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Teaching your kids about consent

by Michael Grose

The concept of respectful relationships, including consent, has been discussed at a school level for some time, but it hasn't yet gained universal traction with families. Lacking confidence and unsure where to start, many parents have struggled to make headway in this area. If this sounds familiar, these ideas will help you make a start.

Establish home as a safe place to talk

Is your home a place where children can talk about any topic? Sexuality and relationship education are subjects that many parents place in the 'let's talk about this when you are older' basket.

Professor Kerry Robinson, who is in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology and the Sexualities and Genders Research Network at Western Sydney University advises parents to be factual when answering children's questions, emphasising the importance of staying informed about the subject kids are interested in.

In a recent article in The Guardian, she said "... have set it up early with your child that when they talk about certain things you give open, simple, honest answers, then you set a precedent that you can build on."

Professor Robinson also advises parents not to fob off children's questions: "Straight away you're setting a pattern of not answering and putting it off. Kids learn really quickly that this is a taboo subject. They will talk to their friends about it: they won't talk to their parents and other adults about it because it's taboo."

Teach no means no

Children learn about mutual consent through their play and sharing. A child who doesn't want to share their toys has a right to be left alone, rather than being scolded to change their mind. A parent who withdraws a privilege in response to a teenager's poor behaviour shouldn't be subjected to repeated attempts to negotiate a different outcome. Reinforce with children and young people that a no is not an invitation to ask again.

Emphasise choices

Framing behaviour as a choice is a central consent strategy for children or all ages. A young child who shares a toy with a friend can be told, "Good choice Harry. Now you can have fun together." A primary school child who completes their homework assignment early can be reminded, "Now you've got plenty of time to relax. Smart choice." The teenager who quietly helps you prepare a meal can be told "You could have done anything after school, but you chose to help me. I appreciate that."

Teach kids to seek consent

Another important component of consent is that children and young people should also develop the habit of seeking consent from others. "Ask your sister if it's okay for you to play that game next to her." "Ask grandma if she feels like a cuddle right now." Permission-seeking is another piece in the respectful relationships puzzle that you can reinforce with kids.

In closing

The best age to start teaching your children about consent is when they are young. The second-best age is whatever age they are right now. Consent education is too big an issue to ignore or leave to schools to manage. It's something we all have to commit to if we want real change to occur.