

## Teaching our Children “When to Say No”

Parenting is a tough job. It is a constant balancing act – teaching children to be brave, but careful; independent, but compliant; self confident, but humble; not outspoken, but not afraid to speak. Protecting our children from abuse is no different than other tasks of parenting. When we think about things like abuse and exploitation, we want to empower our children to set boundaries and resist the charms of coercive adults. At the same time, however, we are aware of our call to teach our children to respect adult authority ...to honor their father and mother... to love their neighbor as themselves. How do we teach our children when to say no to an adult?

Young children are concrete thinkers. They are not yet able to grasp abstract concepts or discern the motives of adults. In their minds, things are generally black and white with regard to right and wrong. Phrasing our concerns in terms of rules helps them with decision-making. If we regularly review rules including: 1) the “no touching rule” (if someone tries to touch private parts of your body or touch you in a hurtful way say, “No.”), 2) the Rules for Adult-Child Interactions (e.g. don’t meet alone, no expensive gifts, keep clear boundaries, treat everyone with respect...), and 3) God’s rules (the Commandments, the Golden Rule...) we can guide them with the simple reminder, “Say no when an adult is breaking a rule or asks you to break a rule.”

As our children grow older (7-12 years) they begin to understand the reasons behind the rules. They have some understanding of cause / effect and social order; and make many of their decisions based on social consequences. They are able to understand that the motives and point of view of others differs from their own; and they can begin to understand the concept that people aren’t all good or all bad. We can begin talking to them about how some people who seem to care about them can make bad choices in their own interest, and how the same behaviors that are appropriate in some situations / relationships (e.g. hugging and kissing, tickling, exchanging gifts, spending time alone...) are not appropriate in others. We can teach them to respectfully disagree when what is asked of them interferes with following God’s commandments, is inappropriate for the situation, or is hurtful to themselves or others.

By adolescence, many of our children will be thinking abstractly. They may seem quite savvy at recognizing when behaviors have sexual undertones and readily identify when they feel they are not being respected. They may seem like they have social relationships all figured out and don’t need our help; but they continue to need our support and guidance. As they begin to think more abstractly, adolescents spend a great deal of time re-thinking their view of themselves and their role in social relationships. A charming perpetrator can often convince them that their affection is genuine (and consensual) and that they understand them at a level that no one else does – including their parents. It is important to convey to our teenage children that we empathize with them and are invested in understanding them as they redefine themselves. As our teenage children are rethinking relationships, it is imperative that we review the qualities of right relationships versus abusive ones, and share our beliefs about things like dating, marriage, and sexual activity. If we don’t, their evolving view of relationships will be

based solely on their own experiences and observations of peers and the media. For our adolescent children, saying no when they identify signs of abuse and setting personal boundaries with regard to sexuality will be important, not only in preventing abuse by adults, but in protecting them from entering an abusive / exploitative dating or marital relationship.

Parenting is tough. Sometimes it's hard to maintain perfect balance. The good news is that what we tell our children is only a very small part of how we educate, protect and care for them. Our children will seek right relationships if we model those characteristics in our own relationships and interactions with them. We can set limits for them by being aware of where they are, who they are with, and how they are feeling. We can watch for "warning signs" in their relationships with adults. Information and resources on the qualities of right relationships and warning signs of abuse are available through the Diocesan Child Protection Office.