

Dr. Nancy: Hi, everybody. Good afternoon, and welcome to Wednesday Live with Dr. Nancy. Very excited today about our special guest, but before we introduce her, I want to just remind you about our clothing swap that's going on on Saturday the 18th.

Dr. Nancy: It's going to be from 9:00 until 1:00. 9:00 until 11:00 is women, so clothing sizes small to extra-large, and then some maternity clothes. Then from 11:00 until 1:00 we're going to have a kids' clothes exchange, so sizes from newborn to six.

Dr. Nancy: Tickets are being, not sold, but given away, on our Facebook page, so make sure you snag those. I know that we only have a few left, so go ahead and snag your tickets and reserve your spot. We look forward to seeing you next Saturday.

Dr. Nancy: Last month, we did a lot of posting about abuse awareness, in April, and I've had a lot of patients reach out to me thanking me for bringing it to attention. We are fortunate today to have Feather Berkower with us, from Boulder, Colorado, who specializes in this. She's going to talk to us a little bit about parenting for safe children.

Dr. Nancy: I want to go ahead and let Feather introduce herself, tell us a little bit about herself, and we'll go from there. Welcome, Feather.

Feather: Well, thanks, Dr. Nancy. So fun to be here. Let's see. A little bit about myself. I am dedicated and committed to educating adults about keeping children safe from sex abuse. I've been doing this a long time. A couple or three decades.

Feather: I got into this work in college. Actually, it's kind of a weird story. I had not concept or information about child sex assault. I was watching a made-for-TV movie while I was an undergraduate student, and it was called Something About Amelia, and it was all about a 10 year-old girl being incested by her father.

Feather: There was something about that movie that just clicked in me. From that moment, I just dedicated my life to doing this work, and got a social work degree, and started working in prevention with kids in schools. Through time, and over decades, have moved to focusing on prevention work with adults.

Dr. Nancy: Wonderful.

Feather: Yeah, so I have a business called Parenting Safe Children. Actually, I want to back up a minute, and just really start by acknowledging that, and I always like to do this, that we have survivors among us today, listening.

Feather: Because the statistics, the numbers are so high of children who are sexually assaulted. Right around one in three girls and six boys. We always have survivors among us.

Feather: I just want to make a plug, for anyone listening, to take care of yourselves in whatever way that means for you. This information can really affect people in very personal ways, so for us all to just keep that in mind. Okay.

Dr. Nancy: [inaudible 00:03:10].

Feather: Parenting Safe Children is all about educating adults how to keep children safe from sexual assault by minimizing the risk for them, and creating environments for them that have less risk. I come from the belief that adults are responsible for protecting children from sex assault, that kids can learn protection skills, and it's important that they do. However, ultimately, it is up to the adult to protect the child, not for children to have to protect themselves.

Feather: I focus my work, rather than working with kids at this point, I work with adults. I offer workshops to parents and youth professionals in schools and youth organizations.

Dr. Nancy: That's great.

Feather: Yeah, I can tell you ... You can ask questions, or I can tell you what the content is, and what people learn. Whatever you'd like to do.

Dr. Nancy: Let's start with um, maybe how you start with parents. What kind of suggestions do you offer to them?

Feather: What I do with parents is, the presentation that I offer, focuses on three areas of prevention. Really, these are the most important, to do your best, to do your due diligence, to minimize risk.

Feather: That would be, first, Learning the Facts. How does child sex abuse happen to children? Meaning, what is the grooming process that an older teen or an adult will use with a child and that child's adults, the adults around the child?

Feather: Because almost always, there are preceding behaviors to a touch. Those are what we call "grooming" behaviors. It would include learning grooming behaviors, learning the difference between children who sexually act out and offend, versus kids who are exploring sexuality in normal ways, and how to speak up and intervene if you do see those grooming behaviors from an older teen or an adult.

Feather: Also included in Learning the Facts is how to answer kids' sexual questions, and how to nurture their sexual development. Because there's a direct link between the reduction of risk of sex abuse, and nurturing children's sexual development. That is a start, is to learn the facts.

Feather: Then, parents can learn Body Safety Rules to be teaching kids. This would be children's' skill-set. This would be their tool-kit.

Feather: Even though it's an adult's responsibility to protect kids, they still need information to protect themselves. That's what we call Body Safety Rules and Boundaries.

Feather: We can get into that in a minute, if you want, but most importantly, what I really focus on with parents, is how to have conversations with their caregivers, including their own

family members, about their children's Body Safety Rules. Because if parents can be alerting family, and babysitters, and coaches, and teachers, and religious leaders, and whomever they put their children in the care of, about their children's body safety, and be having a normalized conversation, just like allergies, or the car seat, or a bike helmet, then we reduce the risk.

Feather: Let me just give you an example. If you're sitting across from a potential nanny, and you're discussing with that nanny secrets versus surprises in your home, and the fact that your children are allowed to choose if they have hugs and kisses, because they've learned consent, and that no one touches the private areas of their body. You're having that kind of discussion, along with "How much do you charge? When are you available?" The other things parents talk about.

Feather: Then you're doing two things. One, inadvertently, you're letting this person know "My child is off-limits, and if you have a behavior problem with kids, not my kid." But more importantly, you're also saying, "Be on my prevention team. Are we like-minded? We're matching expectations here. Can you help keep my child safe by following the boundaries we have in our home?"

Feather: If parents can learn these conversations with every caregiver that they leave their child with, we can reduce the risk of sex abuse.

Dr. Nancy: [crosstalk 00:07:43]-

Feather: That's, in a nutshell, the content that I offer in my parent workshops.

Dr. Nancy: I can see where that would really work to prevent sex abuse in kids, for sure.

Feather: Yeah. I mean, I also meet with sex offenders, in prisons and in outpatient treatment groups, and I have these conversations with both men and women who have offended. I repeatedly ask them, "What would you have done if the adult in this child's life would have spoken with you about these kinds of topics, body safety rules and boundaries? Would you have offended?"

Feather: The answers vary, but the theme that I hear is, typically, "I'd run for the hills." Now, we have to remember that a lot of sex abuse is committed by family itself. It's incest, so we have to just remember that piece of that, when I do talk to offenders.

Dr. Nancy: Right.

Feather: Yeah.

Dr. Nancy: What other things do you do in your program, to help the adults?

Feather: To help the adults. We break into groups, and the parents practice these conversations. I might show some videos of a mom speaking with a school director, a father speaking with his own mother, parents speaking with the parents of a play date invitation or

sleepover, and how to model these conversations. We have 90 minutes of that practice in these workshops.

Feather: We also go through 10 Body Safety Rules and how to implement those with kids, by using "What if?" games, because "What if?" games can stimulate critical thinking. We practice what those "What if?" games are, and how to optimize teachable moments.

Feather: Because I'm teaching parents these 10 concrete Body Safety Rules, and most parents are so excited about them, they want to go home and sit their four year-old down and read a list of Body Safety Rules, and that's not how kids learn. So we practice how to listen for a teachable moment, and then discuss hugs and kisses, and consent, and who's allowed to touch the private areas of their body, and who's not, and when.

Feather: Also, a big piece of what we practice, and parents have a lot of questions about, is how to deal with relatives who demand hugs and kisses, and who don't understand the concept of consent for a two year-old, or a three year-old.

Dr. Nancy: Right.

Feather: So we practice that. Also, how to answer children's sexual questions, and when to answer them, and how to use accurate language for genitals and just all of the information that goes into minimizing risk for kids.

Feather: Because what I've learned, and what we know, is that a person who sexually offends children, usually an older teen or adult, they're looking for opportunity and access. When families are discussing these topics openly, and their children have information, the risk just gets minimized, because offenders see that as not as vulnerable of a family.

Dr. Nancy: Yeah.

Feather: Does that make sense?

Dr. Nancy: Do you also teach what to look for, for a child that maybe has been sexually assaulted?

Feather: I do. I spend very little time on this. It is one of the slides. The reason is that once there are signs, that's after the fact.

Dr. Nancy: Right. Right.

Feather: Right? That's, excuse me, no longer prevention. But yes, I do go, and if you'd like me to do that, I can do that. But I really focus on what can parents be doing, every day, just like, "Hey, buckle into the seatbelt," and "Wear your bike helmet," and "Don't run around a wet swimming pool," and all the rules we give kids. How can we normalize body safety, and include it in every day living? Yeah.

Dr. Nancy: What age do you recommend having the conversation?

Feather: Great question. It's never too early to start, and really, the concept of body safety begins the day a child is born. It really does. Because much of the work that I'm doing is focused on adults sharing this information with other adults, and other teens.

Feather: You can be changing a baby's diaper, and be using correct terminology, and be offering consent, on some level. "I'm going to change your diaper right now," even though the infant, obviously, doesn't understand what you're saying, they still are perceiving the message.

Dr. Nancy: Right.

Feather: "I'm changing your diaper right now. I'm going to clean your vagina, or your vulva. I'm going to clean your testicles, and now I'm going to put your diaper back on." That kind of language can start at birth.

Feather: Really, kids begin to understand the information maybe right around one. I know parents who send me e-mails where their 14 month-old is yelling in the back of the car seat, "I'm the boss of my body!" Though that can trigger a parent, it's also wonderful when a kid can do that, because they're beginning to, even if they're just parroting the concept, they're using the language.

Dr. Nancy: Right so would you recommend using the accurate terms of the body parts, versus cute little names for [crosstalk 00:13:02]-

Feather: Absolutely. Absolutely. When we use slang terminology, which often focuses on food, like cookie, and taco, and hot dog, and sausage, and twigs and berries, and all these words that make us laugh, there's two things going on.

Feather: One, where that's not really body pride. We're not communicating a message of body pride. Two, it's a lie. A vagina, and a vulva, and a penis are not these words that describe food, and it makes it more difficult for children to disclose if they are being touched.

Feather: Because if a child is being taught slang words, and then they go to tell, and they use the word "cookie," somebody might misinterpret what they're saying, and not help them. In a court of law, if a child uses the word "cookie" for her genital, it would be thrown out. The child would not be heard. Correct terminology is critical from day one.

Dr. Nancy: What would be the most common ... How do I put it? Like a scenario, that a parent should watch for for a kid to get in a situation like this, where they're vulnerable?

Feather: Yeah, so I mean, I could some of the vulnerabilities that offenders look for.

Dr. Nancy: That would be great.

Feather: I think that the grooming behaviors is something that all adults need to understand. Both parents and youth professionals. Because that behavior is what precedes the

touch, typically. What I mean, "typically," is children can be sexually assaulted the first time they're dropped off at camp. Or a play date.

Feather: That can happen, and it does, but more often than not, there's this process over weeks, and months, and years, that a person gets to know the child, and the child's adults. Even if the offender is a parent or a family member. There's still this process of grooming.

Feather: What to look for? The behaviors of concern are things like isolating a child, and removing them from events, and other adults, and other children. Separating them. Focusing on the developing body of a child, and making comments. Demanding secrets. Offering rewards and breaking rules. Always trying to get a child alone. Being too good to be true, offering to babysit with no charge.

Feather: What I can say about all of these kinds of signs is that there is a gut feeling that typically accompanies this. As humans, we know when something feels wrong, and when it feels right. I would always support people to listen to that gut feeling. It doesn't mean we have to go calling the police every time we get a red flag, but we do need to listen to it.

Feather: I guess my answer would be to learn the grooming signs, of how an older teen or an adult behaves. The one thing really want to say about this, I think this is important, is that, and I've always known this, but it really came much more clear to me recently in a sex offender group that I participated in, where one of the men shared with me.

Feather: He said, "Feather, I really focus on grooming the adults around the child more than I do the child. Because once I can get the child's loved ones, the parents, the grandparents, their soccer coach, their teacher, whomever it is, to trust me, and to rely on me, and to call on me, and to like me, and to think I'm the greatest. All of those traits. Then it's so easy to get to the child."

Feather: My point here is that when grooming is occurring, it is simultaneously occurring with the child, as well as the child's safe adults. People need to understand that. It's not just focused on the child.

Feather: Some other vulnerabilities ... Oh, did you have a question?

Dr. Nancy: No. I'm just shocked. This is something I hadn't really thought about. You just think about one instance. You don't think about that somebody's grooming you or your child for this. So I'm just shocked.

Feather: Yes for weeks and years, it can go on. Yeah, and if you look at most cases, you will see, I mean, the high-profile cases, you can read about and look at. You'll see that there's a process of friendship-building over time. There's getting to know the child, and looking for their vulnerabilities, and offering rewards, and toys, and love, and connection, and Barbie dolls, and iPhones, and whatever the child wants.

Feather: Then secrets are built to isolate the child. Fun, innocent-like secrets. Like "Let's eat ice cream and not tell your mommy." Which is why it's so important for grandparents and

other relatives not to engage in those kinds of "innocent-like," but very dangerous, secrets with children.

Feather: Then, through these stages of grooming, lastly comes the touch. Which usually begins with grooming touch. Playing with hair, and stroking shoulders, and patting butts, in a real hands-on, touchy-feely kind of relationship, which is different than the loving affection parents give their children, and need to continue to give. But there's a focus, and an obsession with a touching relationship.

Feather: Some other vulnerabilities in kids are kid who don't like and have real good self-esteem, or who are disconnected from other adults, or who do keep secrets. Parents who don't have a large presence in their child's life.

Feather: I mean, I can go on and on with some of the vulnerabilities that adult offenders look for, and I think this is a key, you asked this in the beginning, for parents to learn. How does this work? Just like, "How does a child ride a bicycle? How do they learn to read? How do they do anything else? How does sex abuse work? I make sure, I do my best, to minimize risk for my child. Including with family members."

Dr. Nancy: When you're talking to parents about this, do you address the teenage ... I have a teenage daughter, who I'm very afraid to let date. Do you address some education about that? I mean, because we haven't done all the foundation like you're talking about.

Feather: Right. You mean about her dating right now?

Dr. Nancy: Well, she's not dating yet, no, but-

Feather: You mean dating and dating relationships? I don't. I mean, I can, and I would, if someone asked a question, but that's not part of my curriculum, dating and dating relationships. It's more ... But Nancy, it's not too late for you to have these conversations.

Dr. Nancy: Right.

Feather: What I'll say is, having a teenager, the reason that it's so important to nurture children's sexual development from day one is because offenders look for kids who don't have correct information around sexuality, so they can teach it.

Feather: What I often ask parents is, "Who do you want to be the person who educates your child about sexual development?" What do you think the answer is, most of the time, for parents?

Dr. Nancy: The school.

Feather: Hopefully, that's not the answer.

Dr. Nancy: No!

Feather: But sometimes that's the answer. Who would you want it to be?

Dr. Nancy: Oh, myself.

Feather: Of course, so if that's what you want, that has to start really early. When a child says, "Mommy, why do you have big boobies, and I don't?" Or "Why is my penis sticking straight out?" Or "Why is there blood in the toilet?" And answering these questions honestly and correctly, right from the beginning, matter-of-factly.

Feather: Being able to have conversations with kids about sexuality and not fearing that giving them information will put something in their brain that wasn't there. When kids have the language to talk about sexual development and sexuality, then they will come to you instead of, hopefully, going to their peer, or to Siri, or to some other form of information.

Feather: It's just so common for kids to learn this stuff on their phones, in the playground. They get misinformation, and then porn comes up, and on and on. It's really better when it comes from a trusted adult.

Dr. Nancy: Yes, I agree.

Feather: Yeah.

Dr. Nancy: Great. Before we leave today, do you have any other tips, or anything you want to leave our audience with? It's been great information so far. Wonderful.

Feather: Oh, I guess the biggest tip is that my guess is that people are feeling uncomfortable listening to this. That is something I start with in my workshops, is "What are the barriers to protecting kids from sex abuse?" What people come up with, number one, is that it's so uncomfortable.

Feather: The tip I leave you with is asking yourself are you willing to feel a little uncomfortable learning about this, and having conversations about this, so your children, hopefully, don't have to live it? That's for each person to answer.

Feather: I invite your listeners to log on to Parentingsafechildren.com. I have, for people who live in the Colorado area, locally in Boulder/Denver, they can come to one of my live workshops and learn all this. But if you live outside of the Denver-area, the same workshop is available online, on my website.

Feather: It's super affordable. I teach it. The same exact information with the materials. My book, *Off Limits*, and *Conversation Starter Cards* are on the website, and join in.

Dr. Nancy: Yeah. Great. I really appreciate you coming on and talking to us about this subject. It's a tough one. But it's a much-needed subject, that's for sure. I encourage everybody to log on to that website, get all the information you can, and let's save the children.

Feather: Yeah.

Dr. Nancy: Let's protect them.

Feather: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Nancy: It's up to us.

Feather: Yeah, and so often, people say this is a tough topic. What I always bring it back to is, "Who is it really tough for?" It's tough for the child who lives it. Are we willing to have it be tough so that they don't have to experience it?

Dr. Nancy: [crosstalk 00:23:53].

Feather: Thank you so much for focusing on this.

Dr. Nancy: Oh, well, thank you for coming on and sharing your knowledge with us. I really appreciate that you're doing this. Again, everybody, Parentingsafechildren.com. Go on, take the course. This is Sharia, she says "It's a great workshop. Best book ever." So thank you for that.

Feather: Thanks, Sharia!

Dr. Nancy: Thank you, again, for coming on. I really appreciate it.

Feather: Thank you, Dr. Nancy, for the work you do, also.

Dr. Nancy: Thank you.

Feather: Take care. Bye bye.

Dr. Nancy: Bye.