

Approaches to Discussing Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting (FGM/C) with Youth

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Introduction

Background

In March 2024, [RTI International](#)'s Addressing FGM/C Training and Technical Assistance Program (AFTTAP) hosted a roundtable conversation with Angela Peabody from [Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation \(GWPF\)](#) for [Office for Victims of Crime \(OVC\)](#) funded organizations who respond to FGM/C. This conversation explored promising practices to discussing FGM/C with children and youth. This resource was developed to document and share those lessons with the field. This document starts by listing key recommendations for practitioners who engage with young people in conversations about FGM/C, offers unique considerations for those recommendations as discussed by the participants, and concludes with related resources shared by the participants.

About the AFTTAP Project

The RTI International AFTTAP team provides tailored, one-on-one training and technical assistance to organizations seeking support on FGM/C-related programs.

About GWPF

Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation is a U.S. 501(c)(3) charitable not-for-profit. that advocates on behalf of women and girls against FGM, focusing on the United States and West Africa.



**To learn more
about the
AFTTAP project,
[CLICK HERE.](#)**

**To learn more
about GWPF,
[CLICK HERE.](#)**

Please note that this document does not contain legal guidance. If you have concerns about the wellbeing of a child, always follow your jurisdiction's mandated reporting guidelines.

Funding Disclaimer

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Overall Strategies for Starting and Continuing the Conversation

01**BE AWARE**

Be aware of the signs that indicate a child wants to talk about FGM/C.

02**FIND**

Find your comfort level with the child.
Find age-appropriate communication (e.g., language, visuals, etc.)

03**ESTABLISH**

Establish trust and confidence with the child.

04**EQUATE**

Equate FGM/C to concepts children are familiar with, such as girl's rights or bodily autonomy.

05**EXPLAIN**

Explain FGM/C and the negative consequences it can have.

Key Recommendations



Preparing to talk to youth

Effective conversations with children about FGM/C require **preparation and self-reflection from the adult**. Consider your readiness to talk about taboo and difficult topics, your ability to respond appropriately to disclosure, and reflect on the type of relationship you have with the child before starting a conversation about FGM/C.



Age-appropriate approaches

Use **age-appropriate language** with children to discuss FGM/C. Consider both your word choice and the concepts you share.



Each child is unique

Every child is different. **Consider the unique perspectives and needs of the child or youth** you are talking to including, gender, culture, pre-existing knowledge of FGM/C, and the presence of people in their lives who may support FGM/C.

Preparation & Self Reflection

Effective conversations with children about FGM/C require preparation and self-reflection from the adult. **Here are a few things to consider.**



PREPARATION IS KEY

- Your own knowledge and comfort level with the topic of FGM/C will play a role in how you approach the conversation.
- It is normal to feel nervous and anxious about talking with a child about a topic like FGM/C.
- Come prepared with resources to share with the child.

Resources:

- [KidSmartz](#)

RESPOND APPROPRIATELY



- It is critical that you help create a safe environment for children and youth to discuss or disclose FGM/C. Know how to respond if a young person discloses risk or experience of FGM/C.
- Being a great listener, thanking them for sharing, and being supportive throughout the conversation are paramount.
- You will likely not be able to address the trauma or have a disclosure from a child in a single conversation. Be patient and remember that the child should be in control of the process.

Resources:

- [Understanding Childhood Trauma](#)
- [Responding to a Child's Disclosure of Abuse](#)
- [Handling Disclosures](#)



REFLECT ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE YOUNG PERSON

- It can be challenging to have a conversation with a young person about FGM/C if you are a stranger or if their guardian is present.
- Depending on their age, some youth might be more comfortable without their guardian present. Younger children might be more comfortable speaking about this topic with a family member, whereas teens might be more comfortable raising the topic with other adults and not parents.

Age Appropriate Approaches

The developmental stage and age of the child should dictate the way you talk about FGM/C. Use age-appropriate language with children to discuss FGM/C.

Here are a few things to consider in your approach.



TEACH KIDS TO USE ANATOMICAL LANGUAGE TO DESCRIBE THEIR BODIES

- Children may use nicknames or pet names to describe their genitalia because of societal stigma around private body parts. Lead with questions and listen to children so that you can gain clarity on the terms they use.
- However, when possible, adults should introduce specific anatomical terminology (e.g., vagina, labia, penis) to improve children's ability to have conversations with adults about their bodies.



RECOGNIZE THAT DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS WILL RESPOND TO THESE CONVERSATIONS DIFFERENTLY.

- Talking about private body parts and taboo topics can be awkward for any age.
 - Teenagers might giggle or be quiet out of embarrassment, while young children might be curious and inquisitive. It just depends!
- If the young person experienced FGM/C when they were very young, they may not remember, understand, or have context for what happened.
 - Younger girls may have positive associations about FGM/C as they grow up. These positive associations may assuage some trauma, but it is important to remember that trauma is still present during these conversations.

Age Appropriate Approaches (Continued)

LEARN FROM OTHER MOVEMENTS, SUCH AS CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE RESPONSE, TO FIND STRATEGIES THAT HAVE PROVEN TO BE EFFECTIVE OR THESE TYPES OF CONVERSATIONS.



Even though FGM/C can be a difficult topic to discuss, children who may be at risk, have a right to know about this practice as their increased awareness may facilitate opportunities for prevention or intervention (e.g., telling a teacher about concerns). Similar movements, like the child sex abuse movement, have a variety of evidence-based resources for talking to kids about their bodies and their rights.

Resources:

- [Understanding Childhood Trauma](#)
- [My Body Belongs to Me](#)
- [KidSmartz](#)
- [Child Sex Abuse: Talking to children 0-11 years](#)

When appropriate, speak to younger children about FGM/C. The younger the child, the better opportunity teachers and other adults who work with them have to educate them about FGM/C and its harmful consequences before it happens.

Every child can learn about consent and their rights to their body. For example, with younger children, conversations about “safe and unsafe touch” can be an effective strategy to start the conversation. Approaching the conversation from that perspective may be more appropriate and similar to how we would discuss any type of other abuse with children. There are workshops dedicated to talking to children about their rights, bodily autonomy, and choices regarding their body and who get to make them. Group workshops can be a good place to mention that parents may have a different perspective on the practice of FGM/C.

Resource:

- [Teaching Consent](#)

It is important not to alienate the parent or have “them vs us” messaging when speaking to youth about FGM/C. Instead, focus on explaining different perspectives on this issue and affirm that children and youth do have a voice over what is done to their body.

Age Appropriate Approaches (Continued)

SIGNS THAT A CHILD MAY BE READY TO TALK ABOUT FGM/C



Some children will discuss hypothetical scenarios of something that happened to a friend.

If a child attempts to have conversations about FGM/C with adults, even if they are not clear using the terms typically associated with FGM/C, that might be a sign they are ready to discuss this topic.

Negative experiences attempting to disclose or discuss FGM/C in the past can impact how a child acts with you.

If youth have had a negative experience discussing or disclosing FGM/C to an adult, they will avoid discussing it with other adults or will attempt to disclose in indirect ways. If a youth brings this or other sensitive topics up in conversation, be sure to provide a supportive response and reassurance.



Disclosure is not necessarily the goal.

It's uncommon for children to disclose FGM/C on their own without additional relationship building or context. Therefore, conversations should be seen as an opportunity to educate the children about FGM/C. Only when a young person feels comfortable discussing this topic with an adult, are they likely to disclose in a way that feels safe.



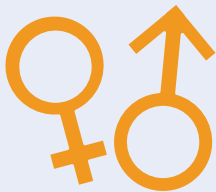
For more resources on how to respond to disclosures, check out the resource list at the end of this document!

Considering Youth's Unique Needs and Experiences

Every child is different. Consider the unique perspectives and needs of the child including, gender, culture, pre-existing knowledge of FGM/C, and the presence of people in their lives who may support FGM/C.

Here are a few things to consider in your approach.

GENDER IDENTITY¹



If you have an opportunity to address children about FGM/C at school and parental consent is given, **the topics you may cover will likely vary** based on whether you'll be speaking with:

- A group of all girls
- A group of all boys
- A mix of girls and boys

Remember that many young people are not comfortable discussing topics related to anatomy with the opposite sex.

One-on-one conversations will also differ based on the child's gender. For example, conversations with girls may focus on self-care, while conversations with boys may focus on advocacy.

Special considerations for speaking with boys about FGM/C

- Some boys might be surprisingly interested in the topic and motivated to be advocates against the practice. For others, FGM/C is not a topic of interest to them, which can complicate their engagement particularly in a group setting.
- When boys do not express interest in learning about FGM/C, an effective approach might be to help them relate to the topic by linking it to topics such as violence, body autonomy, and girls' rights.
- One-on-one conversations with boys can be particularly effective, especially if the boy initiates the conversation and ask questions.

[1] People of all different gender identities can experience FGM/C. However, for brevity we primarily use the term 'girl' to describe people who have experienced FGM/C. It's important to remember that a person's gender may not align with assumptions about their biological sex organs.

Youth's Unique Needs and Experiences (Continued)



YOUNG PEOPLE WITH PRE-EXISTING KNOWLEDGE OF OR EXPOSURE TO FGM/C

Conversations will be different between girls who have experienced FGM/C and those who might be at risk. These conversations must center around recognizing hidden trauma, understanding culture and the young person's personal views on FGM/C, and finding ways to support those who have lived experience.

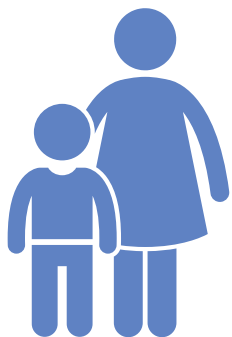
DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUTH WHO HAVE LITTLE TO NO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT FGM/C

Some youth might be more open to discuss the topic if they are unfamiliar with FGM/C. For example, a group of young people that have not been exposed to FGM/C might be interested in why this practice takes place, how it can be prevented, and what role young people can play in preventing it.

Other young people who do not have prior experience may be hesitant, reserved, or not open to talking about FGM/C. This may be due to the challenging nature of the topic or simply because many young people are more reserved when it comes to conversations about their bodies. Adults can play a critical role in increasing awareness by having safe, engaging conversations with youth about their bodies and bodily autonomy. Such conversations can allow young people to identify ways to initiate conversations about their body with their friends or guardians.

Young people may have heard about FGM/C but not know about the complications and harms associated with it. Raising awareness in such groups of young people can be done by combining the topic of FGM/C into the larger context of issues related to youth such as violence and bodily autonomy. When appropriate, topics related to harms caused by FGM/C and associated laws in the United States may be introduced.

Youth's Unique Needs and Experiences (Continued)



SOME YOUNG PEOPLE MAY HAVE POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS WITH FGM/C

Adults who seek to prevent FGM/C may emphasize the harmful effects and health complications of the practice. However, young people may receive positive or mixed messages on FGM/C if they have adults in their lives who are in support of the practice.

A child who discloses FGM/C or related symptoms to someone in support of the practice may receive:

- Reassurance about the practice or symptoms. The adult may assuage her concerns or fears about the practice or her symptoms.
- Reassurance that the practice happens to many girls. It is common for adult relatives to normalize and not seek treatment for their children when they experience complications from FGM/C.
- Portrayal of the practice as positive or mention that it only happens to special girls.
- Guidance that the girl should only discuss the practice with close family as it is a private matter. The adult may create boundaries on who the child can talk to about this.

Other Considerations

- In cultures that support and practice FGM/C, speaking about your genitalia and sex is a taboo, especially outside of marriage. This may make it even more challenging to begin a conversation about this topic.
- FGM/C is considered a woman's issue and it is rarely discussed with a child.
- Men are separated from conversations about FGM/C and often are not a part of decision making when it comes to FGM/C.

What Would You Do?

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT A CHILD HAS EXPERIENCED FGM/C, AND THEY COME TO YOU DIRECTLY



Example

A 6 year old child who you work with shares with *you* that she is experiencing pain while riding a bike and is seeing red (blood) when she uses the bathroom. Based on other contextual factors, you suspect that these symptoms may be related to FGM/C.

SOME QUESTIONS TO START YOUR CONVERSATION WITH THE CHILD MIGHT INCLUDE:

- “Do you know what happened to cause pain?”
- “How long has that been happening to you?”
- “Have you told anyone else about what is happening?”
- “Has anyone taken you to the doctor?”

The child might open up and provide more information, such as whether their parents are aware of the symptoms, if they know where the symptoms originated, or if they have received treatment from a medical provider or relative.

AS THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES:

- Follow mandated reporting guidelines for your jurisdiction.
- Avoid making assumptions that FGM/C took place. This child may be experiencing medical issues or other forms of violence. Discuss the symptoms further with the child.
- Avoid engaging in stereotyping.
- Consider resources you can offer the child.

What Would You Do?

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT A CHILD HAS EXPERIENCED FGM/C, BUT THEY HAVE NOT COME TO YOU DIRECTLY

Example



You overhear a conversation between a child who you work with and her aunt. The 6 year old girl shares with *her aunt, who is in support of FGM/C*, that she is experiencing pain while riding a bike and is seeing red (blood) when she uses the bathroom. The aunt reassures her niece that what she's experiencing is normal, and only happens to special girls. Based on contextual factors, you suspect that these symptoms may be related to FGM/C.

FIRST, ASSESS THE CHILD'S WELLBEING.

- Consider saying to the aunt:
 - “I overheard your niece mention the pain she is experiencing. Has she seen a doctor for this? If not, I would be happy to provide a recommendation.”
- Identify whether there are other children who are at risk of FGM/C (e.g., the 6 year old girl has a younger sister).
- Follow mandated reporting guidelines for your jurisdiction.

Resource:

- [Equality Now List of US Laws](#)

IF CIRCUMSTANCES PERMIT, SEEK TO HAVE A PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH THE ADULT.

- If the individual expresses support for FGM/C, try to understand the reasons why. Consider asking:
 - “What are your reasons for supporting the practice?” (e.g., is it the sexual purity or the hygiene?)
- If appropriate, you can continue the conversation with the person about the harms of practicing FGM/C.



Talking to Children About Their Bodies and Safety

RESOURCES

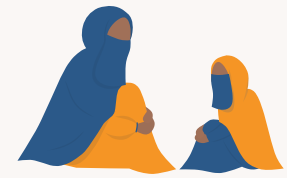
On March 25, 2024, RTI held a virtual roundtable discussion with grantees of the U.S. Office for Victims of Crime “Addressing Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting” program. Angela Peabody from Woman Global P.E.A.C.E Foundation moderated the first conversation on approaches to discussing female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) with youth. Talking with children about sensitive topics can be scary. Advocates against FGM/C can borrow strategies used in related fields to help them have conversations with youth and adolescents about their bodies. As a result of the roundtable discussion, a list of resources was compiled. The table below provides a variety of resources—briefs, books, videos, workshops— that can help improve knowledge and skills needed to talk to kids about their bodies.

Resource Title	Author	Description	Key Takeaways	Link
<u>Understanding Childhood Trauma</u>	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)	Infographics and tools with signs to recognize responses to traumatic events based on child’s developmental stage (Preschool, elementary school, middle and high school)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs of responses to traumatic events based on the developmental stage. • Links to SAMHSA’s behavioral treatment supports. 	<u>https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma</u>
<u>My Body Belongs to Me</u>	Interface Children & Family Services	Child personal safety education toolkit for parents and teachers (preschool to 6th grade)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A kit that empowers caregivers and teachers to talk to kids about their bodies and building autonomy/ control over their bodies. 	<u>https://www.icfs.org/wp-content/uploads/My-Body-Belongs-To-Me-Toolkit-English.pdf</u>

RESOURCES



Resource Title	Author	Description	Key Takeawaays	Link
<u>KidSmartz</u>	National Center for Missing and Exploited Children	KidSmartz is a child safety program that educates families about preventing abduction and empowers kids in grades K-5 to practice safer behaviors. This program offers resources to help parents, caregivers, and teachers protect kids using classroom lessons, at-home lessons, parent tips, and fun printable activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 4 Rules of Personal Safety can help keep kids safe. 	<u>https://www.missingkids.org/education/kidsmartz</u>
<u>Child Sex Abuse: Talking to children 0-11 years</u>	Australian Government	Webpage outlining key content, approaches, and resources to help caregivers and parents talk to children about child sex abuse for people age 0-11.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking about child sexual abuse helps keep children safe. • You can talk about sexual abuse as part of conversations about bodies, relationships, respect, consent and online safety. • It's important to talk about saying no, physical warning signs, inappropriate touch, and secrets and surprises. 	<u>https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/safety/child-sexual-abuse/child-sexual-abuse-talking-to-children</u>
<u>“Talk About It” Talking to Kids About Child Sex Abuse</u>	Darkness to Light	Curriculum designed to empower children, with a variety of resources on their website to supplement that education. Resources to support talking to kids about their bodies, safety, and sexual abuse.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tips for key content to cover with children about what abusers can do and how to share if bad things happen. • Understanding the neurobiology of trauma can help us better reach kids. 	<u>https://www.d2l.org/education/5-steps/step-3/</u>



Resource Title	Author	Description	Key Takeaways	Link
<u>Teaching Consent</u>	Safe Secure Kids	This plain-language resource page includes information and activities for both caregivers and kids to talk to kids about consent, knowing their bodies, and setting boundaries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps kids feel empowered to confidently make decisions about their body. • Feel confident about talking to their trusted adults about sensitive topics. 	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLUn9GgAXIs
<u>Responding to a Child's Disclosure of Abuse</u>	NSPCC Learning	This YouTube video gives a walkthrough of how to respond if a child discloses abuse or shares something difficult.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your body language and words create a safe environment for disclosure. 	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvJ5uBIGYgE
<u>Traumatic Experiences</u>	Sesame Street in Communities	This page has information for caregivers, teachers, and kids to learn about how traumatic experience can impact kids and how we can help them heal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes videos for kids and activities to do together with kids who have experienced trauma. • This may be particularly helpful for children who have experienced FGM/C and are experiencing trauma impacts as a result. 	https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/traumatic-experiences/
<u>Handling Disclosures</u>	Child Help	This resource is for adults to learn how to handle child abuse disclosure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When a child comes to you to talk about abuse they are facing, it is important to listen and act in a way to support the child and keep him or her protected. 	https://www.childhelp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Handling-Disclosures-v2.pdf