



TEACHING CONSENT TO CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

Following the March 4 Justice rallies families have been urged to talk to their children about consent. Many parents are unsure where to start and how to go about it. Here are some ideas to assist parents in this most important topic.

Start the consent ball rolling from an early age

Consent education begins with adults teaching and modelling respectful treatment related to children's development stages. Holding discussions about body boundaries, checking in with feelings, respecting the feelings and voices of others, and listening to children's concerns are the types of behaviours that will help you develop a culture of respect in your family.

Teach no means no

Children learn about mutual consent through their play and sharing. A child who doesn't want to share their toys has a right to be left alone, rather than being scolded to change their mind. A parent who withdraws a privilege in response to a teenager's poor behaviour shouldn't be subjected to repeated attempts to negotiate a different outcome. Reinforce with children and young people that a no is not an invitation to ask again.

Emphasise choices

The biggest lesson to reinforce for children and young people is that they have a choice in how they behave, and how they react. The young person who blames alcohol for sexual assault has neglected the role that choice plays in their decisions. Blaming alcohol, the dress or the demeanour of another person are older versions of 'it's not my fault because he/she made me do it' that children so often use when asked to account for poor behaviour. Framing behaviour as a choice is a central consent strategy for children or all ages. A young child who shares a toy with a friend can be told, "Good choice Harry. Now you can have fun together." A primary school child who completes their homework assignment early can be reminded "Now you've got plenty of time to relax. Smart choice." The teenager who quietly helps you prepare a meal can be told, "You could have done anything after school, but you chose to help me. I appreciate that."

Teach kids to seek consent

While teaching kids the right to say no is a central consent message, children and young people should also develop the habit of seeking consent from others. "Ask your sister if it's okay for you to play that game next to her." "Ask grandma if she feels like a cuddle right now." Permission-seeking is another piece in respectful relationships puzzle that you can reinforce with kids.

Model consent

The use of consensual language is a community concern. A grandparent may need to be respectfully reminded to ask young children if they'd like a kiss or hug. Similarly, a relative should abide by a young child's wishes if they ask them to stop tickling or playing with them. A doctor should ask a child, "I'm going to take your temperature. Is that okay?" It's up to adults to frame requests in ways that children feel safe and comfortable.

In closing

The best age to start teaching your children about consent is when they are young. The second-best age is whatever age they are right now. Consent education is too big an issue to ignore or leave to schools to manage. It's something we all have to commit to if we want real change to occur.

Parenting Ideas 2022, accessed January 2022, <https://www.parentingideas.com.au/>

