

Jamin skipped to the classroom. His shoes went *thud-THUD, thud-THUD, thud-THUD* down the hall. His best friend Zakiya would be there, and he was excited! They had lots to do.



When it was time to go home, Jamin and Zakiya usually shared a great big extra-squeezy hug.



But this afternoon, when Jamin leaned in for a great big extra-squeezy hug, Zakiya held out her hands and stopped him. She said, "I don't want to hug you today, Jamin."

Jamin shrank back. His face felt hot. He scrunched up his eyes, confused. Zakiya's mom nudged her toward Jamin. "He looks sad!"



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

Handling Rejection

If someone asks for a hug, and the answer is no, what do they do with the resulting feelings? Like Jamin, they may feel sad or hurt or even angry. Rejection may spark uncomfortable emotions. Processing difficult feelings is a skill everyone needs to practice.

Here are four steps you can take to help a child process their emotions and cope with rejection when someone has told them no:

- 1. Help children respect the no.** If a child asks permission to do something, such as hug a friend, and the answer is no, then the child shouldn't do it. If you say, "It's just a hug!" you communicate that the friend's boundaries don't matter. You also tell the child asking for a hug that they are entitled to one in spite of being told no. Step in if necessary to protect the friend's bodily autonomy. You can say to the child, "(Friend's name) said no, because they're making a choice for their body." Then you can turn to the friend and say, "Thank you, (friend's name), for being in charge of your body." It's okay to suggest that the child ask about an alternative, such as "May I give you a high five instead?"

- 2. Validate children's emotions.** Remind children that it is okay to feel sad, angry, hurt, or disappointed. We all feel these uncomfortable emotions sometimes. Feelings are part of being human. Help children connect to their emotions by asking, "How is your body feeling right now? Why do you think that is?"
- 3. Empathize.** Empathy is making an effort to understand how someone feels. You can help children use their own experiences to try to understand someone else. You might say, "I don't know why they don't want to hug you. But sometimes you don't want to be tickled, and you know what that feels like. Maybe that's how they feel?"



*RAINN. 2021. "Child Sexual Abuse." rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse.