

PERSONAL POWER

PARENT LETTER 3: GROOMING & BOUNDARIES

The third lesson of our middle school *Safer, Smarter Teens: Personal Power* curriculum covered the topic of grooming as a red flag of an unsafe relationship. Your child will learn that adults, like parents, are accountable for their children’s education, wellbeing, and safety. When adults use this power responsibly, this is a healthy balance of power. The video scenario opened with Brianna, a student who “really wants to make the team.” She is with her soccer coach, who has presented her with a brand new pair of expensive cleats and asks her to keep the gift a secret. Lauren defined grooming as the steps an abuser takes to win the trust of kids. These may include special gifts and privileges, testing boundaries, gaining trust and access, secrecy, controlling the relationship, isolation, and, eventually, unsafe touches. She reviewed the scenario, noting the red flags, Brianna’s reactions, and the use of TFA (Think, Feel, Act). Classroom activities extended the knowledge of grooming by identifying red flags and steps to take action through several more scenarios in a class discussion.

PARENT CONNECTION

Most adults in charge of children use their power wisely – providing for their safety and education. Unfortunately, some use this power to manipulate and groom children for unsafe relationships by creating a feeling of intimacy with the child (“this will be our little secret” or “no one understands you like I do”). While not all instances of special treatment indicate sexual abuse, it is a red flag, and children should tell a trusted adult, such as a parent, to help them evaluate the situation. No one should ask them to keep a secret from their trusted adults. Since 90 percent of sexual abusers are known to the child either as family members, family friends, neighbors, babysitters, or youth leaders, it’s important for a child to have a variety of trusted adults he or she can turn to.

TIPS TO FURTHER TODAY’S LESSON

Discuss the common grooming behaviors below with your child and apply the TFA strategy (“What do you think? How do you feel? What would you do?”) if someone:

- Gave you special gifts, favors, treatment
- Tried to be alone with you
- Worked hard to gain your trust and access
- Touched you in ways that made you feel unsafe
- Was especially controlling in the relationship
- Engaged in threats or coercion
- Acted in secretive ways

Discuss the following scenario with your child: Your neighbor gives your child some extra money for helping her with her lawn. Then the neighbor tells your child “Let’s not tell your mom. This will be our secret.”

Think: What does your child think? Possibly that this is the neighbor’s way of thanking him or her.

Feel: He or she might feel happy and excited to have some extra money.

Act: Your child should thank your neighbor but be sure to check with you first before accepting the money. This scenario may not be grooming, but the neighbor should not have asked to keep the money a secret. That’s a red flag. Your child could say, “Oh, no, I couldn’t do that” and then let you know. Grooming tactics often make children feel guilty or ashamed. We want to reinforce that it is always okay to tell!