

Teaching Children to Set Boundaries and Respect the Boundaries of Others

The news these days is filled with stories of grown men violating the boundaries of others, particularly women, who are sexually harassed and/or assaulted in staggering numbers. So, what do these stories mean for parents, who want to raise children who would never treat others with such disrespect? Parents can start with basic lessons about boundaries, respect and empathy in the earliest years of life.

I. Underlying issues

- Learning about boundaries starts very early in childhood, long before the issues of sexual behavior emerge – for example, when kids get too rough with each other, tickle someone, invade someone's space, push someone under water at the pool, etc.
- Teaching young children to say a firm “No!” is important, as is teaching children to respect when someone else says no.
- When children become adolescents, those same principles apply in romantic relationships and/or sexual behavior – with the concept of “affirmative consent” being a key lesson we need to teach our sons and daughters even before they are old enough to find themselves in those situations.

II. What parents can do

- 1) Teach your toddler or preschooler to say firmly, “No! I don’t like that.”
- 2) Teach your young child to stop when another child says no.
“She says she doesn’t like that, so you need to stop!”
- 3) Emphasize empathy and perspective-taking
“How do you think your friend feels when you don’t stop when she says no?”
“How do you feel when someone does that to you?”
- 4) When children approach adolescence, specifically discuss sexual boundaries, respect, affirmative consent
Pose real-life dilemmas and ask what is the right way to handle them. Talk about the role of bystanders and the importance of turning to a caring adult and reporting to authorities when violation happens. Speak out!