

# REALWOMAN

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*Exclusive*  
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YOUR BODY  
WITH SCIENCE  
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MEGAN SHEA IS TAKING  
ON FOOD INSECURITY  
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# KEEPING OUR Kids Safe

Every child deserves a secure, loving environment. PEI Kids in Mercer County is working tirelessly to make sure children know this—and to help teachers and parents understand what to do if they suspect abuse.

By Meghan Rabbitt

**T**wo years ago, facilitators at PEI Kids had just led a workshop at a New Jersey elementary school where they taught the children about their right to a safe environment—what that means, and how to speak up about something that doesn't make them feel safe. They were talking to a second-grade boy during something they call “review time” after the workshop, when kids can speak to the facilitators one-on-one.

That day, a little boy told the workshop leaders that his teenage brother had a gun in the house and had threatened to kill himself. The boy was understandably scared—and after the workshop, he felt like he could finally tell someone that he didn't feel safe at home. Luckily, the story had a happy ending: The police went to the boy's house, got his brother's gun, nobody got in trouble (the boys' parents didn't know their son had a gun), and the teen got help.

“This is a situation that could've gone terribly wrong,” says Roslyn E. Dashiell, MBA, executive director of PEI Kids in Lawrenceville, NJ. And it's an example of why she is so passionate about the child-advocacy work her organization does, providing kids, parents, and educators with information and intervention services related to child abuse and assault, bullying, gangs, and more. “So many kids are suffering in silence every day,” she says. “The fact that we go into schools, build

trust with kids, and give them permission to talk about things they often don't have the language to discuss allows kids to unburden themselves and ask for solutions. This way they can be free to be kids, as they should be.”

## HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

Most people don't realize how prevalent child abuse and neglect are, says Dashiell: In New Jersey alone, there are more than 9,000 cases of child abuse reported each year. And research shows that early-life traumatic events—whether physical or sexual abuse, bullying or peer assault, neglect, or victimization—lead to real impairment later on.

“We know that long-term adjustment problems and functional impairment are often the result of abuse in childhood,” says Dashiell. “Things like PTSD, depression, violent behavior, delinquency, substance abuse, and increased risk for revictimization and involvement in unhealthy adult relationships are common, and often perpetuate a cycle of abuse.”

Scary statistics and outcomes to be sure, but the more we collectively know about the scope of this problem, the more we can do about it, adds Dashiell. “At PEI Kids, we believe child abuse, both physical and sexual, is completely preventable—and we know from our own prevention and intervention work





that education and training are essential when it comes to cultivating healthy and vigilant communities, which create a safe environment where kids can thrive," she says.

It's why PEI Kids goes to elementary schools around Mercer County to teach kids in kindergarten through eighth grade about their right to feel safe—and how to speak up if they don't. "We go into 65 schools and see about 9,000 students and more than 10,500 people every year," says Dashiell. PEI Kids also provides free counseling for child sexual abuse victims and their families.

Using trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), PEI Kids helps children reduce PTSD symptoms, recover from the trauma of sexual abuse, and reduce their risk of re-victimization. "This issue is ubiquitous, and it crosses economic, social, and educational barriers," says Dashiell. "We all know someone who's been impacted by child sexual abuse, whether we realize it or not." It's also why they teach community workshops to parents, so they know how to talk to kids to make sure they're safe, and how to speak up if they fear something is amiss with their children—or any child in their community.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

We all have a responsibility and role to play in keeping kids safe. That means knowing how to talk to them—and how to handle a situation that doesn't seem right. Dashiell shares advice she says can help parents everywhere cultivate a safe environment for all kids.

**Ask about policies that protect your kids.** Before you sign your child up for organized sports, extracurricular programs, or any class or event where he or she will be in the presence of an adult, don't be afraid to ask what policies are in place to prevent child abuse. "For example, ask if the staff has been background-checked, or what measures are taken to make sure an adult is never alone with a child," says Dashiell. "You deserve to know who has access to your kids."

Don't live in the Mercer County region but want to know who to call for more resources that'll help you keep your kids (and all kids in your community) safe? Dashiell says these resources are a great start:

- Enough Abuse campaign: [enoughabuse.org](http://enoughabuse.org)
- Youth Engaged 4 Change: [engage.youth.gov](http://engage.youth.gov)
- Child Welfare Information Gateway: [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov)
- Lovelsrespect (dating abuse): [lovelsrespect.org](http://lovelsrespect.org)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- Parents Anonymous: [pofnj.com](http://pofnj.com)
- Crisis Text Line: [crisistextline.org](http://crisistextline.org)
- National Center for Missing & Exploited Children: [missingkids.org](http://missingkids.org)
- NJ Division of Child Protection & Permanency: [nj.gov/dcf/reporting/how/index.html](http://nj.gov/dcf/reporting/how/index.html)

**Give kids specific language to help them express what's happening.** Dashiell tells a story of a first-grade child who told her teacher repeatedly that a little boy in her class was putting his hand "in her pocketbook." The teacher thought nothing of it; it sounds

harmless enough. Then it came out that the girl's mom had taught her to call her private parts her "pocketbook," which led to the issue persisting much longer than it might have if the child was able to say specifically what was happening from the start, says Dashiell. "If you talk to your kids at a young age and give them specific language, it's easier to deal with any issues that

might surface along the way," she says.

**Don't wait until there's a problem to talk to your kids.**

Dashiell says it's crucial to regularly ask your kids if they feel safe, strong, and free: "Oftentimes, kids won't come right out and tell you if something's bothering them, but take the time to ask the questions, and it'll often reveal a lot." Find a few minutes, even just once a week, for a check-in; possibly ask something like, *Is anyone touching you in a way that feels uncomfortable?* "It may be tempting to brush this off as unnecessary, but getting a child to talk about something that's not right—and putting a stop to behavior that isn't appropriate—can change the trajectory of his or her whole life."

**Speak up if something feels off.** Feel like you should say something, but don't feel like it's your place to interject into a situation that doesn't have anything to do with you, and about which you don't have all the details?

Say something anyway, says Dashiell.

"All too often, we don't want to upset anyone, or we want to be politically correct, and we push a nagging thought to the back of our mind and ignore it," she says. "But that's the wrong thing to do. In fact, it's incumbent on you to say something." If you suspect a problem at school, start by talking to the teacher. If

it's an issue at home, report a potential problem to a local child abuse hotline (or 911; they can point you to the appropriate resource). Tell them you suspect something may be going on. "Don't feel you need all of the answers or even that you need proof before you make that phone call," adds Dashiell. "That's someone else's job." Also, rest assured that if you report something, you'll remain anonymous.

**Take (or organize) a kid's safety workshop.** PEI Kids provides free "Enough Abuse" community workshops, to help parents and other caregivers prevent, identify, and respond appropriately to actual or suspected abuse. So far, PEI Kids has taught more than 2,000 adults in Mercer County, says Dashiell. "Every parent loves their children and wants them to be safe," she says. "If this is something you're passionate about, form a workshop to learn more—and to help other parents do the same."



ROSLYN DASHIELL

**FACT:**  
**95% OF MOLESTED CHILDREN KNOW THEIR MOLESTERS.**

**SOURCE:**  
**OFFICE OF U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL, 2001**

