



COMMENTARY **SEXUALITY**

We Can Teach Kids About Consent Without Bringing Sex Into the Conversation

Apr 9, 2015, 11:05am Martha Kempner

By respecting our daughter's wishes when she asks us to stop tickling her, my husband and I are modeling other correct behavior as well: We're establishing, early on, the need to give and obtain consent when it comes to control of one's own body.



My husband and I have been establishing, early on, the need to give and obtain consent when it comes to control of one's own body.

One night last week, when my 4-year-old daughter got home from preschool, she ran into her father's office and climbed up on his lap. After some hugs and generalized silliness, he started to tickle her. Even as she laughed hard, she said, "Stop it, Daddy." Instantly, he put his hands in the air and said, "You asked me to stop, and so I did."

You see, our daughter has a tendency to treat us both like her personal jungle gym, jumping and climbing accordingly. It hurts. So we are on a mission to model the correct response when someone says, "Stop, you're hurting me" or, "Please, I don't want you to sit on me right now"—to do what that person asks. We've been doing this in the name of self-preservation. Lately, it's occurred to me that we're modeling other correct behavior as well: We're establishing, early on, the need to give and obtain consent when it comes to control of one's own body.

My husband was a sexual assault peer educator in college, and I'm a sexuality educator by training and profession, so we have thought a lot about what our daughters will face as they get older and more independent. Though we often think about consent in terms of sexual assault, the truth is that it is an essential aspect of all interpersonal relationships. People have the right to set boundaries about their bodies, their possessions, and their actions, and we need to respect those boundaries. By framing consent in this way for kids, we're laying the groundwork they will need to navigate situations in the future, including and beyond sexual interactions.

So the conversation my husband had with my 4-year-old was not about sex or rape. Those words were never mentioned. Nonetheless, he was providing her with a foundation to assert control of her own body and to see how others assert control of theirs.

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It's sometimes hard to demonstrate that behavior with the very young—especially because sometimes, as a child, she doesn't know what's best and isn't actually in control. Like the other day, when she had to get a throat culture, which involved getting a giant Q-tip stuck in her throat. As she protested, I tried to explain the limits of consent, the importance of medical care, and how mommies, daddies, and sometimes have to do things that kids don't like. I stressed that this only applies to me, her dad

doctor. And I acknowledged the fact she was upset and told her I understood. This may all have been lost on her as she clung to me and clenched her jaw, but hopefully some of it sank in.

Those situations—in which I have to override our consent for her own good—make me even more committed to abiding by her wishes when I can, because I want her to know that in most situations her body is hers and she sets the limits. Often when she complains, for example, I'm trying to get the knots out of her hair. I don't want to stop; I want to keep brushing and send her to school without a rat's nest hidden in a ponytail for once. But I stop and point out that I did so because it's her hair and she asked me to. Then I promise to be gentler and ask for permission to start again (and when she inevitably doesn't give it to me, I reach for the ponytail holder and move on).

Tickling is a really tricky one for us too, because the kid is usually laughing hysterically and looking like she's having a really good time even while she's asking us to stop. My husband and I are far from the first parents to notice that tickle fighting can mirror other coercive situations later in life, especially when parents take their children's laughter as a cue to continue despite being asked to stop. So we always take her at her word and back off. More than once her response has been to start laughing and say, "OK, tickle me."

As kids get older, conversations can get a little more specific in terms of relationships and actions. For example, the same night my husband stopped tickling my younger daughter, my older daughter and I had a conversation that touched on abuse. She is in third grade and starring as Audrey in a ten-minute production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. She has asked repeatedly to see the movie. Though I'd seen it years ago, I had forgotten just how much domestic violence was shown and hinted at in the relationship between Audrey and the dentist. It's possible I should have taken the PG-13 rating more seriously and pushed our viewing forward a few years. Since I hadn't, though, I used it as a teachable moment and said during the movie and again at bedtime, "You know nobody ever gets to hit you, right?"

My 8-year-old always likes to find exceptions to any rules that I put forward, so instead of just saying, "Right," she challenged my statement with a hypothetical situation: "What if you and your best friend have a secret handshake, and as part of it, you slap each other really gently on the cheek?"

I paused for a second. "OK, I'm going to teach you a really important word tonight. Consent. Do you know what that means?"

She shook her head: No.

“It means permission. Your friend has to give you permission to slap her, even gently, and you have to do the same. So if you talk ahead of time and decide together that it would be cool to add a gentle slap to your secret handshake and you both agree, then OK, you can do it. But you can’t make up a secret handshake that includes hitting her and try it out without asking. She has to give you permission first. She has to consent. Does that make sense?”

She nodded and did not challenge me any further. We moved on to discussing her costume for the play and have not discussed consent again. But we will. And when we do, she’ll know the word and the basic concept.

Logan Levkoff, a sexologist and author of the book *Got Teens? The Dr. Moms’ Guide to Sexuality Social Media and Other Adolescent Realities*, said she talks about consent in much the same way with her own kids and her students, some of whom are as young as 7 or 8 years old. She explained in an interview, “It’s our responsibility to be talking about consent and permission in ways that have nothing to do with sexuality, because it teaches our young people to respect a ‘yes’ and to respect a ‘no.’ Whether it’s asking a friend, ‘Can I give you a hug?’ or ‘Can I play with your toy?’ it teaches kids both that they have to listen to others and that they have a voice of their own. And it helps them understand that their bodies belong to them.”

Levkoff added that in the classroom, one of the most important things she teaches young people on this issue is their right to speak up. “It’s about understanding that you have a body and a voice. You have a right to have ownership of everything about your body and everything you do, from kissing to holding hands to whether someone posts a picture of you on the Internet.”

She pointed out that this last one is especially interesting to discuss with little kids, because most often it’s their own parents who want to share photos of their children on social media. Even then, she encourages her students to voice their concerns, in part for the practice of asking for consent in a trusted scenario. “It’s much easier to practice in a safe place than when it comes time to talk about this in sexual situations, which can be uncomfortable to begin with,” she said.

This building-block approach is also used by the *National Sexuality Education Standards*, a textbook that lays out the minimum of what students should know and be able to do by the end of certain grade levels. The word “consent” does not appear until the standards for ninth through 12th grade, but the concept is introduced long before that. In kindergarten through second grade, for example, the standards suggest that students be able to “[e]xplain that all people, including children, have the right to tell others not to touch their body when they do not want to be touched.”

I asked Monica Rodriguez, president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), what a lesson on consent would look like in elementary school. “It likely wouldn’t and shouldn’t discuss sexuality at all,” she said. Instead, she imagined a lesson in which kids brainstormed things that classmates might do that they didn’t like, such as chasing, hitting, or teasing. Then the class would discuss why these behaviors were wrong and how to say “no.”

“In the end, this helps us prevent sexual assault from both sides,” she said. “We are helping potential victims understand that they have the right to set boundaries and say no, but this is also where perpetrator prevention happens. We are teaching all kids that they have a responsibility to respect people’s boundaries. If someone tells you to stop and you keep going, that is wrong.”

Recently, I wrote about a law in California designed to teach high school students about affirmative consent or the idea that “only yes mean yes” when it comes to sexual activity. I supported the law because it is clear to me that teenagers are having sex, they are experiencing sexual assault, and they do not understand consent. If they did, we would not read about cases in which women who are passed out drunk and unable to consent are sexually assaulted in front of classmates. And we would not see pictures of these incidents passed around school or shared on social media, suggesting that the perpetrators and witnesses are proud. Clearly, I argued, we can’t wait until college to teach them about consent.

Of course, we shouldn’t wait until high school either. We need to start helping kids respect boundaries—their own and others’—as early as possible.

I believe that if we start educating my daughters and their peers about consent now and continue to build on that in age-appropriate ways through high school, we can raise a generation of kids who understand that all sexual behavior must be mutually consensual, who know the importance of having honest conversations with their partners before (and during) sexual activity, and who step in when they see something that looks wrong instead of posting pictures of it on the Internet.

I’m not suggesting that this will end sexual assault on college campuses or elsewhere—many rapes are about violence or power and not sex. Still, I am hopeful that by the time the graduating classes of 2028 and 2032 reach campus, a culture of respect and consent will have begun to take hold.

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