Talking about consent

A guide for parents and caregivers of children aged 0 to 5

Young children learn about consent through everyday experiences: being listened to, having choices and learning to respect other people's boundaries. Simple conversations about hugs, tickling, play and personal space help tamariki understand that their bodies matter and they can ask for help.

For this age group, consent means practising permission and respect in everyday interactions. Young children cannot consent to sexual activity. Adults are responsible for protecting children; safety education never makes a child responsible for preventing abuse.

Start with responsive care from birth

Babies communicate through sounds, expressions and movement. Explain what you are about to do: "I'm going to pick you up now." Notice their cues and respond gently. Where possible, slow down or pause if they seem overwhelmed. This builds a pattern of respectful care, rather than expecting a baby to give permission they cannot yet understand.

As toddlers begin to make choices, offer small, genuine options: "Would you like a cuddle or to sit beside me?" Give them time to respond through words, gestures, signs or a communication aid. Silence, stillness or laughter should not be treated as agreement.

Practise with toddlers and preschoolers

Use short conversations during play and daily routines. You can say:

- "Your body belongs to you. You can choose whether you want a hug."
- "Ask first, and wait to see whether they want to play."
- "You said stop, so I'm stopping."
- "You can change your mind, even if you wanted a tickle before."

Stop optional touch or play when a child says no, pulls away or shows they are uncomfortable. Offer a wave or another greeting instead of requiring hugs or kisses. Explain this to relatives and other caregivers so the child does not have to manage adult expectations alone.

Help children respect other people too

Model asking before hugging or joining physical play. If another child says no or moves away, help your child stop: "They don't want a hug. Let's give them space." Stay nearby to support them; young children need repeated practice and adult guidance.

Use toys, stories and everyday moments to explore feelings and boundaries without frightening children. Adapt your approach to their development, culture, sensory preferences and communication needs.

Explain necessary care clearly

Children still need nappy changes, washing, toothbrushing, medical care and help staying safe. Explain why essential care is needed and offer genuine choices about how: “Your nappy needs changing to keep you clean. Would you like to hold the clean nappy?”

Acknowledge distress, be gentle and pause where it is safe to do so. Provide privacy and involve them as they are able. Essential care never excuses inappropriate touching. Let children know they can tell another trusted adult about any care or touch that worries them.

Use clear words about bodies and safety

Use correct names for body parts, including penis, vulva and bottom, without shame. Explain private parts simply and include why some care is necessary. Encourage questions, and make it clear that no one should ask them to keep touching or private pictures secret.

Help children name feelings, but do not rely only on whether a touch feels nice or unpleasant to decide if it is safe. They can tell you about anything, even if they felt confused, liked the person or did not say stop.

Make asking for help familiar

Identify trusted adults with your child, including someone outside your household. Practise words or gestures for asking for help. Reassure them: “You can always tell me. You won’t be in trouble.” If one adult does not listen, they can tell another. Adults must notice concerns and act.

Share these messages with whānau, babysitters and your child’s early learning service. Agree how to respect boundaries and respond to concerns.

If your child tells you something concerning

Listen calmly, thank them and reassure them that it is not their fault. Avoid leading questions, repeated questioning or promising secrecy. Explain that you will get help to keep them safe. Write down their words accurately and seek advice promptly.

Call Police on 111 for immediate danger. For concerns about possible abuse, call Oranga Tamariki on 0508 326 459, free 24 hours a day, or contact Police. You can ask for advice even if you are unsure.

Support and further information

CAPS Hauraki | 07 868 8644
reception@capshauraki.co.nz
Safe to talk | 0800 044 334 or text 4334
Free, confidential sexual harm support, available 24 hours a day.

Child Safeguarding Week | Safety conversations by age
Ministry of Education | Being together and responsive care
HELP Auckland | Personal safety education for ages 3 to 5
Oranga Tamariki | Worried about a child

Guidance, links and contacts checked October 2026. HELP’s programme is Auckland based; ask CAPS about local support.