

PERSONAL POWER

Dear Parent,

Your child will be participating in the **Safer, Smarter Teens** personal safety curriculum over the next several weeks. The *Safer, Smarter Teens* curriculum was developed by me, Lauren Book, M.S.Ed., in collaboration with a developmental psychologist and career educators, to arm your child with the necessary skills to avoid sexual abuse and exploitation. It is age-appropriate and provides practical strategies to help teens protect themselves without being explicit or frightening.

Parents and other responsible adults want to protect children from those who might harm them, but no child can be supervised 24 hours a day. Middle school students by nature want to be more independent and fit in with their peer group. The *Safer, Smarter Teens* curriculum will teach your child ways that he or she can reduce the likelihood of being abused and how to get help if needed.

The curriculum is taught through six lessons that incorporate videos in which I review scenarios involving middle school students that cover our topic areas. The teacher then directs in-class discussions and activities, including small-group work and journal prompts. Information is sent home to you after each lesson to build your background knowledge of the day's topic, to provide you and your child the opportunity to extend the discussion further, and to allow for more individual attention to this important topic. This discussion also helps to keep the lines of communication open between you and your child, which is key to his or her safety. We want teens to recognize that:

- Building self-esteem increases responsible behavior, including assisting others.
- Safe relationships involve a balance of power.
- Setting personal boundaries means they have the right to say "no" to anything and anyone that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- They need to have a few adults they trust whom they can go to whenever a situation makes them feel scared or uncomfortable.
- They can learn to recognize "red flags," such as secrets or threats, that may be warning signs of unsafe situations.

The activities in the *Safer, Smarter Teens* curriculum have been designed to meet existing educational standards while imparting critical personal safety information. If you have any questions about the curriculum, please contact your child's teacher. You can learn more about the curriculum by visiting SaferSmarterTeens.org.

Thank you,



Lauren Book, M.S.Ed.
Founder/CEO, Lauren's Kids

ABOUT LAUREN'S KIDS: *Lauren's Kids was founded by child abuse survivor, prevention advocate, and elementary school educator Lauren Book. The organization educates adults and children about sexual abuse topics through an in-school curriculum and speaking engagements around the world. The goal of Lauren's Kids is to create a world where the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is not tolerated. Lauren's Kids is a designated 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.*

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PARENT LETTER 1: SELF-ESTEEM & PERSONAL POWER

In our first lesson of *Safer, Smarter Teens: Personal Power*, your child met Lauren Book, an educator and advocate who briefly shared her story of childhood abuse to set the stage for a discussion about personal safety. Lauren introduced the concept of positive personal power, which includes power to recognize danger, the power to say “no,” the power to get help, and the power to set personal body boundaries. She defined sexual abuse and gave an overview of the curriculum. A photo montage of middle school students was featured, with taglines describing their personal and family situations, things like, “Not sure he fits in” and “Worried they’re laughing at him.” Many of their stories will be depicted and discussed in the videos to be shown in the next five lessons. Lauren introduced the *Safer, Smarter Teens* theme of “Be the Change” and taking action with our personal power by making positive “power plays.”

PARENT CONNECTION:

This lesson sets the stage for the entire program by introducing the idea that we all have the personal power within us to make choices and decisions that keep us safe. We can use that power to recognize red flags that alert us to unsafe situations involving ourselves or others.

Today’s lesson is important because early adolescence is a challenging time for both children and parents. As children strive to grow up and be independent – an important developmental step – they don’t yet have the emotional maturity or strategies to handle difficult situations they may encounter. Keeping the lines of communication open with your child is an important part of being one of his or her trusted adults to whom he or she can turn. Abusers often target young adolescents because children in this age group are frequently insecure, may be exploring their sexuality, and are moving beyond the constant watch of their parents.

TIPS TO FURTHER TODAY’S LESSON:

Ask your child about the various taglines introduced with the students in the video. Did any look like something he or she has encountered or felt? How did he or she handle and resolve it? Students participated in activities related to building self-esteem. Ask your child to share his or her thoughts on the day’s lesson and the classroom activities that supported it.

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PARENT LETTER 2: FITTING IN & ACCEPTANCE

The second lesson of **Safer, Smarter Teens: Personal Power** included a video scenario with Mike and Sarah discussing their after school plans. Mike is Sarah's first boyfriend and would like some "alone time" with Sarah ("Are you going to be alone at home? We are going out, right?"). Commenting on this video scenario, Lauren acknowledged that we all want to be accepted and loved, and she provided guidelines to help manage our relationships safely. A safe relationship was defined as one with an appropriate balance of power. An appropriate balance of power is when both people share in decision-making, feel comfortable communicating, and respect each other's wishes. She reviewed the scenario and asked students to pay attention to body boundaries and listening to your Guiding Voice. She identified an imbalance of power in a relationship as a possible red flag. She introduced a "Power Play" – TFA (Think, Feel, Act) as a way to maintain a safe relationship.

This concept is based on tested psychological theories as a foundation to evaluate a situation. Thinking about a situation is the objective part such as gathering data is in the scientific method. What do you see? What's going on? Feeling is more subjective and individual. How do you feel about it? Acting, of course, is the behavior that follows. What will you do to stay safe?

PARENT CONNECTION:

Adolescents' worlds are expanding to include emotional and physical attractions, which may lead them into situations that compromise their values and comfort level, compounded by their need to be accepted. By keeping the lines of communication open, you can help your child feel comfortable coming to you with difficult issues. Review the concepts of safe vs. unsafe relationships and the balance of power in relationships with your child. Remind your child that when someone is feeling pressured to do something that makes him or her uncomfortable, this is unsafe.

TIPS TO FURTHER TODAY'S LESSON:

Discuss with your child the concepts below that were introduced in the lesson. For example, the idea that he or she has the right to set body boundaries and expect them to be respected. You might ask, "Is it ok to go along with something you know and feel to be wrong to maintain a friendship?" Or "Can you identify red flags in unsafe relationships?"



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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!

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PARENT LETTER 4: A.C.T. – ABUSE, DISCLOSURE, & GETTING HELP

During our fourth lesson of **Safer, Smarter Teens: Personal Power**, your child saw a video scenario featuring Chris, whose backstory includes that he is “being abused by his mom’s boyfriend.” Lauren reviewed the red flags of abuse. She noted that abusers create opportunities to be alone with children and teens and may offer enticing experiences, such as access to alcohol or inappropriate movies, with the caveat not to tell. She shared her conflicts about disclosing her abuse and reminded students that abuse is never the child’s fault. Students practiced A.C.T. (Ask, Care, Tell) as a way to respond to red flags and to reach out to peers.

PARENT CONNECTION

Middle school age children are old enough to be aware of changes in their friends’ behaviors and help them recognize questionable or unsafe situations. This lesson reinforces ways in which children can access help because it’s always okay to tell. Encourage your child to share his or her observations and concerns. Discuss what to do if his or her friend discloses abuse. It is important to stay calm in this situation. Remind your child to reassure that friend that your child is glad he or she confided in him or her. Your child can help a friend by telling a trusted adult. When children disclose abuse to adults, it is important for adults also to remain calm and reassuring. It is very difficult for a victim to disclose abuse, so a calm, non-judgmental response is best.

TIPS TO FURTHER TODAY’S LESSON

Look for opportunities to discuss “what if” situations with your child and review strategies for using A.C.T. (Ask, Care, Tell).

For example:

- What if a friend tells you that she is uncomfortable when her cousin comes over? He is 30 and always comments about how good she looks. He tries to be alone with her and has bought her makeup that her mom doesn’t know about.
- What if a friend tells you that his music teacher has given him beer to relax and begs you not to tell anyone?
- What if your cousin seems sad and quiet? You miss texting and chatting together. She says that her dad won’t let her use the phone.

Ask your child how he or she would A.C.T. – What would he or she Ask to begin the conversation with his or her friend who may be in an unsafe situation? How would your child communicate that he or she Cares about the safety and well-being of the friend? Reinforce the next step: Telling a trusted adult and getting help. (Consider asking your child what he or she would do if the friend begged your child not to tell and to keep this unsafe secret.)