

Personal Boundaries, Social Expectations, Acceptance and Safety

If you are not taught how to recognize personal boundaries and how to follow social norms, then you open yourself up to sexual abuse and being bullied. You become a target in society. There are steps that can be taken to lessen the likelihood of these events, and that increase acceptance in social situations, in friendships, and at work.

This begins at an early age, before a child ever enters school. From the beginning, parents model messages of love, affection, touch and relationships. However, as a child grows, he must know how to apply values and standards to a variety of situations. He may not be able to discriminate between hugging close family friends and kids at school or strangers at the pool or store. This is why it is so important to begin the process early and to think what behaviors will look like when a child is 13, 19, or 29. At 13 or 19, hugs may encourage predators or allegations of sexual harassment.

A child needs to practice respect for personal space of another. How close should you stand when talking to another person? Can you touch their personal belongings without permission? How do you greet people, with a handshake, high five, smile? Does it matter who the other person is? Can the child distinguish between different categories of people such as close family, close family friends, parent's business associates, acquaintances or strangers? If not, then what is modeled for one group may be applied to everyone. We tell children not to talk to strangers, and then talk to perfect strangers at the grocery store, sporting events, and restaurants. It can be very confusing to any child because what we model is not what we said. How do they differentiate when what we model and what we say does not always align?

Numerous repetitions of real-life practice with cues and possibly visual supports may be needed before a child easily recognizes certain situations and scenarios. It takes time to practice skills and comprehend all the rules. Concepts need to be reinforced and practiced to be mastered. It can be very confusing to generalize the skills across all environments. And if a child lacks vocabulary and speech skills, he may not be able to ask questions about what is not understood. Observations need to be made in multiple situations to effectively assess a child's understanding of safe and appropriate interactions.

A child needs to understand it is appropriate to be assertive when his personal space is encroached upon or if someone touches the body inappropriately. When teaching body parts, include the genital terms. The research shows a child that can name his body parts correctly is more likely to be taken seriously if he has been abused. It also lessens confusion as he grows older and hears vocabulary that he needs to understand

as his body matures. It will also be helpful with medical professionals if a child is able to express himself using traditional terms.

Along with teaching body parts is the task of teaching appropriate and inappropriate touch. Which are private parts (those covered by clothing) and who can touch those parts and why needs to be taught. Medical personnel, parents and grandparents or certain caretakers can touch those parts. However, they should always ask permission and explain why. If a child learns these rules, he is more likely to tell you if someone else tries to touch his private parts. He needs to know who he should tell if someone touches him in private areas.

With all of this also comes the discussion of private vs. public places and activities. The bathroom door should be closed when you are in there; changing clothes should be in the privacy of a room, not in a public area of the house; touching private parts takes place in a private location; passing gas is in a private area; and so on. Use visuals to represent the two types of areas and activities. Redirect a child who is being inappropriate with a reminder that he needs privacy. You need to model the behavior that you expect. The whole family should have the same rules. If not, it can be very confusing to a child. The message is not consistent. (There are great visual aids in a link under resources.)

Do not teach privacy and then walk into the bathroom when your child is in there with no respect for his privacy. That would not be a very good job of modeling. If you feel you must enter the room, knock first and ask permission. Teach that to enter any room with a closed door, you must knock and wait for permission to enter.

Teaching is done in the same way as any subject is taught. If frequent repetition, small steps and pictures help your child learn, then that is how you teach this also.

Good hygiene routines encourage social acceptance, allow a child to independently take care of his private needs, convey a message of pride and understanding and awareness of the body. Help your child learn routines for showering, brushing teeth, washing hair, and other personal care activities. What supplies do you need for each activity? How often do you need to do each activity? How long does it take? For example, you should brush your teeth for 2 minutes. Do you have an electric brush that automatically times that for you or do you need a timer of some sort?

If a child doesn't know when to stop using soap and to rinse off, is there a song they like that they can sing or listen to, and when it ends, he goes to the next step in the process.

Does the child need a visual with the steps to be independent? When do you back out of the routine? At what age is that appropriate? When does he need to shower by himself and not with siblings?

When the child is done grooming, does he check his appearance in the mirror? Take a picture and explain how great he looks and why that is important.

Is your child dressing like his peers? Can you adapt clothing so it is what his peers are wearing? Is the haircut current? Looking like peers helps to build acceptance and opens the doors to friendships.

All these skills will expand and build as the child matures and enters puberty. However, the foundation is built when the child is young. It is never too early to develop skills, knowledge and vocabulary that will keep a child healthy, safe, and a welcomed member of society.

Resources:

<http://downsyndromenutrition.com/images/stories/dsolnsvol4/4-5.pdf>

<http://www.kcdsg.org/files/content/HealthyBodies-Girls-With%20Disabilities.pdf>

<http://www.kcdsg.org/files/content/HealthyBodies-Boys-with%20disabilities.pdf>

There are a lot of visual support materials in the following article:

<http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/healthybodies/files/HealthyBodiesAppendix-Girls.pdf>