

Jovan peeked into the block area. He saw Jackson carefully balancing blocks to build a tall tower. Jovan crept closer.



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“Jackson!” said Jovan, jumping in for a hug.

Jackson was surprised. He lost his balance and knocked over his tower.
“Jovan! You made my tower fall!”

Jovan stepped back, confused. He was just trying to say hello. Why was Jackson angry?



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“Jackson, do you want to play detectives with me?” Jovan asked.

“No,” Jackson said angrily. He turned around to fix his tower.

“Hmph!” Jovan said, annoyed. He walked away.

Detective Jovan crept along the shelves toward Deja. She was sitting in the library with Mr. B. Jovan tiptoed close, then flung his arms around Deja’s shoulders. “Gotcha!” he said.

Deja pushed him away. “Jovan! Get off me!”

Jovan frowned.



CONSENT: A GUIDE FOR CARING ADULTS

CONSENT FOUNDATIONS

What Is Consent?

Consent is a nuanced concept. Its meaning expands as children and situations mature. With young children, we can use the definition *agreeing because you want to*. This child-friendly definition inspired the series title We Say What's Okay.

Why Consent?

As high-profile assault allegations and hidden abuse have come to light in recent years, more and more people have called for the need to teach about consent. These conversations tend to focus on high schools, colleges, and places of employment. However, they need to happen much earlier to be the most effective—just as it is important to read to young children and give them opportunities to run and play to support cognitive and physical development. Consent is a social and emotional skill that requires learning and practice. Caring adults can help children build the foundations of consent early on.

Consent is a principle that we as adults can practice in our lives and model for children. When we create a culture of consent, we provide a safe space for children and empower them to have a voice. This guide offers help in that effort. It is not just a one-time lesson plan. This is ongoing work. The more we and the children in our care practice

trusting our instincts and saying no when something feels off in the day-to-day, the more likely we are to trust ourselves when we are in danger. When we as parents, teachers, social workers, and caregivers can make our spaces safe, consensual, and communicative, children know that they can come to us for support.

The Fallacy of Stranger Danger

Of children who are sexually abused, 93 percent are abused by someone they know.* Saying no to someone you know and trust can be difficult, but it is a vital skill. We need to empower children to say no at home and in other familiar, day-to-day environments. It is not children's job to protect themselves from abuse. That is our job. But we can use consent foundations to empower children and to mitigate risk.

Five Steps for Teaching Consent

Building consent foundations involves teaching children five key concepts:

- I listen to my body.
- I am in charge of my body.
- I ask permission.
- I check in.
- I accept no.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

Asking Permission

Asking permission allows the person asked to agree (or not) to an action or activity. It can be tempting not to ask permission to do something you like, or something you think is nice. For example, if you like hugs a lot, you may assume that everyone does. But plenty of people do not! Instead of announcing, "I'm a hugger!" and swooping in, a better option is to say, "I like hugs, but I know not everyone does. May I hug you?"

Ready to take it a step further? Consider the nuances of how you phrase requests for permission. If you ask, "Will you give me a hug?" you are making a demand—putting a burden on the other person to comply or not. Instead, if you ask, "May I give you a hug?" you are making an offer, which the other person may feel free to accept or decline.

Health and safety note: Are you supposed to ask permission for everything? What if a child says no to a bath? Or a doctor appointment? Sometimes it isn't going to work to ask a child's permission. Your priority is protecting the health and safety of the child in your care. For example, if you ask your child's permission to change their dirty diaper and they say no, you're left with the choice of either violating their boundaries (because they didn't consent to a diaper change) or leaving them in a dirty diaper (which is neglect and a health hazard). However, even when you can't ask permission, you can still show children that their bodies are worthy of respect through including them in the activity and by offering choices. For instance: "Tonight is bath night. Are you ready to take a bath now, or

should we do it closer to bedtime?" "Your diaper is full and we need to get you a clean one. Would you like to sit on the toilet too?" It's also important to talk through what's happening. For example, instead of picking up a child and tossing them in the tub with no warning, provide a running commentary: "Okay, I'm going to pick you up now and set you in the tub! Do you want to help wash your belly? Now I'm going to wash behind your ears. . . ." By describing what's happening, you avoid catching the child off guard, and you show that their body is worthy of respect and their mind deserves to know what's going on.



* RAINN. 2020. "Child Sexual Abuse." rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse.