

P.I.N.K. Backpack

HOW TO HELP YOUR DAUGHTER
UNDERSTAND CONSENT



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How to Help Your Daughter Understand Consent
(About Anything That's Hers)

by Trish Allison

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The importance of teaching your daughter about consent

Thanks to #metoo and the long-overdue disclosure of rampant, harmful misogyny, 'consent' has finally become a recognized value that needs to be taught to our children.

One way to teach consent is to explain it to your daughter at *her* level by equating it with 'self-respect' and 'boundaries.' To do that, the suggestions in this handbook are intentionally ordered sequentially to take you step-by-step through the process of helping your daughter truly comprehend 'respect' then 'self-respect' then 'boundaries.'

Hopefully as the years unfold, you can keep the conversation going, and she'll be able to apply the values you teach her to scenarios in her own life.

Practical Tips

Please keep in mind that P.I.N.K. Backpack suggestions are just that – *suggestions*. You know best what *is* and *isn't* appropriate for the maturity level of your own daughter.

Also please keep in mind that helping your daughter understand consent is not a 'once-and-done' conversation. It doesn't have to be a one-time, sit-down, formal discussion. It can and should be an ongoing, casual, back-and-forth exchange of ideas.

Tip #1 – Review basic respect together

Before you start discussing respect, know that when kids sense the important adults in their lives are concerned, they can sometimes feel like they've done something wrong.

That said, it's important for you to tell your daughter as soon as she knows you want to talk about something important that you're not angry with her. This will hopefully prevent her from spending the entire conversation trying to figure out what she did wrong.

You could start the conversation by saying something like:

'First, I want you to know that I'm not angry. Not at all. I just want to make sure that we agree on something that's been in the news lately.'

Once you feel like she understands that you're not mad at her, define 'respect' *together*. Start by giving her a compliment and say something like:

I know you already know what respect is. For starters, it's things like saying 'please' and 'thank you.' And I know you already know that respect goes beyond just saying 'please' and 'thank you.'

To me, respect is a way of treating or thinking about something or someone. If you respect your teacher, you admire her and treat her well. If you respect your friend, you regard her highly and treat her with consideration.

Hopefully, she'll chime in here and add her own examples of respect, like 'asking permission to borrow something' or 'letting someone finish speaking even if you already know the answer.'

If she doesn't contribute and needs more time to join the conversation, you could continue offering your own ideas about what respect is. Try to tailor your ideas to match activities in *her* life. For example, you could say something like, '*to me, respect is not interrupting the teacher*' or '*not borrowing someone's sweater without asking.*'

Keep it simple. Talking about it with her on a level that she understands will greatly increase the odds that the concept sinks in. If you start throwing around terms like 'sexual assault' and 'social injustice,' she's likely to tune out.

The goal in this tip is purely to establish a foundation by helping her feel comfortable with the conversation and contribute her own ideas as much as possible.

The more she feels like she's part of the conversation, and not being lectured, the more ownership she'll feel for the subject matter. And the more ownership she feels, the likelier it is that she'll be able to assimilate what she learns and apply it to scenarios in her own life.

Keep the conversation going by defining respect together. Try to get her to expand on your examples. Then expand on *her* examples so it starts (or continues) to feel like a two-way conversation.

Here are some more ideas for defining respect *together*:

- Think of someone who is respectful and talk about why they would be a good friend.
- Think of things people say who are respectful. Here are a few: 'please' 'thank you' 'I appreciate that' 'may I hold the door for you?' 'excuse me' 'I'm sorry I offended you'.
- 'Respect for belongings' is a big issue at the pre-teen age. You could try to integrate it into the conversation if you're having a hard time getting things started. If you are the target of her 'respect for belongings' frustration (e.g. you borrowed something from her without asking), listen attentively to her feelings, make eye contact, and tell her you'll pay more attention to the problem and work on improving.

- Watch a TV show together and point out examples of respect/disrespect and why. Do the same thing when you are out doing errands together. (store clerks? parking etiquette? check-out line?)
- Think of ways to show respect that connect with her interests. For example, if she's interested in climate change, think of examples (together!) that respect the environment. Recycling? Reducing carbon emissions? Look up Rachel Carson and/or Laurie David on Wikipedia and talk about how they respect the environment.

Try to make sure she has a good foundation for understanding respect before going on to the next tip.

Tip #2 – Connect respect and self-respect

One way to pivot the conversation from 'respect' to 'self-respect' is to discuss simple definitions of self-respect *together*.

Here are some ideas for simple definitions:

- When you set boundaries that you don't let others cross.
- When you accept yourself for who you are, no matter what others say.
- When you feel good about yourself and know you deserve to be treated fairly.

Let her tell you which definition she likes the best. Remember, you want her to feel like she has an equal stake in the conversation.

Play a game where you both think of everything you love about yourself. You can start by listing the wonderful things about yourself. This will allow her to see clearly your own self-love and will give her permission to do the same.

When it's her turn and she shares things that she likes about herself, discuss it with her *extensively*. For example, if she tells you she thinks of herself as a kind person because when no one would play with someone during school recess one day, she comforted that person and spent recess talking to her and getting to know her.

Ask her questions about why she comforted the child at recess and how it made her feel. Ask her more questions about the incident. Try to lead her into saying out loud (again) that she thinks she's a kind person.

Or maybe she'll tell you that she always keeps her word to others. She considers herself very reliable because she always does what she says she's going to do. Or maybe she considers herself to be trustworthy because when someone tells her something in confidence, she keeps it a secret.

Whatever she tells you, the goal here is to make a big deal about the traits she considers admirable about herself.

Then connect the traits she admires about herself with self-respect. Give her an example of when you chose to respect your own boundaries. Maybe someone tried to cut you off in the Starbucks line? Grocery store line? Tell her that your inner dialogue said "Wait. That's not fair to me."

Ask her if she can think of an example of someone who tried to cross her boundaries and she stuck up for herself. When she offers her own example, pay extra attention to it. Ask her what made her decide it wasn't fair to her, what she said/did, what was the outcome? Dwell on her decision to respect herself so she gets a healthy dose of experiencing what self-respect feels like. This is a great opportunity for the concept of self-respect to fully sink in.

Another suggestion is for you to find a role model who exudes self-respect and point out that person (Beyonce? Lady Gaga?). Even if the role model you point out seems obnoxiously self-involved, talk about how you can tell that person would never let anyone take advantage of her.

The goal of this suggestion is to give your daughter a visual role model of self-respect - someone she could hypothetically ask herself 'Would Beyonce let someone do that to her? Probably not.'

Continue to think of ways, *together*, that you can practice self-respect as you go about your busy lives. Return to the conversation and compare notes. She might have more questions as she goes out into the world and practices what you discussed. That's good. Take time to answer her questions thoroughly. Make it an ongoing conversation.

Tip #3 – Define 'boundaries' *together*

One of the most important parts of successful parenting, in my humble opinion, is establishing and maintaining consistent boundaries. Because 'boundaries' is such an abstract concept, it's best to use an easily

identifiable visual metaphor. Think of parental boundaries as a long bowling alley lane with a rubber bumper on each side where your daughter can go from one bumper (boundary) to the other and feel safe.

As she progressively tests the limits of her world, she'll hopefully feel safe every time she bounces off one boundary and encounters another. As she grows, her boundaries will get further and further apart.

The same bowling alley metaphor can be used to help your daughter understand the concept of 'boundaries' as she applies them to her own independence. Tell her that as she gets older, she will be increasingly in charge of how far to widen (or not) her own personal boundaries of consent. She needs to know that she, and she alone, is the one in charge of setting the boundaries for how others treat her.

Using a visual metaphor like the bowling alley bumpers will help her understand 'boundaries' by giving her a 'visual' that she can keep in her head.

Depending on your daughter's maturity level, here are some more words you could use to explain boundaries:

- 'We all have a thing around us called a boundary, which is a line between ourselves and other people. You can't see it but it's there. It's kind of like an invisible forcefield and it's there to protect each of us from the people who feel bad to be around – the ones who say mean things or do mean things that you just don't deserve.'
- 'You are completely in charge of the invisible forcefield around you. You can decide when it goes up and when it comes down. You can decide what's allowed in and what must stay out. You're the boss of yourself and you'll always be the boss.'
- 'Sometimes there might be people who do or say mean things so often that you never feel good when you're around them. That's when it's okay to put your forcefield up. In fact, it's one of the bravest things you can do.'
- 'It's important to respect other people, but it's even more important to respect yourself first – and putting up your forcefield is one of the ways you can do this.'

- 'We can't control other people, but we can control whether we let the mean things they say or do come close enough to hurt us. Being a kid is hard work – and you're awesome at it.'
- 'Everyone is responsible for how they treat other people, including grownups, but the person you have to treat the very best is yourself. Sometimes that means not listening to what other people might say about you.'
- 'Sometimes you have to be your own hero and protect yourself from being hurt by people who don't know the rules about being kind and respectful.'

Any combination of the suggested words above will help communicate to your daughter how important boundaries are.

Tip #4 – Model Respectful Behavior

As with all values we try to instill in our children, the best way to get the message across is by modeling the behavior ourselves.

While your daughter is gradually defining 'respect,' 'self-respect,' and 'boundaries' in her own head, she needs someone she can emulate. Here are some suggestions for what you can do and say that will give her someone (you!) whom she loves and trusts, to mimic:

- **Keep your cool.** Instead of yelling, 'Don't you say that to me, it's disrespectful!' Calmly respond to her misbehavior with words like 'You know, we don't talk to each other like that in our family. We treat each other with respect.'
- **Practice kind and firm discipline.** Discipline means to teach or to train, not to punish. It's not about shaming her. Discipline is a lot more effective and longer-lasting when not using punitive strategies. Teaching respect and using disrespectful discipline are mutually exclusive.
- **Reiterate that everyone is different.** When children's differences are accepted, they feel heard and respected. If she has a different way of doing things, respect that difference by saying things like 'I've never

seen anyone do it that way before, but I like it!' Say 'everybody's different' every opportunity you get.

- **Don't be disrespectful of others.** Children are master observers. If you're sarcastic, dismissive, and talk behind others' backs, she'll try out that kind of behavior soon enough. If she thinks it's OK to be disrespectful of others and to herself, she'll mimic your behavior.
- **Model positive personal ethics.** Whether it's obvious or not, she's watching you. She's watching and listening to things like whether you pay your bills on time, if you help others, if you're generous with tips when the waiter/waitress does a good job, and if you participate in charitable giving.
- **Say you're sorry if you screw up.** A mature, respectful grownup accepts responsibility and apologizes when he or she makes mistakes. Let her see and hear you apologizing if you are wrong.
- **Share your own story.** This will make her feel like you are accessible and that she has a starting point for a conversation about self-respect. For example, she might say something like 'Remember when you told me xyz, well something similar happened to me and I need your opinion.'
- **Show respect to your partner.** This will go a long way towards setting an example of how two people should treat each other. Remember she's watching you. Even things like whether it's OK to take/use the other person's belongings is something she'll learn from you.
- **Be a good listener.** Give her your undivided attention when she is speaking to you. Listening the others' opinions without retaliation is an enormous part of learning how to respect others.
- **Be trustworthy.** Keep her heart-felt feelings and experiences private, show her that you can be a trusted adult who cares about her feelings and her self-respect.
- **Go on a date together.** Dads? Uncles? Consider taking your daughter on a 'date' to show her how she should expect to be treated. She needs to feel empowered and know that a healthy relationship is free

from hurt (emotionally and physically) and behaviors like that are unacceptable. Shower her with love, appreciation, and respect and ideally, she will expect the same from her future partners.

Granted, the modeling suggestions above are extremely hard to accomplish, especially when you're in the heat of the moment. But if you can at least strive to accomplish *some* of the suggestions, your daughter will be better off. It will help her define 'respect' in her own head and will also help her recognize when disrespect is occurring among her peers.

Tip #5 – Make it an ongoing conversation

While she's a pre-teen, sex doesn't necessarily have to be part of the conversation. The subject of 'consent' can be anything related to how two people treat each other.

As she grows older, you can modify the subject. For example, when she's 9, your 'consent' conversation might be about a friend who borrowed something of hers without asking. As she gets older, the 'consent' subject can slowly wind its way into lots of more mature topics of conversation. If the conversation *is* about sex, she needs to know that she doesn't have to do anything with her body (or anything else that belongs to her) that she doesn't want to.

Even if all she hears from your ongoing conversations is 'blah blah blah consent blah blah blah self-respect blah blah blah' you've given her two words ('self-respect' and 'consent') she can use as a takeaway.

Hopefully, none of your conversations will sound like 'blah blah blah,' but at least you have a Plan B to fall back on if Plan A doesn't work. If she comes back to you a few days later and says 'what's consent again?,' you've done your job.

Keep hammering away at the notion of 'self-respect' and the word 'consent.' She needs words she can use as a reminder of your conversation. Remember though that kids are clever. When you think you're surreptitiously slipping 'consent' into the conversation, she might be fully aware of what you're doing. (just a heads up)

The good news is that the decisions that she makes as she grows through adolescence and early adulthood are informed by her understanding of what you teach her in your ongoing conversations about self-respect.

Refer back to this handbook if you need to. She needs to know that she has a credible, informed person she can always rely on. If you can get her to remember this conversation in her head when she's unsure about boundaries, she'll be one step ahead.

More Resources

- [A really simplified, yet effective, video that explains the concept of consent to kids](#)
- [Parents explain #metoo](#) (video)
- [4 Ways Parents Teach Kids That Consent Doesn't Matter](#) (video)