



# Mott Poll Report

March 16, 2020  
Volume 36  
Issue 1

## Parenting to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse

Teaching children the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching is a recommended strategy to prevent sexual abuse. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 2-9 years about their experiences talking with their child about inappropriate touching.

Most parents (60%) say conversations about inappropriate touching should start when a child is preschool age (2-4 years old); 33% say such conversations should start at school-age (5-9 years), and 7% say wait until age 10 years or older.

Parents cite friends and family (32%) as their most common source of information or suggestions about how to talk with children about inappropriate touching, followed by the child's health care provider (24%), parenting books or magazines (20%), school or preschool (18%), social media (15%), children's books (14%), and religious institutions (11%). However, 41% of parents say they have not gotten any information on how to talk with their child about inappropriate touching.

Overall 60% of parents would want their child's school or preschool to teach students about inappropriate touching, and 76% want the school to provide information for parents on this topic.

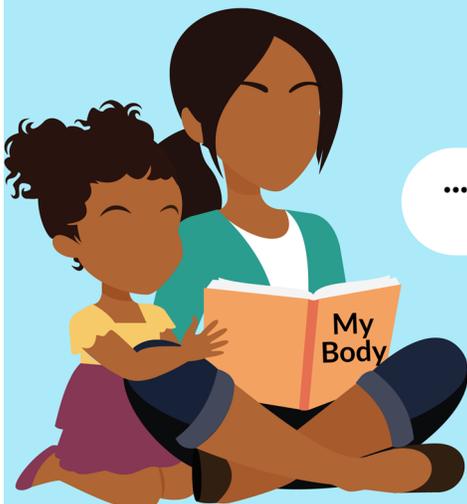
More parents of school-age children, compared to those of parents of preschoolers, say they have talked with their child about inappropriate touching (77% vs 44%). About half of parents of school-age children (47%), and only 11% of parents of preschoolers, think their child definitely knows the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching. Those parents who have talked about inappropriate touching are more likely to think their child knows the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching.

Among parents of school-age children, common reasons for not talking about inappropriate touching include just not getting around to it (39%), feeling their child is too young (36%), not wanting to scare their child (21%), not knowing how to bring it up (18%), and believing it is unnecessary to discuss because it rarely happens (18%). Among parents of preschool-age children who have not talked about inappropriate touching, 71% feel their child is too young and 20% have just not gotten around to it.

### Teaching children about appropriate vs inappropriate touching

Experts say to start talking with children during preschool years...

...but only 3 in 5 parents believe that's the best age to start



Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2020

### Report Highlights

3 in 4 parents of school-age children say they have talked about inappropriate touching, compared to less than half of parents of preschoolers.

2 in 5 parents report not receiving any information on how to talk with their child about inappropriate touching.

3 in 4 parents want their child's school or preschool to provide information for parents on how to talk about inappropriate touching.

## Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in January-February 2020 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 0-18 years living in their household (n=2,016). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 60% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,106 parents who had at least one child age 2-9 years. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±2 to 3 percentage points, and higher among subgroups.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the University of Michigan Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

Findings from the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health do not represent the opinions of the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan reserves all rights over this material.

## C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

Co-Director: Sarah J. Clark, MPH  
Co-Director: Gary L. Freed, MD, MPH  
Poll Manager: Dianne C. Singer, MPH  
Data Analyst: Acham Gebremariam, MS  
Publication Designer: Sara L. Schultz, MPS



**SUSAN B. MEISTER  
CHILD HEALTH EVALUATION  
AND RESEARCH CENTER**  
MICHIGAN MEDICINE

## Implications

Whether from news stories or their own firsthand knowledge, parents recognize child sexual abuse as horrific, something they hope would never happen to their child. Yet many parents are uncertain about their role in preventing sexual abuse. An important first step is to make sure children understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching. Experts recommend that parents start this process during the preschool years, by teaching the anatomically correct names for body parts and explaining what parts are private (for example, the body parts covered by a swimsuit).

Despite expert recommendations to start early, only 3 in 5 parents in this Mott Poll agreed that the preschool years were the right age to start. Among those parents who believed that conversations about inappropriate touching should start later, the predominant reason was that the child was too young. Instead, parents should think about this topic as something they will discuss multiple times, in age-appropriate ways as their child gets older.

Findings also suggest that many parents need additional information and support. Only one quarter of parents have gotten information from their child's health care provider on how to talk with their child about inappropriate touching, while 41% have not gotten any information from any source. Without guidance, it is not surprising that parents are unsure about how to approach this topic in an age-appropriate way.

Resources on child sexual abuse can help parents understand the rationale for expert recommendations. Statistics show that most child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child knows – a family member or family friend. For this reason, experts recommend that parents not force children to accept hugs, kisses or other physical contact. Another important statistic is that most child sexual abuse victims do not tell anyone about the abuse for at least a year. Thus, experts recommend that parents make sure children know they can tell mom and dad if someone's touching makes them uncomfortable, and emphasize that they will always listen to them.

This Mott Poll identified a group of parents who may be failing in their parenting responsibilities around preventing child sexual abuse: those who said it is unnecessary to discuss inappropriate touching because it rarely happens. Statistics show that up to 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused before the age of 18. Parents who disregard the reality of child sexual abuse, and who do not teach their child how to recognize and deal with inappropriate touching, are leaving their child unequipped to confront one of the gravest potential dangers of childhood.

One of the most common reasons for not talking about inappropriate touching was that parents just didn't get around to it. Given the devastating effects of child sexual abuse, this excuse is simply not consistent with good parenting. Parents should decide on a way to start the conversation, and make it a priority.

While in past decades, parents may have preferred topics like inappropriate touching to be handled "within the family," it is clear that the current generation of parents are interested in partnering with schools and preschools around this topic. Overall, 3 in 5 parents indicated that their child's school or preschool should teach students about inappropriate touching. Even stronger support was seen for schools providing information for parents on how to talk with their child. Parents may want to talk with teachers or administrators to arrange a parent workshop or guest speaker. Schools can use their websites or send home handouts that direct parents to expert recommendations on age-appropriate books and videos, tips for talking with children, and other resources.