



Consent and Boundaries in Early Childhood

YOUR BODY BELONGS TO YOU

During the early childhood years (0-5 years old), it is important to teach children that their body belongs to them. You can talk to children about the right they have to decide who touches their body and the right they have to say no. Just like adults, children have good days and bad days, times when they want to be touched and times when they don't.

By hugging, kissing, tickling and chasing children who have not given permission for this activity, we are teaching them they do not have control over what happens to their bodies.

Consent is open communication between people about their boundaries and preferences. It can be used in any situation where you are interacting with another person. Consent in early childhood can look like sharing toys or asking for a hug.

Check out the Book List at www.shorecentre.ca/parents for ideas.

We should teach children:

- To read facial expressions and body language.
- To be empathetic towards others.
- That saying yes today does not necessarily mean yes tomorrow.

How to teach consent

- Model how to GIVE and GET consent. Children look to adults for behavior cues.
- Model behaviours you think are important such as respecting other people, listening to others and using correct names for body parts.
- Ask before posting a picture of a child
- Describing what you are doing in the moment, and asking for their consent (e.g. in toilet training and wiping their bum).
- Teaching a child they can say no to touch.

These actions allow for respect of their body, and teaches consent.



COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Begin talking to children at a young age (the earlier the better) and continue talking with them throughout their childhood. If consent becomes part of everyday conversation it will become a normal part of their life.

POLITENESS CONDITIONING

In her book for parents *Beyond Birds & Bees*, Bonnie J. Rough explains that we are taught to not take no for an answer. “When somebody asks you to touch them and you say no, it’s **NOT** okay for them to keep asking. It’s hard to keep saying no, but you have the right to do that”. We are taught to wear people down. This teaching goes against our instincts. When we are pestered, it raises our tolerance for being bothered, bullied and harassed. We often learn to be polite at the sake of our personal boundaries and comfort.

Teaching personal boundaries is important during these early childhood years. Teaching a child they can decline a hug or decline touch, allows for respect of their body and teaches consent. Give options to children such as high fives, waves, hugs or verbal communication during greetings and goodbyes.

Not only is it important for us to ask a child before we touch them, it is important that children learn how to ask others before touching them. Lessons about sharing and touch-based games like tickling, all help to create a more [intuitive understanding of consent.](#)

A child who understands consent is more likely to say no to someone who is touching them inappropriately and tell a trusted adult.

A child who understands consent is more likely to have healthy and consensual relationships throughout their life. If consent is taught early it becomes a natural part of their understanding of relationships.

Consider reading books about body parts, privacy and how to say no.

For more information, check out shorecentre.ca

