

The Power of Prevention

A Modern Parent's Guide to Building a Circle of Trust & Keeping Kids Safe in a Digital World

Presented by

RAACE

RAACE AGAINST ABUSE OF CHILDREN EVERYWHERE

25 Years of Protecting Maryland's Children



Foreword: The hard truth

By Kenneth Smith
Founder of RAACE

For 25 years, RAACE has been on a mission to stop child sexual abuse before it starts. When I first began this work, working alongside St. Vincent's Children's Center, I learned a truth that changed my life forever: the children who end up in state care are rarely there because of a stranger in a dark alley.

We have spent generations teaching our children to fear the "stranger in the white van." While teaching kids general caution is good, it entirely misses the reality of how child sexual abuse actually happens.

Here is the most important statistic you will ever read:

93%

of child sexual abuse reported to police was committed by a family member or someone the child knew.

U.S. Department of Justice. See Sources, page 11.

It happens right before our eyes. It happens at family barbecues, during youth sports practices, and at sleepovers. Abuse thrives in secrecy, and it thrives within our own "Circle of Trust" because we simply never expect it.

This guidebook is not here to scare you. It is here to **empower you**. By understanding how boundary-crossing actually happens in the real world and on modern digital screens, you can build a resilient, proactive family culture where your child feels safe, heard, and protected.





Section 1

1 Rethinking the “Circle of Trust”

The hardest pill for society to swallow is that abuse is rarely a sudden, violent event; it is a slow, methodical process called *grooming*. And predators don’t just groom children—they groom parents, too.

A predator will often make themselves indispensable to a family. They are the coach who offers free private lessons, the fun uncle who always brings the best gifts, or the family friend who is always willing to babysit. They build unquestioned trust with the parents to gain unmonitored access to the child.

Proactive safety rules for the real world

The “No Secrets” Rule: Predators rely on secrets. Teach your child from a very young age the difference between a *surprise* and a *secret*. A surprise (like a birthday party) is fun and temporary. A *secret* isolates the child. Strict family rule: It is never okay for an adult to ask a child to keep a secret from their parents.

Body Autonomy Starts Early: Your child owns their body. If they don’t want to hug Uncle John, kiss Grandma, or high-five the coach, do not force them. Teaching them that they control their boundaries at age 4 protects them from manipulation at age 14.

The Open-Door Policy: Reconsider traditional unmonitored settings. Keep hangouts, gaming, and internet use in highly trafficked areas of the home, like the living room or kitchen.

Do this today

The Circle of Trust app



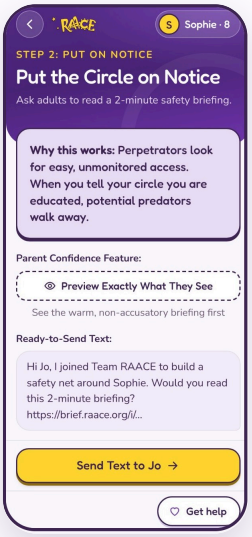
93% of child sexual abuse reported to police was committed by a family member or someone the child knew. That's why the Circle of Trust is so vital to our mission. In about two minutes, the free app helps you identify the adults who are willing to protect your child, and put any potential threats on notice.



Step 1

Map your child's world

Add every adult who has regular or unmonitored access to your child: family, coaches, teachers, babysitters. You only enter a first name.



Step 2

Put the Circle on notice

The app writes a text for each adult, with a link to a two-minute safety briefing. Preview exactly what they will see, then send it from your own phone.



Step 3

See who has read it

Your dashboard shows each adult who has read the basics. Links stay valid for 14 days, with no awkward follow-ups.

App screens show a made-up sample family.

Why it works

The adults who care learn what to watch for. And **if there is a predator in your circle, they will think twice about targeting your child after knowing your family is educated and vigilant.**

app.raace.org

Free · Nothing to install



Section 2

2 The digital playground

The “Circle of Trust” now extends to the internet. Today’s threats are mobile, hidden in plain sight, and brilliantly disguised as games, peers, or friends.

Modern apps & hidden dangers

Roblox, Minecraft, & VR Chat: These are massive, unmonitored social networks. Predators use in-game chats to build trust, offer free digital currency, and move the conversation to private apps.

Discord & Voice Chats: These voice rooms allow adults to speak directly into your child’s headset without you ever hearing the conversation.

Snapchat (Snap Maps): This broadcasts your child’s exact location to the street level. **Action:** Turn on “Ghost Mode” immediately.

Sextortion: Predators connect with a child online and convince them to send a compromising photo, then threaten to expose it unless the child complies with demands.

The “Safe Harbor” Rule

Tell your child:

“If you ever see something scary online, or send a picture you regret, come to me. I will not take your phone away, and you won’t be in trouble. My job is to protect you, and we will fix it together.”

Section 3

3 Empowering conversations

Experts agree that if children are comfortable talking openly with their parents, they are more confident and less likely to become victims of abuse. Establishing age-appropriate communication is your best defense.



18 months – 3 years old

- Teach your child which body parts are private (parts covered by a bathing suit), using their proper names.
- Make sure you know the adults and children that spend time with your child.
- Make surprise visits to your child's caregiver.

3 years – 5 years old

- *"If a grown-up ever asks you to keep a secret, you must tell me right away. You will never be in trouble."*
- Give simple answers. When children ask questions about their bodies, give simple answers so they know the topics are not "off limits."
- If your child asks an adult to perform a sexual act, or becomes forceful in sexual behavior, call your pediatrician for advice.





5 years – 8 years old

- Make sure they know it is okay to tell you about *anyone* who makes them feel uncomfortable, no matter who that person may be.
- Teach your child to respect the private parts of others and to expect others to do the same.
- Talk about whom they can tell when they are away from home, and listen closely when something seems hard for them to say.



8 years – 12 years old

- *"Who are you talking to on Roblox? Remember, someone who says they are a 10-year-old boy might actually be an adult."*
- Discuss peer pressure and create safety plans for uncomfortable situations.
- Teach them about sexual abuse and the places it can happen, such as locker rooms and out-of-the-way places. If their school has a prevention program, talk about what they learned.



13+ years (teenagers)

- *"If anyone ever pressures you for a photo or threatens you, please come to me. Do not try to handle it alone."*
- Promise them Safe Harbor: if they see something scary online or send a picture they regret, they can come to you without losing their phone or being in trouble.
- Set aside time each week to talk about the good, bad and confusing things they have experienced.



Section 4

4 Recognizing & reporting

Child sexual abuse is rarely committed in public and abusers are seldom caught in the act. A child in distress due to sexual abuse will exhibit signs that are often vague and difficult to spot. However, informed adults can prevent and interrupt abuse.

Warning signs to watch for

Emotional & behavioral changes

- Depression, anxiety, or sudden withdrawal
- Suddenly refuses to change for gym or participate in activities
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge for their age
- Bed wetting, specifically in older children

Increased fear & physical signs

- Nightmares or excessive crying
- Sudden fear of particular people or places (especially someone they used to trust)
- Pain, discomfort, or bleeding at the genitals
- Has difficulty walking or sitting

Note: *Children who have NOT been abused may display these behaviors at times. But when exhibited regularly or in combination, seek professional guidance.*

Get immediate help

If you suspect child abuse, contact your local Child Advocacy Center or call the National Child Abuse Hotline, staffed 24/7 with professional crisis counselors. If a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

1-800-4-A-CHILD
(1-800-422-4453)

Law enforcement strives to protect all children, but they cannot cover every area of a community. If you suspect a child needs help, reporting provides a crucial link between a caring professional and a hurt child.



Join Team RAACE

Child safety is a community effort. Every guidebook and every Circle stays free of charge for families. Here are four ways to help us reach more of them.

Map your child's Circle

Do the two-minute Circle of Trust exercise in the free app.

app.raace.org

Pass this guide along

Send it to another parent, a coach, a teacher or a grandparent. Informed adults can prevent and interrupt abuse.

RAACE.org

Give

RAACE is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Donations pay for the people and day-to-day work behind the guidebook and the app.

RAACE.org/donate

Volunteer or spread the word

Give your time, or introduce RAACE to your team, school, church or workplace.

RAACE.org/get-involved



The Builders Network

A special thank you to our Corporate Protectors

Child safety is a community effort. For 25 years, RAACE has been proudly supported by the leaders of Maryland's trade and construction industry. These businesses have taken the **Trade Partner Pledge** to keep our community safe and ensure this vital information reaches families free of charge.

Want to align your business with the protection of children?

Visit **RAACE.org/Sponsor** to join the Founders Circle and feature your company's commitment to our community on the back of our next edition.

About RAACE

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, our mission is to raise public awareness and provide tools to help adults protect children: in their family, in their community, and all over the world.

This guidebook and the Circle of Trust app are free for every family.

Contact

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About this guide

Sources

1. **93% of abuse reported to police was by someone the child knew.** In sexual assaults of children and teens reported to law enforcement, 93% of offenders were family members or acquaintances of the victim, and 7% were strangers. Howard N. Snyder, *Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, July 2000, NCJ 182990.

2. **Age-by-age conversations.** Based on recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, as in earlier editions of this guide. **healthychildren.org**

3. **Warning signs.** For more on recognizing the signs of abuse, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway, U.S. Children's Bureau. **childwelfare.gov**

4. **National Child Abuse Hotline.** Run by Childhelp. Call or text 1-800-422-4453, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. **childhelphotline.org**

About the photographs

The family and community photographs in this guide are illustrations created with AI. They do not show real people. The photograph of Kenneth Smith on page 2 is real, and the app screens on page 4 show a made-up sample family.



Every child deserves a safe circle.

RAACE AGAINST ABUSE OF CHILDREN EVERYWHERE

Suspect abuse? National Child Abuse Hotline, 24/7

1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

If a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

RAACE.org | app.raace.org

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