

What is Erin's Law

- ▶ Erin's law is a state law requiring public schools to teach child sexual abuse and exploitation prevention classes to students in kindergarten through eighth grade. ([Erin's Law | New York State Education Department \(nysed.gov\)](https://www.nysed.gov/erins-law)).
- The law was enacted by the NY legislature in August of 2019
- The law is named for Erin Merryn, an abuse survivor and activist who has advocated for similar laws nationwide for over a decade. <https://www.erinslaw.org/for-parents/>
- A version of Erin's Law has been passed by 38 states and is pending in the remaining 12 states. <https://www.erinslaw.org/erins-law/>

Erin's Law Requirements

- Grade band curricular benchmarks have been created as a guideline for what information should be covered. These are outlined on the NYSED website:
<https://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/erins-law>
- The benchmarks do not have to be covered every year, but need to be adequately covered over the course of the grade band.
- Participation in Erin's Law prevention education programming is NOT optional, either for the school district or for the individual student.

What are the goals of sexual abuse prevention education?

The goals are multi-faceted, and include:

- Kids who have been or are currently being abused disclosing, and therefore getting help.
- Kids being prepared with how to respond and get help if they are abused in the future.
- Kids recognizing warning signs so that the potential future abuse can be prevented.
- Kids being empowered to say no to inappropriate touch, sexual or otherwise, throughout their lives.
- Kids internalizing the importance of consent so that our cultural norms will change, and sexual assault will be less frequent in the future.

Short summary of the grade band objectives

- ▶ The NYS Erin's law lists specific objectives for each different grade band, but ultimately the same basic concepts are repeated over and over again. These are:
 - ▶ **Bodily autonomy** – we all have the right to have our bodies respected
 - ▶ **Trust your gut feelings** – if you get an unsafe or unpleasant feeling, pay attention
 - ▶ There are **warning signs** you might notice
 - ▶ **You are not alone** – there are safe adults who can help you
 - ▶ **Abuse is never the child's fault** – even if the child broke a rule, didn't say no, didn't tell, etc.

Why is Erin's Law Necessary

- **THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN IMPACTED IS HUGE**
ACCORDING TO THE CDC, ABOUT 1 IN 4 GIRLS AND 1 IN 13 BOYS WILL EXPERIENCE SEXUAL ABUSE DURING THEIR LIFETIME. IT IS POSSIBLE THE ACTUAL NUMBER IS MUCH HIGHER BECAUSE CHILDREN OFTEN NEVER REPORT.
- **SEXUAL ABUSE CAN HAVE LIFETIME NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES**
LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH HAS FOUND THAT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE CAN RESULT IN LONG TERM NEGATIVE HEALTH, PSYCHOSOCIAL, AND SOCIOECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR THE VICTIMS.
- **PREVENTION PROGRAMS HELP.**
RESEARCH SHOWS THAT PREVENTION PROGRAMS HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON CHILDRENS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE BASIC CONCEPTS NEEDED TO RECOGNIZE AN ABUSIVE SITUATION, SAY NO, AND/OR GET HELP. PREVENTION PROGRAMS CAN ALSO HELP SPUR CHILDREN WHO ARE CURRENTLY BEING ABUSED TO DISCLOSE AND SEEK ASSISTANCE.

Isn't it enough to teach basic safety rules?

- ▶ Safety rules, such as ‘always check with the adult in charge before going anywhere’, are important, and teaching them is included in the Erin’s Law objectives.
- ▶ However, basic safety rules are generally most relevant in situations where the person posing a risk to the child is a stranger. Since most abuse is perpetrated by someone the child already knows – and often someone the child loves and trusts, teaching just basic safety rules – especially ones focused on stranger danger – are not sufficient.

Challenges unique to teaching sexual abuse prevention

- **The concepts being addressed can be gray. While we want kids to know how to say no to inappropriate touching, we don't want to teach them that they can so no to appropriate adult guidance, such as holding hands when crossing a street.**
- **Sexual abuse is often preceded by grooming, which is a period of time where no actual abuse occurs, but the perpetrator sets up a situation where the child feels trapped and unable to protect themselves. Therefore we need to teach kids not just how to deal with inappropriate touching, but about other, often very subtle, inappropriate behaviors as well.**
- **Based on statistics alone, we know that some of the students sitting in the classrooms during the presentations will have already experienced sexual abuse. Some of the students may even be experiencing abuse at the very point in time when we are giving our presentation. We need to be able to speak to these kids, who most desperately need to be reached, in a way that is respectful of the reality they are living, while at the same time speaking to those children who have not experienced any abuse in a way that will avoid exposing them to concepts they are not ready to hear.**
- **We don't want to create an anti-septic environment where appropriate, loving physical contact between adults and children is considered suspect.**

Ways to address those challenges:

- Introduce the concepts in as many ways as possible. Many of the basic concepts taught as part of sexual abuse are already taught as part of regular Social Emotional Learning programs. These concepts will ideally be taught and reinforced in the home as well.
- Acknowledge that there are gray areas, and encourage kids to talk to adults when they are confused.
- Focus on giving kids tools that empower them to say no and get help, rather than trying to protect them by making them scared.
- Repeatedly remind students that, no matter what, abuse is never a child's fault.
- Include positive touch as part of the conversation. When discussing touch, focus on issues such as: consent, the right to bodily autonomy, privacy, appropriate boundaries, and respect.

What Erin's Law presentations CAN'T Do – and what parents and caregivers need to be doing.

Erin's Law presentations provide kids with information about how to recognize and respond to sexual abuse. However, kids are still kids, and responsibility for protecting kids ultimately falls on the grownups in their lives. Here are a few key strategies you, as a caregiver, can use to protect the children in your care:

- ▶ Reinforce the lessons they are being taught in school about bodily autonomy. Unless it is about keeping them safe or healthy, or preventing them from harming others, teach them that they have the right to say no to unwanted touch.
- ▶ Look for red flags when other adults or older children are around your kids. These include someone behaving in ways that violate boundaries, even if those boundaries aren't directly related to touch, someone who actively tries to be alone with a specific child, and someone giving a specific child a lot of special gifts or privileges.
- ▶ We teach children to trust their instincts if someone's behavior gives them a weird feeling. Trust your instincts as well! If you aren't sure, talk to the social worker at your child's school, call the Ulster County Crime Victims Assistance Program, or reach out to the Ulster County Child Advocacy Center.
- ▶ If a child shares something with you, listen closely to them, believe them, and react in a quiet and calm way that will make them feel safe about talking to you. Then, contact an appropriate professional for guidance in how to proceed.

Resources for parents and caregivers. Learn more about:

- ▶ How and why to talk to kids about this topic, and what you can do to help keep your kids safe:

<https://www.d2l.org/education/5-steps/>

<https://www.stopitnow.org/help-guidance/prevention-tools>

- ▶ The roundabout ways children sometimes disclose when they have been sexually abused

<https://www.earlyopenoften.org/be-ready-to-respond/responding-to-disclosure/>

- ▶ Confidential resources if you are concerned you might be at risk of sexually abusing a child yourself:

<https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/resources-for-people-concerned-about-their-own-thoughts-and-behaviors>

About the Ulster County Crime Victims' Assistance Program

The Ulster County Crime Victims Assistance Program, a division of the Ulster County Department of Probation, provides free, confidential services to victims of crime in Ulster County. The program also runs the county sexual assault hotline, provides contextually appropriate sexual assault prevention education programming, provides support services for victims on college campuses, and runs the county Safe Harbor program. For more information about any of these services please contact us at:

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