

# Advocates launch all-out campaign to stop child sexual abuse



## 5 Steps to Protecting Children from Sex Abuse

### 1. Learn the facts

At least one in 10 children is sexually abused, and over 90 percent know their abusers. Children living with single parents or live-in partners are 20 times more likely to be victims.

### 2. Minimize opportunity

Eliminate or reduce isolated, one-on-one situations between adults and children, especially in child care settings.

### 3. Talk about it

Have open conversations with children about bodies, sex, and boundaries. Understand that children can be afraid to talk about abuse, and often test the waters with subtle comments. Use appropriate and accurate names for body parts, and explain to children that they should not keep "secrets" from parents. such as thumb-sucking or bed-wetting; fear of going home; changes in eating or sleeping patterns; excessive school absences, and inappropriate sexual behaviors or language.

Following a blueprint created by Mothers Against Drunk Driving, a Nashville group wants the same high-intensity, "It's not OK" attention paid to child sexual abuse.

Mobilizing such an effort won't be easy.

A group of local nonprofits known as the Nashville Child Protection Coalition says reducing sexual abuse will require a major shift in how parents talk with their children and better training and policies for institutions such as schools and day cares — the same kind of all-out effort that MADD used to change culture and laws about drunk driving.

The coalition has agreed on one key tool in its effort: a cutting-edge training program called "Stewards of Children." Its member groups want some 30,000 Nashvillians to experience the video-based lesson — a goal set because researchers say influencing 5 percent of the population can lead to real change.

"It's going to take a movement" was the refrain during a recent class hosted by the Nashville Sexual Assault Center, one of the nonprofits in the coalition.

"What we hope happens as a result of trainings like this, that we will get 'MADD', and we will take a position that we want to shift the culture," said Sharon Travis, community outreach director. "Somebody needs to stand up and say, 'No, this is not alright.'"

Trainers from the [Tennessee chapter of Children's Advocacy Centers](#) have been teaching Stewards of Children for about three years. In 2013, more than 11,000 adults took the class statewide, said Bonnie Beneke, executive director of the chapter.

n Nashville, they teach a free public class once a month, typically targeted at professionals who work with children. But the campaign will spread this year, especially in April, National Child Abuse Prevention Month, with a goal of taking the training from events put on by the nonprofits to large companies and the community.

"We want people to open up their doors in business communities," Beneke said. "We'd like to get into workplaces."

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## 4. Recognize the signs

Know the signs of abuse to protect children. Signs to watch for include: unexplained injuries, such as bruises in the shapes of objects; children returning to behaviors

## 5. React responsibly

Allow children to talk, do not ask leading questions, and do not make broad promises about the future. Be careful about showing anger toward the offender.

## Reporting Abuse

If a child speaks out about abuse, call 911 or Tennessee's abuse and neglect hotline at 877-237-0004. Abuse must be reported under Tennessee law, and information may be provided anonymously. Sources: Tennessee Child Advocacy Centers and "Stewards of Children" training



Get the training:

The Tennessee chapter of Children's Advocacy Centers hosts training sessions on child sexual abuse prevention. For more information about upcoming classes, call 615-327-9450.

Together, seven Nashville-based agencies have formed the Nashville Child Protection Coalition to focus on assault prevention. Those include the advocacy centers, the Nashville Sexual Assault Center, Nashville Children's Alliance, Family and Children's Services, Prevent Child Abuse Tennessee, Our Kids Center, and Magdalene.

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## Class teaches policies

Speaking to a class last month, Sexual Assault Center Executive Director Tom Tohill told the 40 participants that individual nonprofits can't stop sex abuse on their own.

He said [Stewards of Children](#) can help the community coalesce around a united strategy.

To really protect children, the adults in the world are the ones that are truly going to be able to protect them," he said.

Staff members from the Boys and Girls Club, Metro Schools, the city police department, churches and other nonprofits sat in on the class Tohill led.

The class breaks down sexual assault prevention into five steps. It features video testimonials from a diverse group of assault survivors. Through emotional stories, the survivors discuss abuses by coaches, relatives and mentors they once trusted.

The training video and booklet suggest policies that organizations serving children can use to protect them: Not allowing one-on-one interactions behind closed doors; how to handle locker room interactions; how to escort young children to the bathroom.

Partway through the film, instructors led a 40-minute discussion that grew candid. Some shared examples of policies at their nonprofits, talked about background checks for volunteers, and told stories of when children broached the delicate subject of abuse they had experienced — and how they helped.

"What I've liked so far in the training is the frankness of the language," said Beverly Whalen, a Metro Schools psychologist. "A lot of this is still kept quiet.

"I wish it were more common in our conversations, so then it wouldn't be so scary."