AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

To Hug or Not to Hug: Teaching Kids About Consent



The positive impacts of hugs on people's bodies and minds are well documented. In order for hugs to be healthy, both participants have to be engaged with full, enthusiastic consent. Otherwise, the hug can easily become a negative experience. *Don't Hug the Quokka!* By Daniel Enrico provides a lighthearted and friendly introduction to the concept of consent for young children.

Read an excerpt from the Note to Parents and Caregivers by Karen Rayne, PhD, providing guidance to help your child understand consent.

Bodily Autonomy and Understanding Consent

The thing to remember about hugs is that they are often the very first kinds of interpersonal touch that children learn to navigate on their own. The rules that are laid around hugs—how to ask for them, how to consent or not consent to them, how to listen to someone else's consent—are the basis for the tools that children will take into their adolescence and young adulthood.

The basic hallmark is to **trust children to draw their own boundaries on their physical bodies**. If they don't want to be hugged or touched, they are allowed to say no. This teaches children that they can be their own person, invites them to actually consider what they do want and need, and increases self-esteem and autonomy. It will also make it easier for them to understand that others have the same right to make decisions about their own bodies—thus learning to accept a no from other people. Helping kids navigate the hug and touch landscape is the start of a lifelong process. These tools translate directly into an adolescent and young adult's capacity to engage in sexual and romantic relationships clearly, ethically, authentically, and safely.

When (and How!) to Say No

Helping your child learn to say no to something or someone is difficult for many parents because they did not receive this kind of guidance and support as children themselves. Instead, it tends to come when children are older and many of their habits around consent have already been formed.

Questions and discussion topics to have with your child can include:

- How do you know if you do not want to hug someone?
- What are the ways that your body tells you if you do not want to hug someone?
  (You can talk about the way their body feels in different situations, whether those feelings are comfortable or uncomfortable, and what those feelings might be telling them.)
- If you do not want to hug a friend, how would you tell them that? What if it were your teacher? What if it were your friend's parent?
  (Include additional important people in this question, like family members, clergy members, and others. Model some clear ways to say no, which can be as simple as "No, thank you" or "I don't want a hug.")
- What would you do if someone tried to hug you without asking first?
  (Some possibilities include saying "Please ask me before you touch me" and "I don't like it when people hug me without asking me first.")
- What would you do if someone tried to hug you after you had told them no?
  (Tell your child that if a person continues to try and hug them, or keeps asking over and over again after the child has said no, the child should get support from an adult (or another adult, if an adult is the one trying to instigate the hug).

Most children will need the support of their parents when they say no to physical contact, particularly when it is with an adult. Be sure and tell your child clearly that you will support them saying no to a hug with anyone, including family members.

This Article's Author

Daniel Errico is a children's author and producer, and founder of Freechildrenstories.com. His works have been featured by The United Nations, *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Huffington Post*, *Buzzfeed*, *USA Today*, and many others. He is the creator and head writer of the Hulu Original Series *The Bravest Knight*, based on a successful short film. Visit him on Twitter and Instagram.

Don't Hug the Quokka!

Daniel Errico That quokka may be cute, but does it want a hug? The quokka says "No!" In *Don't Hug The Quokka!*, young readers get a lighthearted and friendly introduction to the concept of consent, learning that even the most adorable creatures might not want a hug—unless they say so! Consent is a really important topic for parents to introduce to young children, but it can be tricky to do so in a way that's clear without being frightening. This book is funny and cute, but has a clear message that you have to ask before touching someone else—it's a good place to start for young kids.