

Expert Available for Comment:

BRONWEN CARROLL, MD

Pediatric Emergency Medicine Physician and Child Protection Advocate

DR. BRONWEN CARROLL, MD, is a board-certified pediatric emergency medicine physician at Boston Medical Center and an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at Boston University Chobanian and Avedisian School of Medicine. She graduated magna cum laude from Harvard College and received her medical degree from the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where she was inducted into Alpha Omega Alpha, the national medical honor society. After receiving her medical degree, Dr. Carroll completed a pediatrics residency at Massachusetts General Hospital and a pediatric emergency medicine fellowship at Boston Medical Center. She lives with her four children and husband in Boston.



With more than 20 years of experience working with children and families who have experienced sexual abuse and assault, Dr. Carroll is currently writing a book about how to talk to our kids about preventing sexual abuse. *We Need to Be Talking About This* will be both a powerful call to action on preventing childhood sexual abuse and helping children stay safe, and a practical guide for parents, caregivers, educators, and anyone who cares about children. One in 10 children experience sexual abuse before the age of 18¹—making it more common than any childhood illness or injury that parents routinely hear about preventing. This is a public health crisis that can be changed through education, and yet families are not equipped to talk about it, and kids are not prepared to protect themselves. Dr. Carroll is working to reshape the cultural dialogue and is on a mission to empower parents and make child protection a priority. For more information, visit her website [here](#).

THEMES AND IDEAS THAT DR. BRONWEN CARROLL CAN DISCUSS:

- How child sexual abuse is not just a tragedy, but a public health emergency—and what we can do about it
- How childhood sexual abuse is shockingly common, but largely preventable
- Why grooming behaviors are the tools predators rely on—and how to teach your kids to recognize them and respond
- How to build a family culture where no topic is off-limits
- Age-appropriate strategies for talking to kids from preschool through high school

- Why talking about sexual abuse and sexual assault should be a standard part of child development
- What signs to watch for and how to respond
- Why creating confident, connected children is one of the best ways to protect them
- What children should know about online safety and pornography
- What young adults should know about sexual assault before heading off to college
- How to talk to teens about healthy relationships

A CONVERSATION WITH DR. BRONWEN CARROLL:

Q: You have been treating victims of sexual abuse in the pediatric ER for decades. Can you share why you feel that now is the time to speak out?

A: While I have spent years caring for children who have been sexually assaulted in the Emergency Department, I hadn't realized how little information and education parents were receiving on this topic until my daughter's teacher was arrested and charged with possession of child sexual abuse materials. After that event, I had the opportunity to speak to parents and offer guidance as to how they could discuss sexual abuse with their children. These conversations led me to understand that parents are not receiving the tools and education they need to facilitate having these crucial conversations with their kids. That has to change. Childhood sexual abuse is overwhelmingly more likely to happen to a child than the vast majority of potential risks that we routinely warn kids about. We should be having conversations to prevent sexual abuse rather than just reacting once it happens, but we have allowed a culture of silence that further endangers kids to exist for too long. All children should be educated about sexual abuse and how to stay safe. Parents are the best people to provide the education that kids need, and I want to help parents learn how to do that.

Q: Why do you think pediatricians aren't talking to parents about preventing childhood sexual abuse alongside other routine childhood illnesses and injuries?

A: I think that some pediatricians are talking to parents about preventing childhood sexual abuse. The problem is that as healthcare has evolved in the United States, pediatricians, and all primary care physicians, are expected to fit an ever-increasing to-do list into visits that are simultaneously shrinking in time. So, in a typical 30-minute well-child visit, pediatricians are supposed to discuss physical development, social and emotional development, growth, nutrition, vaccination, injury prevention and a long list of other topics, and that's before addressing a single parental concern or performing a physical exam! Preventing childhood sexual abuse is a critically important subject, but it is also too broad and involved to be adequately covered in a sentence or two crammed between other topics.

Q: One in 10 children experiences sexual abuse before the age of 18. This number is staggering to comprehend and amounts to a public health crisis. What are some steps that families can take to equip themselves to discuss this important topic with their kids?

A: An easy first step is for parents to explain to their children that adults should never ask kids to keep secrets. I like this opening because it's simple and it applies to kids of all ages. A secret is different from a surprise. A surprise is something that a person will eventually find out and be happy about, like surprising a friend with balloons on his birthday. A secret is different. A secret is something nobody

should ever find out about and something that other people would probably be upset about. Adults should never ask kids to keep secrets and kids should know that if an adult ever does tell them to keep something secret, that the right thing to do is actually to tell another adult right away.

The second simple introductory step that parents can take is to reassure their children that if an adult ever does something that makes them feel uncertain or uncomfortable, that they should tell their parents immediately and their parents will protect them and believe them. Unfortunately, the majority of children who experience sexual abuse do not disclose their abuse for years, if ever. Children frequently don't disclose because they fear not being believed, and predators often reinforce this fear, telling children that either they won't be believed or that they will get in trouble if they disclose or both. Parents need to get ahead of those beliefs and reassure their kids that they will always be believed and protected if they share that something bad has happened to them.

Q: When should parents start educating their children about these topics?

A: Parents should be introducing the idea of bodily autonomy from birth! When giving baths or changing diapers, parents can discuss that children get to decide who touches their bodies and when and how. Even when babies are too little to understand, if parents start mentioning these things, then it becomes something that kids have always heard and are familiar and comfortable with. It also helps make parents more comfortable to start having these conversations from the very beginning and to have them regularly interjected in daily life in a low-key way, as opposed to becoming isolated high-pressure conversations that feel as if they're coming out of nowhere.

Q: Can you share some grooming behaviors that parents should watch out for?

A: The research that has been done with convicted child predators demonstrates remarkable consistency in the grooming patterns that predators use with children. Grooming is a process by which a predator prepares a child, significant adults, and the environment for abuse of a child with a goal of maintaining a child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. Grooming is some combination of gaining a child's trust, gaining a family's trust, manipulating the environment, and ensuring secrecy to facilitate sexual abuse. Child predators don't just groom children, however. Child predators groom families, institutions and local communities as well, all as part of a broader strategy to obtain access to children while avoiding detection.

The first step in grooming is selecting a potential victim. Predators report selecting children who seem needy, insecure and have low self-esteem. So, building our kids up so that they feel strong and confident and good about themselves is something that all parents should be doing at baseline anyway, but it happens to help protect against victimization as well. Predators also seek out children who appear to have low levels of parental involvement. Parents can help protect their kids by making themselves visible and present to adults who interact with their kids. All parents are busy, and no parent can, or should be, present all the time. But by occasionally dropping in on babysitters unexpectedly, introducing themselves to coaches, observing afterschool activities and visiting classrooms, when possible, parents send a message that they're paying attention, and that is exactly what child predators are trying to avoid.

This is also where the secrecy piece comes in. Kids should know that adults should never ask them to keep secrets, even if it's a secret gift or enjoying a secret privilege that other kids aren't getting, which is a strategy that child predators frequently employ to build a relationship with a potential victim.

Then the next step in grooming that child predators use is desensitizing children to touch and sexual materials by starting with "accidental" or benign touches and exposing them to varying forms of sexual content. Kids should know that adults should not be touching them in any sort of regular way and should not be telling jokes or showing them materials of a sexual nature.

Q: The rise of the digital era has given child predators access to greater numbers of children and provided easier methods of communication to reach these children. What are some steps that parents can proactively take to set digital boundaries for their children?

A: The most important tool that parents have in protecting their kids in all situations is engaging in open and honest conversations regularly. Parents need to know what their kids are doing online and having conversations about potential risks and situations to look out for. This means first and foremost just having genuine curiosity about what your kids are doing online, and then also discussing pornography, online enticement and sexual exploitation with them. A 2022 survey conducted by Common Sense Media found that 73% of teens reported seeing online pornography by age 17, 54% of teens reported seeing online pornography before age 13, and 15% of children reported seeing online pornography before age 10. Kids should not have devices in their rooms and have no reason to be talking to people they don't know online, even if they are under the impression that the other person is a child. Children need to know that they should not be saying anything online or sharing images that they would not want to be broadly distributed to their parents, relatives, and entire school. All kids should be trained to assume that anyone they encounter online is really an adult with questionable intentions. But it isn't just child predators operating online whom kids and parents need to be aware of. Sexting and sextortion between peers is a growing problem and parents need to be discussing those scenarios with their children as well.

TO BE IN TOUCH WITH DR. BRONWEN CARROLL:

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