

# KEEPING CHILDREN HEALTHY, HAPPY AND SAFE USING LANGUAGE, BOUNDARIES AND CONSENT

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## Language

Many of us do not use the correct terminology for our genitals; words such as, vulva, vagina, uterus, ovaries, penis, scrotum, testicles and breasts. Many of us therefore do not teach children the correct terminology or words. This may be because we are embarrassed, uncomfortable, scared or we were never taught the correct words when we were young (or old for that matter). However, research has shown that there are many benefits to teaching children the correct words for ALL their body parts, and no risks. It is ok if children know other words for these body parts, as it would be almost impossible for them not to learn any, as long as they also know the correct words and are taught them as early as possible.

### **Why it is Important to Teach Children the Correct Words for all their body parts**

1. It may prevent childhood sexual abuse. Research has shown that some sexual offenders avoid children who know the correct names for their genitals because it tells them that the child has been educated about their body and is more likely to tell someone about the abuse.
2. It may end childhood sexual abuse more quickly. Research has shown that children who have been taught the correct names for their genitals are more likely to disclose abuse, are more likely to be taken seriously when they disclose, and are more likely to be understood when they disclose, leading to a more positive outcome for the child (e.g. ending the abuse, getting support and/or counselling, abuser being charged).

3. It helps children develop a healthy, positive, body image when their genitals are not something to be ashamed of. When they are given a correct name they are respected like other body parts. We don't call other body parts by funny or derogatory names. We also don't leave out other body parts. We make genitals unspeakable by not naming them.
4. It gives children power, as language is power. The more language they have to talk about their body, the more empowered they are.
5. It provides the necessary foundation for subsequent sexual health education about relationships, consent, puberty, reproduction, safer sex, pregnancy, birth control, Sexually Transmitted Infections, etc.
6. It gives them the ability to talk to adults they trust, such as parents and health care providers, about concerns they may have such as itchiness, irritation and pain. It allows them to be specific about the body part and area they are referring to. Only knowing funny or made up words can often cause confusion.
7. It gives them the ability to ask questions about their bodies using words everyone can understand.

## Boundaries

When teaching children the correct terms for all their body parts, you can also teach them that their body is private and "belongs to them." You can talk to them about the right they have to decide who touches their body and the right they have to say no. It is also important to let them know there are no secrets and that they can tell you anything and you will not get angry, and they will not get in trouble. Often children keep secrets because of fear of punishment.

## Okay Touch and Not Okay Touch (or Secret Touching)

We often hear that parts of our body are private, and this is true, however, it is important to teach children that their entire body is private. Often someone who sexually abuses children begins by touching the child on parts of their body that are not their genitals. This may be part of the abusers grooming process.

People who abuse children will often tell the child it is a secret. By having a no secrets policy in your home (surprises are ok, such as surprise parties or surprise presents) it is clear to a child when they are asked to keep a secret that they should tell you. Children should be taught that if someone asks them to keep a secret they should tell an adult they trust about this secret. Talk to children about who their trusted adults are (e.g. parents, grandparents, close friends, teachers, care providers) but be aware that people who abuse children often know the child and have gained the trust of the family.

Explain to children what ok touch and not ok touch are, and who can touch them (e.g. parent, care giver, health care provider) and why. Not ok touch can be abuse, such as secret touching, but it can also be a touch that is painful or uncomfortable from a family member or friend (e.g. getting hit on the playground, a brother hugging too tightly).

Teach them that they can say NO if they are feeling uncomfortable, afraid or being hurt. By understanding that their body belongs to them, and they have the ability to decide what happens to it, you are teaching children confidence, personal agency and respect for themselves and others. It is important to listen to your child when they say no and respect their decision. If this is not possible (e.g. they must go to the dentist, you want them to wear their winter hat) explain why. Only phrase things as questions that are actually a decision your child can make. If it is a demand phrase it this way (Would you like to wear your hat today? Compared to, It is cold out today so you must wear your hat to keep your head and ears warm.)

## Consent

Just like adults get to decide who touches them and how, so should children. Ask your child before you touch them, teach your child to ask before touching someone else. Respect their answer if they say no. Give them options (e.g. would you like to hug grandma, blow them a kiss or say good-bye?). Teach them about rejection (e.g. someone saying no to a hug is their decision and doesn't mean they don't like you).

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 cuddling children who do not want to be touched, we are teaching them they do not have control over

what happens to their bodies and adults can do to their bodies what they want. A child who understands consent is more likely to say no to someone who is touching them inappropriately and tell a trusted adult. They are also more likely to have healthy and consensual relationships throughout their lives if consent is taught early and becomes a natural part of their understanding of relationships.

Teach children to read facial expressions and body language and be empathetic to others. Sometimes people cannot communicate using words and often people choose for various reasons not to use verbal language. The ability to understand verbal language, body language and facial expressions is a useful skill.

**By teaching language, boundaries and consent throughout a child's life, you are preparing them for future relationships and helping to prevent sexual abuse.**

## HOW TO KEEP CHILDREN HEALTHY, HAPPY AND SAFE:

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1. Teach children the correct names for ALL body parts including their genitals. Use words such as, vulva, vagina, uterus, ovaries, penis, scrotum, testicles and breasts.
2. Teach children, "Your body belongs to you."
3. Teach children, "Your body is private." Your entire body, not just your genitals.
4. Read sexual health books with your child. There are many books that discuss body parts, privacy, how to say no and your body belongs to you.
5. Believe children if they tell you someone touched them or made them feel uncomfortable. Tell them it was not their fault.
6. Teach and model how to give and get consent.
7. Try to model behaviours you think are important for your child such as bodily autonomy, healthy relationships, using correct names for body parts etc.

8. Teach children the difference between ok touch and not ok touch.
  9. Teach children empathy and how to read facial expressions and body language.
  10. Teach children there are no secrets between you and them, even if someone told them to keep something a secret.
  11. Teach children that they can tell you anything and ask you anything without getting in trouble.
  12. Teach children to trust their "gut" feelings (instincts, tummy feelings) as they are often your body's way of letting you know something is wrong or someone has negative intentions.
  13. Teach children they do not have to do everything an adult tells them.
  14. Communication is key! Begin talking to children at a young age (the earlier the better) and continue talking to them into their teenage years. If you make concepts such as consent and correct terms for body parts, part of everyday conversation it becomes the norm.
  15. Teach your child the skills to be confident and assertive.
  16. Nurture children to give them a sense of being valued and loved. This should continue throughout a child's life, not only when they are young.
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