Talking about consent

A guide for parents and caregivers of children aged 5 to 12

What children learn about bodies, relationships and sexuality helps them build a healthy understanding of themselves and others as they grow. Calm conversations and everyday examples of respect help tamariki learn about consent, privacy and getting support.

This guide focuses on everyday boundaries and healthy development. Children in this age group cannot consent to sexual activity. Adults are responsible for protecting them. Abuse is never a child's fault, even if they did not say no, move away or tell someone.

Understand development without shame

Children develop at different rates. Some behaviours reflect curiosity or learning; the context matters more than a checklist. Children aged 5–12 may:

- Touch their own bodies or genitals, increasingly understanding that this is private.
- Ask about other people's bodies, babies, gender, relationships or sexual activity. Younger children may explore family roles or body curiosity in pretend play.
- Use sexual words, repeat jokes or swear, sometimes without understanding their meaning.
- Develop crushes, want more privacy or begin noticing puberty changes.

Some children may expose private parts as a joke or encounter sexual content through media or other children. Neither should be treated as an expected milestone or simply dismissed. Respond calmly, reinforce privacy and boundaries, and explore the context without interrogating or shaming them. Curiosity does not make it appropriate to pressure someone, expose them to sexual content or touch their private parts.

Seek advice if behaviour causes pain or distress, involves force, threats or a significant age or developmental difference, is persistent or difficult to redirect, or involves explicit sexual acts. Behaviour alone does not prove abuse. A GP or appropriate specialist can help you understand what is happening.

Explain consent in everyday language

Consent means freely agreeing with an understanding of what is being agreed to. Practise with hugs, tickling, rough play and photos. Ask first, wait and respect the answer. A person can change their mind; agreement once does not mean agreement next time or to something different.

Pressure, guilt, threats or repeated asking do not make agreement freely given. Silence, freezing, nervous laughter or going along to avoid trouble do not show that someone wants something. Model respect by stopping optional touch when your child says no or pulls away.

Help your child practise respect and safety

Use stop signals during play

Teach children that “stop”, “no”, pulling away or showing discomfort means physical play needs to stop. They can also agree on a clear pause word before an imaginative game, but no special word is needed to withdraw agreement. Encourage regular pauses to ask whether everyone still wants to play. Stay nearby to help children act on each other’s signals.

Talk often about bodies and growing up

There is no single age for one big talk. Start with simple answers and add detail as your child grows. Explain puberty before changes become confusing, rather than waiting for them to ask. Use accurate names for body parts and age-appropriate books. If you need preparation, check reliable resources or practise with another trusted adult.

With ages 5–8, use stories and everyday situations. With ages 9–12, build on this with body changes, friendships, crushes, peer pressure and online interactions. Listen first and answer questions kindly. Explain that healthy intimate relationships as they grow older require everyone’s free and ongoing agreement, care and respect.

Practise boundaries and getting adult help

Let children know they can refuse optional touch, including from someone they know, like or see as an authority. Try simple scenarios: “What could you do if a coach offered you a special activity alone and asked you not to tell?” A useful response is “I need to check with my caregiver first.” Adults must provide safe supervision and take concerns seriously.

Talk about privacy during sleepovers, changing and toileting. Necessary health or hygiene care should be explained and respectful, with genuine choices where possible. Children can tell another trusted adult if any care worries them. They can ask for help even if touch felt pleasant or confusing or they did not resist.

Teach kindness and responsibility

Use everyday examples to explore how actions affect others: who is affected when someone leaves litter, excludes a classmate or forwards an embarrassing message? Help children stop when a boundary is crossed, acknowledge the impact and repair harm. The same kindness applies in person and online. Respect does not require giving up personal boundaries.

Take friendships and feelings seriously

Avoid teasing about crushes or labelling a friendship as a boyfriend or girlfriend relationship. Ask open questions such as “How are things going with your friend?” Listen without dismissing their feelings or making assumptions about who they will like. Explain that liking someone does not entitle anyone to affection, attention or a relationship. Help them manage disappointment kindly and seek support.

Include photos and online boundaries

Ask before taking or sharing a child's photo, explain who will see it and listen to their wishes. Teach children to ask before posting about others or forwarding private messages. Permission for one use does not cover others.

Explain that no one is entitled to sexual images, videos or conversations. If someone sends sexual content, requests images or uses threats, help your child stop contact and seek support. Do not blame them for replying or sharing something. Contact Netsafe or Police; do not copy or forward sexual images of children.

Keep the door open for help

Help your child identify several trusted adults, including someone outside your household. Reassure them they can tell you even if they broke a rule, accepted a gift or were told to keep a secret. No one should ask them to hide touching or sexual messages. If one adult does not listen, they can tell another. Adults must notice concerns and act.

Adapt conversations to development, language, culture, sensory preferences and communication needs. Use relaxed moments, keep conversations short and revisit them. Share consistent messages with whānau, caregivers and your child's school or kura.

If your child tells you something concerning

Listen calmly, thank them and reassure them they are not to blame. Avoid leading questions, repeated questioning or promising secrecy. Explain that you will get help, record 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.

KidsHealth NZ | Sexual behaviour in children and young people
Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa | Information for parents and whānau
Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa | Understanding puberty
Child Safeguarding Week | Safety conversations by age
Netsafe Digital Guardian Guide | Online relationships and safety
Oranga Tamariki | Worried about a child

Updated October 2026. Guidance, links and contacts checked. Choose resources to suit your child's age and development.