

SAYING NO: OVERVIEW FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

HOW CAN I PROTECT MY CHILD FROM HARM?

Sometimes kids face situations that are unsafe or are hurting them emotionally or physically. This can be scary for parents because we never want to see our children get hurt. While we can't protect them from everything in life, we can help them build skills to set boundaries and keep themselves safe.

TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD SET BOUNDARIES

1. IT IS OK TO SAY NO

Show your child that setting boundaries and asking for help are signs of strength, not weakness. You can tell them: "When we are struggling and we ask for help or tell someone 'no', we are growing strength and it gets easier every time we do it." If you share examples from your own life it really helps, because it gives them a social script and a model that they internalize in their minds and can draw on later. So you can say: "A friend asked me to go to a dinner that I really didn't want to go to. I felt nervous and scared about their reaction if I said no, so I went and I hated every minute of it and felt exhausted after! So the next time they asked me to go to a dinner I was brave and said no. It was still scary but I felt so much better afterwards! And I realised that it was ok to say no."

2. LIMITS IN THE HOME

When you set boundaries, if you do so calmly and firmly, without getting angry, this helps your child learn that 'no' is a normal and calm thing to say. It's easy for 'no' to become emotionally charged, which turns it into a scary word for kids. If we can give them examples where 'no' is not a big deal, this will help them stay calm and see the bigger picture when it comes to saying 'no' to someone else. You can use empathy to help keep the mood calm. You can say things like: "I'm sorry, I know it's hard, but it's not going to happen." And then lightly change the subject to something else.

3. RESPONSIBILITY

Give them increasing amounts of responsibility to make choices and decide what they want. You can tell them: "I would like to spend some time with you tomorrow, why don't you choose a fun activity for us?" Or: "Why don't you choose a meal that you like and we can cook it together?" It's surprisingly hard for us especially when we are young to actually listen IN to what we want – it is a skill that needs to be practiced. So the more opportunities you give your child to make an empowered choice based purely on how they FEEL, the more chance they have to build the muscle of paying attention to what is happening inside of them and setting boundaries based on that.

4. NON-REACTIVITY

If they accuse you of something or blame you for something, you can turn this unpleasant situation into one of the most helpful conversations you can have with your child. Validate and support their experience by saying: "I'm sorry you feel that way, that's definitely not my intention! What can we both do to change the dynamic?" This is role-modeling healthy respectful voicing and listening to boundaries. By not taking it personally or getting hooked into defending yourself, but simply listening, respecting their opinion (knowing it doesn't mean anything bad about you) and then working constructively with them to repair it, you are showing them how to disagree and set boundaries in a kind and compassionate way.