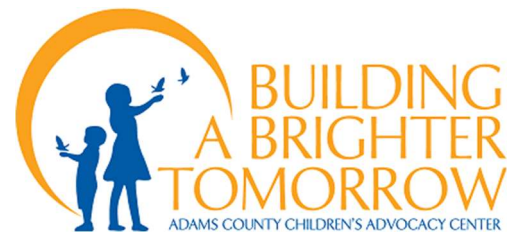


Give the Gift of Choice: Hugs or High-Fives.

By: Cindy Small, President, Board of Directors



It happens every time you arrive at holiday dinner. Just as you enter the door, Aunt Shirley jumps from the sofa, her arms extended wide in friendly greeting. After you exchange a warm hug, she extends her arms to your kids. "Give Aunt Shirley a hug," she says. You can see the uncertainty in the faces of your kids. Although they just witnessed your expression of affection, you can tell they are hesitant to do the same. What should you do?

For most of us, it's natural to want our kids to have affection for the special people in our lives. When it comes to encouraging a child to hug another person, however, we need to be increasingly mindful of what we are asking them to do. Although Aunt Shirley's demand for a hug may come from a place of love, forcing our children to have unwanted contact with another individual is an act of coercion. Rather than simply pushing the kids into Aunt Shirley's arms, a better use of these family interactions may be to teach and model *consent*.

As parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, we must empower the children in our lives with the knowledge that their body is their own, no matter the situation. We must allow them to recognize and trust what feels safe. And as their guardian and protector, we must honor the reality that their body is not ours to control as our property.

As early as the toddler years, children are able to express personal physical boundaries. These boundaries are often a blend of the child's life experiences in new situations, as well as innate personality differences that create unique amounts of safe personal space. Asking children to have unwanted physical contact with a relative, for example, has the ability to threaten this instinctual safety boundary. This may unintentionally teach your child that they must do what an adult tells them to do, even if it makes them uncomfortable.

Honoring your child's choice of bodily autonomy doesn't have to be awkward. Rather than let an uncomfortable feeling hang in the air, be prepared to actively handle this situation. In the moment, if you are sensing your child's hesitation at physical affection, offer your child an alternative. Would they like to high-five, fist-bump or give a verbal greeting to the family member instead? Much unease can be relieved if the child makes some sort of friendly gesture as a replacement to an unwanted hug. You may want to talk to family and friends privately about your expectations and what you are trying to accomplish.

It's our responsibility as adults to keep kids safe. Teaching kids respect for their own bodies helps empower them and reduces their chances of becoming victims of abuse. Often, adults have a feeling that something is not quite right between an adult and a child, but they disregard that feeling because the adult in question is a family member or trusted friend, someone they think could never harm their child. The truth is 90% of children are sexually abused by someone they know well, 70% are by a family member.

Here are a few empowering points to teach your child about personal body safety: 1. Your body belongs to you. 2. You get to decide what happens to your body. 3. No one should touch you without permission. 4. Telling someone not to touch you is NOT rude. 5. Consent means always choosing to respect other's boundaries.

Give your child this impactful gift of choice that will remain with them for a lifetime.