Child & Youth Advocacy: Building Your Child's Safety Skills to Help Prevent Unhealthy Sexual Behavior

Episode transcript

Introduction:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. We're welcoming Amanda Mitten back to the podcast. We'll talk about building your child's safety skills to help prevent sexual behaviors. Amanda, welcome back to the podcast.

Amanda Mitten:

Hello. Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be back.

Bruce:

Yep. It's always good to have you with us. We always touch on really important topics, topics that are really of great interest to families. Before we get into that, let's learn a bit about you and what it is that you do and where you're located.

Amanda:

Sure, I would love to. I am a licensed professional counselor. I was born and raised in Oklahoma, currently living in Oklahoma City. I've worked for the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center for coming up on 10 years, which doesn't feel right, but somehow is.

In my time here, I've really had such an incredible opportunity to gain expertise in so many different areas related to child mental health. I think the thing that has brought me here to this podcast is related to my work as a lead trainer in the University of Oklahoma problematic sexual behavior cognitive behavioral therapy model. We are a part of the National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth, which we will continue to reference and something I'm sure folks are familiar with.

I'm also a certified therapist in trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, and in addition to just the credentials, which are whatever, boring, blah, blah, blah, I do have a particular connection to supporting children and families through hardships and building hope for their futures, whether that's through therapy or supporting and prevention-related services.

Bruce:

Well, great, and this will be a conversation really aimed at parents, giving them information, resources, definitions and such that really will be helpful to parents. Let's get some definitions out of the way first. What would constitute sexual behavior in children?

Amanda:

It's a really good question, and I'm sure something that comes to parents' minds frequently. I know that as a part of this podcast series, many of my colleagues have come on and spoken about sexual behavior in youth, as well, so I encourage folks to go back and listen to previous episodes.

However, we do tend to think about sexual behavior as occurring on a spectrum. The spectrum includes behaviors that are considered normative, to inappropriate, to problematic, to harmful and illegal behaviors, as well. Inappropriate are those that we might consider to be more unhealthy in nature, are those behaviors that would fall outside of what would be considered a typical part of development.

From a prevention standpoint, and in considering the alternative to that healthy sexual development, our goal is to empower and support families and having open conversations with their children about their bodies, private parts, respect, boundaries, consent. The list certainly goes on and on.

These discussions are also really encouraged to include information on abuse prevention. In other words, keeping ourselves safe, as well as age-appropriate sex education.

Bruce:

We're looking at these behaviors, as you said in a continuum. We're starting with, I think you said, expected behaviors or typical behaviors, and there is a range of behaviors that goes into the area of problematic and illegal. Do I have that right?

Amanda:

That's correct, yes. Great summary.

Bruce:

OK, so when we look at these behaviors, how prevalent are these behaviors and what would be some of the vulnerability factors associated with them?

Amanda:

Prevalence can be a really difficult thing to measure as it relates to children and sexual behaviors, and sexual acting out. Nationwide, there are going to be different statutes, regulations and laws surrounding reporting child-initiated sexual behaviors. And

because of that, the number of children who engage in inappropriate or problematic sexual behavior is really quite unclear.

While having these numbers can be helpful to ensure our communities are providing appropriate education, treatment, resources to families in need, we're also cautious of tracking, as there is still quite a bit of stigma and stereotype surrounding sexual behavior. It's important to be mindful that systems in place aren't meaning to perpetuate harmful stereotypes, but they can do that.

However, some things that we do know when we think about sexual play, for example, something that might fall more closer to the continuum of typical or moving into slightly inappropriate behavior, we do know that sexual play does occur across childhood. It's not only in preschool children. I think that can sometimes be an assumption that folks hold.

It also tends to occur with children that are already known to each other. That might be siblings, peers, cousins, folks they spend a lot of time with. And when we look at some of the retrospective research around sexual play, it indicates that it's actually fairly common. So upwards of 66% to 80% of adults who have been surveyed rather have said that that's an experience that they have had.

And it's important to note that if the play is really considered truly sex play and not something that's moved down the spectrum or continuum of being inappropriate or problematic, the encounter retrospectively tends to be perceived as positive or neutral.

To your question about vulnerability factors surrounding development of problematic sexual behaviors, I think it's really important to consider the impact of sexual abuse, modeling of sexuality in the child's environment. We're also going to think about the modeling of coercion in their environments.

That might include things like domestic violence, physical and harsh parenting practices. Also, parental capacity makes a big difference. So those factors might include things like difficulties in a caregiver's life that would hinder their ability to engage in those positive parenting strategies.

But then there's also going to be child vulnerabilities as well and strengths. But any of those predisposed conditions, like ADHD or just difficulty with impulse control, I think the short answer is that, in general, there are multiple pathways that lead to problematic sexual behavior that are varied and maybe intersecting as well.

In other words, it's maybe not just one specific factor.

Bruce:

OK. So, when we look at these various factors, these pathways, these vulnerabilities, what are some of the protective factors that can help prevent problematic sexual behaviors?

Amanda:

Protective factors are the things that ... This is where we want to focus. This is what we want folks to really take away in a big way. A lot of obviously what we've talked about already has been heavier and tougher topics around, what if these things happen, what are the vulnerabilities? And we know these vulnerabilities exist. It's also really important to note that the development of problematic sexual behavior is not a one-way street from any of those things we just talked about.

In addition to this, there are so many supportive and protective factors that parents can bring into their home and their child's environments to promote healthy sexual development. To do this, it's really important that parents promote and model healthy boundaries with others and do their best.

Obviously, some of this is outside of our control, but do their best to protect their children from harm and trauma. This might include helping their children develop language and clear steps for how to respond and what to say in situations in which they feel unsafe or uncomfortable. Age-appropriate parental guidance and supervision is going to be critical.

That would also include opportunities for pro-social experiences, guidance around decision-making, modeling of healthy peer relationships to help their child build confidence. Also increase positive and open communication between and within the family, create space to give them experiences in which they can develop healthy and adaptive coping skills through all of this.

Bruce:

These are a lot of what ends up to be conversations that parents are going to have with their children. What are these conversations or what should these conversations look like between parents and their children?

Amanda:

Absolutely. I think, in general, we tend to be huge proponents of parents creating a little bit of an "open-door policy." I put that in quotes, obviously, as we're talking about sexual behavior, privacy, modesty, all those things. Maybe not literally an open door, but figuratively creating an open-door policy when it comes to engaging with their children.

In doing so, they set themselves up to create a safe space for their children to come to them with the hard questions or the uncomfortable questions, so specifically parents can support their children in establishing all of those protective factors we just discussed. I think, as a parent, sometimes it can feel tempting to put your child in a bubble and never let them out. There's so much going on in our world that can feel unsafe, and our world is very scary at times.

We know, however, that putting them in that bubble is not how they develop skills and assertiveness, pro-social behavior and how to keep themselves safe in the long run. I

think parents should help themselves and work towards feeling prepared to give their child steps for how to respond in situations that make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

Also, though not just about risk, it's also about helping them build respect for themselves and others such that they engage in healthy relationships and interactions with those around them. In addition, I think we know there are so many great things that the internet has provided us, but with that has also brought a lot of risk and vulnerability. It's really imperative that parents themselves are good consumers of the internet to both inform and protect their children in these areas.

Bruce:

How would the conversations be different when parents are talking to teenagers?

Amanda:

In general, the themes are going to remain the same. However, we do know that as children age, the expectations around their behaviors will change. Every family is going to have different beliefs and values for what kind of sexual behaviors are in line with their own family's value systems and the culture of their upbringing.

However, parents should be prepared to broach these subjects with their teens if they haven't already done so, of course. And consent, respect, safety and communication as a part of intimate relationships or just relationships period are among other topics that would be incredibly important for teens to be engaged in.

Bruce:

Would you walk us through an example of problem-solving skills that you would teach parents and children?

Amanda:

Of course. I think these skills are really, really fun and things that are resources that we provide parents on a routine basis. I think these skills are really based on the relationship between our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. And when difficult situations arise, this is going to result in what we call "automatic thoughts," and these automatic thoughts are going to shape our feelings, behaviors and then the ultimate consequences of those behaviors.

When we teach ourselves and our children to increase their awareness, first of these thoughts and these feelings, we're equipping them with skills for working toward more helpful decision-making. For parents, I think it's helpful to equip them with the skills for identifying patterns in their child's behavior that may lead to more inappropriate or unhelpful decision-making to sort of catch it on the front end.

So perhaps I know my child is more likely to make a poor decision when they're bored. I'm going to first put in some preventative measures to keep them active and decrease

boredom overall. This can support in setting their child up for success when they're faced with these situations.

When we're putting those problem-solving skills into place, though, the first step is really to stop and identify the feelings that are arising for the child and support them in doing so. This is going to support them in being more aware of how certain feelings lead us to make certain decisions. So again, that pattern development we just discussed. It's important to use this as an opportunity to also give children skills in how to relax or calm their big feelings.

Things like deep breathing or engaging in muscle relaxation where we progressively tense and relax muscles to teach our body what it feels like to be relaxed. Children may also need support in identifying alternative options when they're faced with difficult situations.

I encourage parents to walk them through this, as well, and in doing so as they're going through the different options when we're faced with difficult decisions, it may also be relevant to help them weigh the pros and cons of specific options, which then would lead them to being able to choose the best course of action in that situation.

Bruce:

Let's bring these problem-solving skills into the military life. Military families move a lot, such as during a PCS when they're doing a military move. That is going to be one example of children finding themselves in new social situations. In what ways can parents help their children navigate these new social situations?

Amanda:

As we discussed with respect to those protective factors, the development of pro-social peer relationships, this would be true for children and adults, is a significant predictor of healthy and helpful decision-making in the long run. I think I would support parents in preparing themselves to talk with their child about both positive and negative peer pressure and, as previously discussed, preparing them for managing situations that might feel riskier and more uncomfortable as we're entering into a lot of newness.

We know that changes in transitions may also bring about a lot of big feelings for both children and their parents. Let's normalize those feelings. They're so normal, and so creating that space for their child to share their feelings, I think is going to be really integral to normalizing and validating a child's experience during these transitions and these changes.

When there are these times of transition for children, I also tend to advocate for a parent within as much as they can to provide as much consistency and predictability within that environment that they have control over, so maybe that's the home environment.

I think this really helps the child feel more in control in certain spaces when the zoomed-out version of that perhaps is that things in general feel more out of control, but adds that semblance of control in those moments.

Bruce:

This is really great information, Amanda. I appreciate it. What I'd like to ask is that you talk about why it's important for parents to be aware of where their child is spending their time, and by that, I mean the friends they hang out with, the places they go, both in real life and then also online.

Amanda:

First and foremost, I empower those caregivers just as we talked about themselves being good consumers of how their child is spending their time on the internet and just the internet in general. I'm going to also empower caregivers to stay informed and involved in their child's social life. I think first and foremost, this type of positive involvement reflects really the care and love they have for their child, demonstrates that they care about how they're spending their time.

Additionally, I think also being aware and ahead of those risky situations, this can help with that. And importantly in playing an active role, they're showing their child that they are consistently available and present for them in those situations. Good, bad and ugly.

I think this takes us back to our discussion around creating that "open-door policy" by being informed, aware and available regarding their child's free time or social life, they create the incredibly important opportunity for their child to come to them with questions, concerns, situations that feel unsafe or uncomfortable, but also those situations that they can celebrate together.

Those successes, those wins, the positive, the neutral and the negative should it arise.

Bruce:

How can families actively build their social network when they're establishing relationships in a new community and really what's the benefit? Why is this so important?

Amanda:

When the families I'm working with are looking for ways to connect in their communities, I often encourage building connections with those they come into contact with the most. Perhaps that's at work or in the school environment. This can help families in learning about their community.

Other places that I think would be good to go to work on some of that networking, so to speak. We know public libraries, local schools, many faith-based centers and other community-based agencies, YMCA, if that's relevant, may also be helpful resources in connecting and integrating into a new community.

And then, dare I say, perhaps the internet as well. I think with the right internet searches, it can hold a plethora of information about what's available to families out there.

Bruce:

Well, hopefully we are evidence that there are good things to be found for families on the internet.

Amanda:

That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

Bruce:

And to that point, you are returning to this podcast. Your colleagues have been on the podcast before talking about this topic, and we've got links in this episode, program notes to other episodes that you've helped out with. One is about talking to your kids about healthy sexual development. Another is about defining what is typical sexual development in children and youth. There is a lot of good out there and we do our best to bring it to military families. With that, I just invite you to wrap this up and share any final thoughts on the topic.

Amanda:

I appreciate that, and I think one of the things that I'd like to share as we close is when we talk to youth, certainly when we're talking with youth, it's after they're involved in services, and so we're less on the prevention side and more on the treatment side of those problematic situations.

But I think what we hear over and over, and this is to empower parents, is that youth consistently report to us that the parents who are there for them is hands down, bar none the most important thing. It's interesting that youth don't always remember exactly what you're saying, but they sure do remember that you were there.

So those positive pro-social relationships and hope for the future, I think is really going to come from that. I hope that parents can take away from this that they have such an amazing opportunity to build that connection with their youth, to help keep them safe, engage them in fun activities and help them navigate any difficulties that arise.

Their youth want to hear from them, their kids want to hear from them, and they remember when they're present.

Bruce:

Excellent. Just a spot-on message to wrap this episode up. Thank you, Amanda Mitten, for joining us, and we hope to have you back.

Amanda:

Thank you so much for having me.

Bruce:

Absolutely. I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We'd love to hear from you. Click on the link in the program notes, send us a note, maybe a question or an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-Bye.