

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.

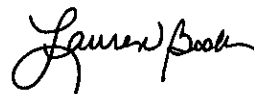
Parents and other responsible adults want to protect children from those who might harm them, but no child can be supervised 24 hours a day. Middle school students by nature want to be more independent and fit in with their peer group. The *Safer, Smarter Teens* curriculum will teach your child ways 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.

PERSONAL POWER

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?"

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

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.)

PERSONAL POWER

PARENT LETTER 7: HUMAN TRAFFICKING

In this *Safer, Smarter Teens: Personal Power* lesson, your child learned about the problem of Human Trafficking. *Human trafficking is when a child or adult is recruited, hidden, transported against their will by using force, fraud, or coercion for the personal gain of another.* Students learned that human trafficking is modern-day slavery. Historical references were used to help students understand that just as Harriett Tubman and other members of the Underground Railroad rescued slaves and brought them to freedom, there may be someone they know who has lost their personal power and needs to be rescued. Scenarios were used to illustrate risky situations and circumstances that may make teens more vulnerable. Methods of reporting suspected or actual human trafficking and the importance of advocating for themselves and others were reviewed.

PARENT CONNECTION

This lesson was very important because teenagers have increased independence. Teens need to have knowledge of potential risks and develop the skills needed to maintain their personal power to stay safe. Human traffickers use tactics to control and manipulate others by creating an imbalance of power.

School-aged children right here in the United States – and even in your own community – are being trafficked, therefore it is essential that all students and parents are informed of the risks. There are factors that may increase the risk of being a victim of human trafficking including being a runaway, living in poverty, dropping out of school, having low self-esteem, and feeling a lack of opportunities. However, any child could be the target of human traffickers.

It is very important that you and your child understand how human traffickers maintain control. Control is maintained by removing the victim's freedom. Traffickers often control the money, food, personal identification, and living conditions of their victims – though every case is different. Traffickers often provide illegal drugs to victims, maintaining control through access to drugs. There is also a lot of emotional and psychological manipulation. Everyone wants to feel connected and loved by other people. We have a natural desire to have relationships. Relationships create bonds. In healthy relationships, there are positive and productive bonds. However, in unhealthy relationships there are destructive or trauma bonds. The creation of a trauma bond is an intentional process. The abuser starts by filling the need of the victim. The use of secrecy and isolation creates even more dependence. The abuser then manipulates the victim's behavior by making false promises. Abusers use the bonds that have formed to convince the victim to do things in the name of love. The trauma bond makes it very difficult for the victim to leave.

TIPS TO FURTHER TODAY'S LESSON

Discuss various situations where a trafficker could approach your child. Apply the TFA strategy ("What do you think? How do you feel? What would you do?") if someone:

- Contacted you online and offered to meet you to talk about an afterschool job
- Stopped you in the mall and offered you a free photoshoot and modeling contract
- Offered you a job doing farm labor on the weekends for cash
- Chatted with you online and asked to meet in person at a party

During this lesson, students used the **A.C.T.** rule: **A**sk, **C**are, **T**ell to respond to an unsafe situation. It is essential for children to have the tools to advocate for themselves and others.

Discuss the following scenario with your child: One of your friends starts hanging out with some older kids. When you ask to get together, your friend tells you that he/she already has plans. You start to notice that your friend seems anxious and nervous since hanging out with these older friends.

What can you **A**sk your friend to find out if something is wrong?

Your friend tells you he/she is being forced to deliver drugs for some of the older kids.

What can you say to show you **C**are?

Who can you **T**ell to get your friend help?

Remind your child, how important it is to seek help if they or someone they know is in an unsafe situation. To seek help for human trafficking:

- Text "**BeFree**" (**233733**) and immediately connect with the **National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-3737-888)**.
- Local Law Enforcement - **911**
- Florida Abuse Hotline - **1.806.96.ABUSE (1.800.962.2873)**

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PARENT LETTER 5: ISOLATION: STAYING SAFE IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

In the fifth lesson of *Safer, Smarter Teens: Personal Power*, your child learned about safety concerns in our growing virtual world of social media with texting, online gaming, and apps. This lesson features two characters: Jacob and Stephanie. Jacob has friends he only knows online, and Stephanie's parents are out late every night. Lauren noted that it's never been easier to connect with people online. This open communication is great, but it can open up teens to what is known as cyber-grooming, which is the use of technology to groom someone for abuse. Cyber-groomers sometimes pretend to be kids themselves.

Lauren discusses power plays for cyber-safety:

1. Play online games only with people you know.
2. Don't post revealing photos or information about yourself like where you live, go to school, play sports, or other identifying information that someone you don't know could use to find you.
3. Never agree to meet someone you don't know.

Social media is a great communication tool, but we all must use it responsibly. Lauren discussed the dangers of electronically sending messages or photos. What a child may think is funny at the time can quickly get out of hand and become inappropriate. Lauren explained that exchanging revealing photos is called "sexting."

PARENT CONNECTION

Your child is growing up in a cyber world with access to information and people like never before. In today's lesson, both students from the video used positive power plays to stay safe. Continue to talk about potential dangers, as well as appropriate use of technology. Many teens are victimized by cyber-bullying. It is important to keep the lines of communication open between you and your child. Regular family dinnertime can reduce the chances of children becoming victims of cyber-bullying.

TIPS TO FURTHER TODAY'S LESSON

Review the Cyber P.L.A.N. with your child and add additional rules and responsibilities that are important for your family:

P stands for Permission: Students should have permission each time they go online. Protecting passwords for their computer and their phone is important.

L stands for Location: Students should only visit approved Internet locations, websites, or game sites. Students should never enter chat rooms because they NEVER know with whom they are really communicating.

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PERSONAL POWER

PARENT LETTER 6: S.A.F.E.: IT'S OK TO TELL

During the final lesson in the *Safer, Smarter Teens: Personal Power* curriculum, your child watched a video in which Kate stood up for Maddie and helped her get the help she needed by going with her to the school counselor. Standing up for yourself and others may feel risky. Your child may think he or she will lose someone's friendship. A victim of abuse may feel it will be too disruptive to tell. But it's important to keep telling until you are heard and helped. Students learned the concept of S.A.F.E. as a power play to access help: **S**eek help from a trusted **A**dult; **F**ace your fears; and **E**nact your power plays. Lauren provided a recap of the first five lessons, which included:

- Personal Power
- Power Plays
- Red Flags
- Body Boundaries
- Sexual Abuse
- Self-Esteem
- Balance of Power
- Safe vs. Unsafe Relationships
- Guiding Voice
- TFA (Think, Feel, Act)
- Assertiveness
- Grooming
- Isolation
- Unsafe Secrets
- Unsafe Touches
- Disclosure
- A.C.T. (Ask, Care, Tell)
- Sexting
- Cyber-Grooming
- Cyber-Safety Plan
- Accessing Help
- S.A.F.E. (Seek help from a trusted Adult; Face your fears; and Enact your power plays)

PARENT CONNECTION

Today's lesson focused on finding one's personal power and making positive power plays to stand up for and to help a friend. "A.C.T." and "S.A.F.E." are two of our acronyms that encompass our empowerment concepts. Continue talking with your child about what it takes to be a safer, smarter teen.

TIPS TO FURTHER TODAY'S LESSON

Ask your child what was most meaningful to him or her in the curriculum. What concepts were most useful to him or her? Does he or she have any questions or concerns?

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