

Helping Children Understand Consent By Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR)

On face value, consent seems like such a simple task. We give consent on a daily basis. While driving, you pause at a stop sign and wave to allow another car to pass through. While out to eat, you give approval to the server to bring over more water. Now imagine if your consent was not respected or your ability to provide consent was taken away from you. Cars would crash into one another through stop signs. Servers would pour more into your glass, even if you didn't request it. These examples are a little silly but they highlight the critical reasons why consent is crucial to the fabric of our society.

So if consent is such a simple thing, why does it seem to get so complicated when it is related to sex? Consent is at its core an act of communication. It is a conversation (whether spoken or unspoken) and provides mutual agreement two or more individuals are making together. However, when related to sex, the conversation can be awkward. Sex is an area where many individuals struggle to communicate and the boundaries of consent get blurred. However, it doesn't have to be so difficult to understand.

Approaching the concept of consent with children can be simple. As parents, role models, and community leaders, we have the opportunity to set a positive foundation of values and beliefs.

Provide children with the opportunity to say yes or no in everyday choices. Whether it is allowing a child to choose their own outfits, what they play with, or who to be friends with, the opportunity to make choices builds a child's ability to be comfortable in their own decisions. It is important that children are able to make some decisions in their lives and for child to know that you have heard their voice and respect their decisions.

Encourage them to use their words and talk to describe good and bad feelings. Asking children about their bodies and how they feel allows for children to speak about what they like and what they don't. What do you enjoy to do with other kids? Do you like to be tickled? How did it feel when another child hurts you? What doesn't feel good during play?

Teach children to ask for permission and teach children that "no" and "stop" are important words. When children hug a fellow playmate or a loved one, it is important to ask the other if they want to give and/or receive a hug. Children also have the power to refuse or stop an act of touching if they want. This process will allow for children to understand that their bodies are only for themselves and that they have the power to allow/ disallow another person from touching them if they do not want to be touched.

Never force a child to hug, touch, or kiss anybody. In situations where children are pressured to hug, touch, or kiss somebody, it is healthy to provide an alternative to that touch. For instance if Grandma wants a kiss, but the child does not want to kiss them, provide an alternative (like give a high five or blow a kiss) to provide space for the child to decide not to kiss. These tools will help children be safe and happy while still respecting their own bodies and others' space.

By instilling these values and simple actions into our youth, we can help create a generation of children that are emphatic, empowered of their bodies, and have a healthy understanding of consent. We can help build a generation where there is less sexual assault and rape.