

A Conversation About Consent:

for Middle School Parents

If you've watched the news in the past few years, it's becoming increasingly clear how important it is to teach the idea of mutual respect in terms of giving and receiving consent. The problem is the majority of adults today didn't get consent-education as kids. In fact, the idea of consent is still a little cloudy and ambiguous to most of us.

We want to help! Your kid is in middle school, and whether or not you've had a formal discussion about consent, now is a great time to either start or keep talking about it.

Defining Consent

So, what is consent? To put it simply, **consent means to give permission for something to happen—to agree to do something or allow something to take place.** It's important to highlight during these conversations that giving or receiving consent does not make a choice "okay." In other words, when someone asks if they can send a photo and your daughter or son agrees to receive it, it may still be an unwise decision.

Consent is a safeguard to put in place that helps keep relationships safe. When consent isn't understood, communicated, or respected, dangerous and hurtful things can happen.

Consent can be verbal or nonverbal. It is *not* perpetual—in other words, giving consent once doesn't mean consent forever. It's okay to change your mind about something you agreed to at first. You should also always ask someone for permission, even if they've agreed to something in the past.

For this age, digital consent is a critical area to discuss. Pictures, videos, Snapchats, and DMs . . . there are so many ways to connect.

At its core, **consent is about mutual respect and honor—honoring others and expecting to be honored by others.**

Consent is complicated. That's why we want to give you a few things to say to your kids to teach them how they can both honor others and expect to be honored.

EXPECT TO BE HONORED BY OTHERS

- **Saying "no" is always the best way to express non-consent.** While there are nonverbal ways to turn down someone's request to hug, kiss, or hold your hand, the best and clearest way to turn them down is to simply say, "No."
- **Saying "no" does not make you rude, close-minded, or immature.** It's okay to hurt someone's feelings with your "no." There are few things more inspiring than someone who knows what they believe in enough to stand up for it.
- **When in doubt, ask yourself, "Am I honoring myself and my body with this decision?"** **Ultimately, we want to teach our kids the importance of honoring themselves, their beliefs, and their bodies.** If they feel uncomfortable, the default response should be, "No."
- **Saying "no" to someone you care about will be tough.** Your middle schooler may or may not be "dating" yet. If they're not, it's still a good idea to talk about their dating future. They should know that consent is required to keep dating relationships safe and healthy. Having conversations with your kid before—and during—their dating relationships about specific boundaries will give them the knowledge and the courage to honor themselves and others when dating. Talk through the idea that a respectful, mutual relationship means that the other person is respecting the boundaries you have set up.
- **You can practice saying "no."** When your kid says "no" to the small things they don't want to do, it's easier to say "no" to the bigger things. Saying "no" to giving hugs, or to people they don't want to hang out with, or to pictures they don't want taken of them will give your kid the necessary practice they need to say "no" when the stakes are higher.
- **Speak up.** Your kid should hear on a regular basis that they can tell you anything, any time. And if they don't want to talk to you about something, they should know of another trusted mentor, coach, or family member they can turn to.

HOW TO GIVE CONSENT

- **If you're unsure, assume the answer is "no."** If you haven't been given permission to send something, say something, or do something, assume the answer is "no" unless you hear a clear "yes."
- **Consent once isn't consent forever.** If you receive consent one time, you still need to receive consent every time.
- **Rejection hurts, but the alternative is worse.** Learning to hear the word "no" is never easy. But the alternative is disrespect and dishonor to yourself and to someone else—which is way more damaging than being rejected.
- **Understand that consent is not the *only* standard.** Consent is definitely important, but we're called to a higher standard. Teach your kid that it's *not* okay to view their relationships, behaviors, and choices through the lens of what the other person said "yes" or *didn't* say "no" to. Instead, teach them to look through the lens of honoring what's best for other people and for them.

Questions to Ask Your Middle Schooler

These are great conversations to have over time, but it's probably not best to ask these questions all at once.

- Have you ever heard the word "consent"?
- Have you ever felt pressured to send, say, or do something that you didn't want to do?
- Is there a friend or adult who makes you feel uncomfortable?
- What can you do or say if you're in a situation with someone who makes you feel uncomfortable?
- Have you ever looked back on a situation and wondered if you got consent prior to sending, saying, or doing something?
- Have you ever looked back on a situation and wondered if you gave consent to someone prior to them sending, saying, or doing something?
- Is it possible to get consent from a person who is under the influence of drugs or alcohol?
- What questions do you have about consent? I may not have all the answers, but I can help you find them.
- If you don't feel comfortable talking to me about the idea of consent, who can you talk to? How can I help connect the two of you?
- If someone sends you something or acts in a way that goes against your "no," what should you do? Let's make a plan for the best way to handle it.

Parent Challenge: How to Model Consent

Your middle schooler should feel some autonomy to manage their own body and its needs—including its need for privacy. However, as a parent of a minor, you do have certain responsibilities to ensure your kid is safe and healthy. And it's not unrealistic to delay some choices until they are legal adults—like that tattoo they want. This tension may not ever fully be resolved during this phase, but there are a few things you can do to practice consent in your own home:

- Knock before entering your kid's room.
- Give them opportunities to explain (and listen to their explanation) before accusing.
- Give your middle schooler privacy when they use the restroom or shower.
- Guard your kid's secrets—be someone they can trust.
- Ask their permission before posting that picture or telling that story.
- Avoid announcing physical developments or milestones publicly (even inside your own household!).

WIDEN THE CIRCLE

In this phase, it's more important than ever to Widen the Circle—to invite in trusted friends or family members who can echo what you're saying at home. If your middle schooler isn't already connected to a local church and/or youth ministry, this conversation may be the perfect catalyst to get them involved.

As always, don't hesitate to reach out to a professional counselor on behalf of your middle schooler whenever necessary.