anal pain, bleeding, or injury	Statements by the child that he/she is sexually abused
Depression, anxiety or unusual fears, or a sudden loss of self-confidence		Inappropriate sexual behavior with other children
Unusual refusal to talk to or engage with anyone		
Desperately seek affection		

5. What can you do when you suspect your child is experiencing sexual abuse?

- Sit with your child and openly discuss safe and unsafe touches
- Ask your child if he/she has ever experienced unsafe touches from anyone
- Contact support services and systems that are available to help you deal with the issue

6. Referral Pathway Services

Service Provider	Contact	Function
1-Tok Kaunselin Helpim Lain	7150 8000	24/7 counselling & referrals
Meri Seif Line (G4S)	7222 1234	24/7 safe transport
FSVU (Boroko Office)	7152-7622, 7350-9130, 7066-4880, 7152-7644.	Family & sexual violence reporting
Lae Police Emergency	7090 3300	24/7 police support
Port Moresby Police (NCD)	324 4331 324 4329 3222222	24/7 police support
Goroka Police	532 1222	24/7 police support
Police Hotline	1800100	24/7 police immediate support
Femili PNG Case Management	Lae:7091 4027, POM:7916 9063	Office-hour case support
Family Support Centres (hospitals)	In-person	Medical, psychosocial care
1-Tok Kaunselin Helpim Lain	7150 8000	24/7 counselling & referrals
Family Support Centre (Pom General Hospital)	32482461	8am-4pm health services
Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee (FSVAC)	71502111 (Toll-free) 3212111	Counselling and assistance for survivors of family and sexual violence
Lifeline PNG	71505555	24/7 Confidential counseling and emotional support
National Department of Health Unit	3248200	Support for mental health concerns and crisis intervention
Port Moresby General Hospital	3248200	For urgent medical assistance
St. John Ambulance	3222222	Emergency ambulance and medical response services
Emergency Number	111	Emergency assistance

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