



Teach Your Child How to Say “No” and Protect Their Boundaries

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Hi! I'm Jorezza Antonio, an elementary teacher and licensed psychometrician. I have taught children from kindergarten to fifth graders, including those with special needs, and have been practicing Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) for managing students' behaviors.

Let's model a simple life situation. A 5-year-old girl's uncle reached out for a hug, but she responded, "No, thank you." The uncle made a sad face, indicating that his niece's refusal hurt his feelings. However, the girl's mom gently explained, "That's alright, she isn't ready to give a hug." No one forced the child or made her feel bad about her decision; instead, the mom supported her boundaries while the uncle respected them. This moment had a

significant impact on the girl, teaching her an important lesson about asserting her comfort levels that she can carry throughout her life.

Sadly, many children don't know how to set boundaries as they are being told that saying "No" is rude and disrespectful, especially when directed to an adult. Making them feel guilty is one way adults do this: "You will hurt his/her feelings." This causes them to feel bad and teaches children that pleasing others is more important than their comfort. Over time, this will erode their sense of agency and safety.

From "Be obedient" to "Use your voice"

In different cultures and among older generations, children were often raised to be obedient and respectful, sometimes at the cost of their personal boundaries. Saying "no" was viewed as a sign of defiance, and children were expected to show affection, particularly towards elders. While respect remains a core value, modern parenting is beginning to change. Today, more parents recognize that respect goes both ways—and that children, like adults, deserve to have control over their own choices and bodies.

Saying "no" isn't about undermining authority. It's about teaching children that their feelings are valid and that they have a right to say "stop," "no," or "I need space." Through this, we're raising emotionally intelligent and resilient children, rather than rebellious ones.



A preschool teacher in California, Gideon Kahn, mentioned that words like “body,” “space,” and “touch” can help teach children the concept of consent. Young kids may not fully understand the word “consent.” Kahn emphasizes the significance of maintaining boundaries and encourages children to express themselves. For example, if they don’t want others to touch them, they can say, “This is my body,” and be understood.

Learning to say “No” is a life skill

Allowing children to say “no” helps them build:

- **Personal Safety:** children will be aware of potential red flags and inappropriate behavior, enabling them to avoid dangerous situations.
- **Self-confidence:** they will learn that their voice matters and will not be afraid to express their thoughts. This helps them develop greater self-awareness.
- **Decision-making:** instead of blindly complying, they will learn to weigh their decisions. They will consider whether their choices could harm themselves or others, and evaluate the benefits and risks involved.
- **Empathy:** they will learn to empathize with others and understand the importance of respecting other people’s boundaries.

It’s important to teach children about boundaries from an early age. Always remind children that it is okay to say “no” and “stop” when they’re not comfortable or dislike something. We should encourage children to set their boundaries and respect the boundaries of others.

How to teach and support healthy boundaries

1. **Lead by example.** Model respect and consent. By demonstrating how you set boundaries with them and others. For instance, always ask “Can I hug you?” or “Is it okay to sleep beside you?” Provide a clear model for them to follow.
2. **Practice and do role-play.** Engage in role-playing at school or home, practice scenarios wherein children need to assert and stand up for themselves. Empower your child by giving them real situations that may happen, for example, their friend encouraging them to skip school or make fun of another child.



3. Normalize saying "no" kindly. Teach children that saying "no" to their friends is okay if it makes them uncomfortable. Provide them with phrases like "I'm not ready to do that," or "I would like to have some space." You may also give them choices when they don't want to do something: "Would you like to give a high five instead?"
4. Talk about keeping your body safe. Teach your children about safety by focusing on their right to decide who touches them. They need to know that they are allowed to say "no" and be respected.
5. Support your children's decision. Children need to know that you will have their support when they refuse to do something because they're uncomfortable.
6. Teach empathy and other people's boundaries. Help children learn that other people have boundaries too, and it is also to be respected.

Teaching boundaries isn't a one-time conversation, it's an ongoing dialogue.

Things to avoid to help children set boundaries

- Forcing affection on children. For example, saying "Hug your cousin, if not, she will be sad" is not good. Ask them if they're comfortable with it. If not, respect their decision. Let them know that they can always come to you when they are ready.

- Not respecting their boundaries. Statements like “Just say yes so they won’t think you’re rude” can undermine their feelings. Listen to their reasons for not wanting to do something; understanding their perspective can help both you and them comprehend how the situation is affecting the child. Take time to process what they are thinking and feeling.
- Dismissing their discomfort. Telling a child, “You have to play with your friends” is not helpful. Instead, teach them to trust their gut feelings and recognize when something doesn’t feel right. Explain that they can always tell you how they’re feeling about a certain person.

Saying ‘No’ isn’t the same as being spoiled

Some parents may worry that allowing their children to say “no” will lead to them becoming spoiled or entitled. While the concern is understandable, teaching boundaries does not give children free rein—it gives them a foundation of respect, empathy, and safety.

The goal of teaching children to establish boundaries is to keep them safe while helping them develop confidence and empathy. It is important to understand that teaching boundaries does not encourage rudeness. We need to support children in expressing themselves freely and respectfully, while also being considerate of others. Let us raise empowered children who recognize everyone’s needs, including their own.

Read more articles about children’s education and wellbeing in our [expert blog](#). Check out Kids Academy’s new interactive [skill drill worksheets](#) for elementary students!

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