

Talking about consent with kids in out-of-home care



Sexual consent is a clear, mutual and informed agreement between people to engage in sexual activity. It must be voluntary and enthusiastic, and can be revoked at any time. Kids should understand the concept of consent from a young age. Later, it's important that they can apply their knowledge to seek, give and withhold sexual consent in relationships.

Why should kids understand sexual consent?

Research indicates that many Australian kids engage in sexual intercourse around 16 years of age. Approximately one third of kids report unwanted sexual experiences – young people identifying as female, and those who are gender diverse, are overrepresented in this group. It's vital that kids understand the importance of seeking and respecting sexual consent, even if they are not yet sexually active. You can support this understanding with open, frequent and non-judgmental conversations.

Having conversations about consent

Start by talking generally about consent during early childhood. Include discussions around healthy relationships and what it means to say no as part of everyday activities - kids are never too young for these conversations. You could start by:

- allowing kids to make choices about when they share toys, what games they participate in or how they greet adults
- giving them choice about the type of physical contact they are comfortable with
 - ensure adults seek permission prior to physical touch
 - don't force kids to hug or be kissed by friends/relatives
- supporting consent conversations through interactions with friends and siblings
 - teach kids about asking others to play
 - help them to accept a 'no' response – this supports an understanding of others withholding consent
 - reinforce their right to choose if they want to play or not, and how to say no or withhold consent
 - support them to accept consent withdrawal – for example, a friend may agree to play, then change their mind.

These early conversations also support an understanding of personal boundaries. Kids in out-of-home care have often experienced trauma involving interpersonal boundary violations. Helping them learn where and how they feel comfortable in relational interactions, and supporting them to develop personal boundaries, can facilitate healing from trauma.

You've Got This!

LINKS Training and Support

As kids get older, it's important to have conversations about affirmative consent. There are three key elements to consider:

Seeking consent - kids must take steps to obtain clear verbal consent before and during all sexual activity.

Giving consent - consent should never be assumed – it must be given clearly and verbally.

Denying or withdrawing consent - consent can be denied, or withdrawn at any point during a sexual encounter.

Discussions around consent should form part of broader respectful relationship conversations. These conversations may include supporting kids to define and recognise positive / problematic relationships; identify boundaries and expectations in relationships; understand and manage their emotions; develop problem solving skills; respect and understand individual difference and diversity; and learn where to gain support. It's a great idea to use things you watch or read to prompt these discussions.

Resources to support your conversations

- <https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/-/media/HWA/Documents/Healthy-living/Sexual-health/talk-soon-talk-often.pdf>
- <https://www.planetpuberty.org.au/relationships/relationships-relationships/healthy-relationships/>

Resources to explore with kids

- <https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/what-consent>
- <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/sex-and-sexual-health/>
- <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/relationships/sexual-consent>

Books for younger kids

- *Consent (for kids!): Boundaries and being in charge of you* by Rachel Brian
- *Let's talk about body boundaries, consent and respect* by Jayneen Sanders
- *Rissy no kissies* by Katey Howes

Books for older kids

- *Can we talk about consent?* by Justin Hancock
- *Welcome to consent* by Yumi Stynes and Melissa Kang