



TALKING WITH OUR CHILDREN ABOUT CONSENT

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In the #MeToo era, more and more parents are eager for opportunities to break the cycle of sexual violence for our children. As our own awareness of these issues heightens, it becomes even more critical that we pass on lessons about the power of consent to our children. By raising a generation that deeply understands the powerful act of giving permission before an act actually happens, we just might be able to “be the change we want to see in the world.”

In fact, talking with our children about consent begins long before they will need to implement the concept in the context of a sexual interaction. By giving them the tools to ask for what they want, accept whatever answer is given, and feel comfortable giving an authentic answer when they are asked, we empower our children to both say and respect the word “no.”

For Family Equality Council, and our community of LGBTQ parents, these issues can be particularly challenging to navigate. LGBTQ people face disproportionately high rates of sexual violence in comparison to the heterosexual and cisgender population. Our parents are both acutely aware of the need for change, yet also often triggered by our own experiences of sexual violence that make navigating these conversations with our children difficult. We hope that this resource serves as a starting point for the dramatic social change we so desperately need.



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TALKING WITH VERY YOUNG CHILDREN (1-5 YEARS OLD)

- **Assess your bookshelf and other media collections.** Do you own books that consistently frame girls and women as strong and independent? Do you watch shows or movies that romanticize forced touching? Do a sweep, and remove media that does not reinforce the messages you want to teach your children.
- **Teach children to ask permission before touching someone's body,** and encourage adults in your home to do that same.
 - *"Sarah, let's ask Joe if he wants a hug goodbye."*
 - *"Grandma, do you want to ask Jalen if he would like a hug or a high five goodbye?"*
- **Model how to respond if someone does not want to be touched.**
 - *"Drea doesn't want a hug. That's ok! Let's wave goodbye instead!"*
- **Teach your child that "no" and "stop" are critical words.**
 - *"Your sister said stop. She should not have to say that word more than once."*
 - *"We listen the first time when someone says stop."*

Empower your child to say no when they do not want to be touched. Practice this. Role play. Saying no to touch is hard. Don't be afraid to help advocate for/with them as they learn this skill.

Never force a child to hug, kiss, or touch someone, even a family member. This one can be hard for parents, especially if the child chooses not to hug or kiss a visiting family member (like a grandparent) goodbye. The underlying message, though, is that the child has authority over her or his body and can choose who gets to touch it at all times.

- **Listen the first time a child says stop,** even if you are late for an appointment, in the middle of a tickle fight, or trying to move quickly out of the rain. There is no need of ours that surpasses their control over who touches them and how.
- **Model taking responsibility for crossing a line.** Apologize if you have touched them in a way they do not like. Verbally take responsibility for doing something wrong, and commit to not doing it again.
- **Tell a child before you touch them.** This sends the message to them that their body and their boundaries matter, even in situations in which they aren't able to say "yes" or "no," such as during diaper changes. Starting even earlier than age one, a parent can narrate to an infant that they are going to be changing them, wiping them, etc. Not only does this lay the groundwork for the child, but it's great practice for the parent to begin telling their child when a touch is coming and to eventually ask permission each time.

TALKING WITH ELEMENTARY-AGED CHILDREN

- **Encourage children to read facial expressions.** Charade-style guessing games are great ways to teach children how to read and pay attention to body language. It is critical that children learn that “no” is not just a word—it is also a grimace or a scowl. If a child says “yes” to something but their body language says they’re unhappy, that isn’t really a yes. Teach your children that both the word and any accompanying facial expressions and body language matter.
- **Teach kids to watch their friends’ facial expressions, and to periodically check in with each other during play.** Make sure everyone is still having fun.
- **Talk about “gut feelings” or instincts.** Sometimes things make us feel weird, scared, or yucky, and we don’t know why. Encourage children to notice and consider those feelings, and let them know they can come to you to talk about them.
- **Let children know how hard it is to talk about uncomfortable topics.** Note how brave they are when they do choose to come to you with things that are hard to talk about.
- **Don’t tease children about friendships you might perceive to be crushes.** They will be less likely to talk with you about the dynamics of the relationship if they feel mocked. Avoid implying that friendships might be crushes, thereby imposing grown-up attitudes about romance onto children.
- **Teach children that their behaviors affect others.** Ask them to observe how people respond when others are rude or disrespectful.
- **Teach children to look for opportunities to help others.** Encourage them to talk to caring adults if they see something troubling.

Proactively ask your children if anyone has touched them in a way that feels unsafe or “icky.” Ask if anyone has tried to touch them even when they’ve said no. Have regular one-on-one check-ins at a time when your child feels peaceful and safe, and remind them that they will never be in trouble for telling you that someone has touched them in a way that they don’t like. Unwanted touches are not their fault. Even if someone tells the child that they will be in trouble if the child tells anyone, it will always be safe for them to tell you.

Note that for very young children, there will be a small group of caring adults who will, by necessity, need to physically keep them safe and assist with hygiene tasks until they can perform these tasks themselves. At times, an adult may need to touch the child’s body in a way the child does not like (brushing teeth or picking them up before they run across the street, for example). The adult should be thoughtful in framing the conversation around helping the child take care of him or herself, and give some choice in the moment (“We can brush your teeth now or after you go to the bathroom. What would you like to do?” “I can put you down if you hold my hand, or I can continue to carry you.”).

TALKING WITH TEENAGERS

- **Encourage youth to reflect on media.**

Call it out when a song on the radio speaks about women disrespectfully. Question if the physical encounter you witnessed on TV involved consent. Wonder out loud, and let your teenager hear your thought process:

— *“Hmmm. I don’t appreciate hearing how the singer just talked about women. It sounds to me like he does not respect women. Did you notice that?”*

— *“I noticed that the woman in that scene was pushing the man away, but he kissed her anyway. Do you think she was ok with that? Is that how you think men should act?”*

Similarly, don’t be afraid to point it out when you notice good examples in media, like a character in a movie backing off when another sets a boundary, or a song showing a positive example of a healthy relationship.

- **Discuss good touch/bad touch openly.**

At this age, various “touch games” emerge (butt slapping, nipple pinching, genital hitting). Bring it back to asking for consent before touching someone else’s body. Reinforce that touching someone without their consent, even if it is perceived as a game, is unacceptable.

Educate about enthusiastic and ongoing consent. Only “yes” means “yes,” and you want to ask before you kiss or touch someone else. You don’t want to wait for them to say no before considering if they consent. You also need to continue asking. “Yes” one time does not mean “yes” a second time, or later in the interaction.

Encourage youth to consider the who, what, where, when and why of consent. Teenagers tend to understand concepts by first applying them personally. Talk with youth about how their consent might change if the who, what, where, when, and why changes. When they understand this concept for themselves, they are more likely to be able to apply it to others.

For example, they may consent to being kissed on the cheek by you in the car before school, but they do not consent to being kissed on the cheek by you in front of their friends at football practice. Work through scenarios where consent changes based on changing circumstances.

DRUGS, ALCOHOL & CONSENT

- **Talk about consent as it relates to sexual interactions.**
 - *“How do you know when your partner is ready to kiss you?”*
 - *“How can you tell if someone is interested in you?”*
- **Call out “locker room talk” when you hear it.** If you hear a youth talking about someone in a degrading way, let them know that it is unacceptable. Affirm your teen’s positive intervention if you hear them calling out others on this issue.
- **Remind youth that people are more than their physical appearance.** When you hear someone commenting on a physical attribute of another, encourage them to think about something substantial about the person they can highlight.
- **Explain that hormones sometimes make emotions feel big and overwhelming.** That’s a normal experience in puberty. You are always around to talk. Make it clear that even through the big feelings, teenagers still need to show kindness and respect to those around them.
- **Talk openly about partying, and share your concerns.** Help your teenager to think critically about the reality of drinking too much.
 - *“How will you know when you’ve had too much to drink?”*
 - *“How will you handle it if your driver has had too much to drink?”* (Make it clear that your child can always call you to come get him or her if needed.)
 - *“How does your behavior change when you’ve had too much to drink?”*
 - *“How will you know whether it’s okay to kiss someone, touch someone, or have sex with someone when you’ve had a lot to drink?”*
- **Explain that decisions sometimes become cloudy and unclear when we are impaired.**
 - *“How will you be sure that you are reading the other person’s signals accurately?”*
- **Remind them to always ask for permission to touch or kiss another person,** especially when there’s drinking involved.
- **Explain that a person who is drunk, high, or otherwise impaired should not be touched, harassed, or sexually assaulted.** Be careful about the language you use with your kids about partying. The responsibility is never on the victim to have prevented his or her assault. It is always on the perpetrator to make the right decision and not harm anyone.
- **Teach your children to stand up for, and seek help for, a fellow partygoer who has had too much to drink.** This is another case in which popular media can be your friend. Note and praise when you see individuals being upstanding on television, in movies, and in songs, and openly discuss when you notice missed opportunities for people to help each other.

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Some of these tips may be easier than others to put into effect. Start slowly. As your family develops a culture around consent, it will become easier to layer on to the conversation. If you have an older child, and you have never talked about consent before, you may consider starting with tips for younger children and working your way up. It isn't always easy, but creating a generation that can ask for and give (or not) consent, can literally change lives.

ATTRIBUTIONS & FURTHER RESOURCES

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