

Talking to kids about...

sexual infringements and consent between children

Talking to kids about... is meant to encourage you to try. Because just the attempt to make discussing difficult topics possible means preventing violence, manipulation, sexual assault, discrimination and confusion. It also strengthens kids, no matter if they are actively listening or not. They know that they can talk to you about important things. This is because you dare to discuss unusual, maybe uncomfortable or burdensome topics.

Below you can find Information and example sentences for conversations with kids regarding sexual infringement and consent between children.

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When we discuss sexual infringements among kids, we tend to dramatise the situation (people talk about sexual abuse, about ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’. In kindergartens for example the cosy corner gets shut down, there are strong conflicts between the parent of the affected child and the parents of the infringing child...), or we trivialise everything (‘nothing happened’, ‘the kids were just playing’, ‘kids should figure it out on their own’...).

First and foremost it is important to stay calm and to understand what even happened: is it a case of consensual childish sexuality, or of sexual infringement/assault?

This folder is part of a series about the following 5 topics:

1. children’s rights & and help against violence
2. sexual infringements among kids & consent explained simply
3. confusion & irritation caused by the behaviour of adults
4. Sex education & dealing with pornography
5. Unease, stress & trauma

The series “talking to kids about...” was developed by the team at Selbstlaut to improve conversations about difficult topics with kids who are around the primary school age. Some things may also be appropriate for kids aged 12 or 13. As a whole however, teens need different phrases which you will not be able to find in this collection.

Four kinds of infringements in child-appropriate words:

1 carelessness and exuberance

Sometimes kids are curious and don't just want to look at and explore themselves and their own bodies, but also the body of another child. Sometimes the children play doctors where they might undress and examine each other naked. Kids are only allowed to play such games together when it's good for both/all kids. Sometimes one child is so excited for the game that they might run into and knock down another child, or hug them too hard, hold their hand too hard, or 'take the other kid's temperature' even though the other child does not want that. That can happen and it's not on purpose. But we should all try to be mindful of how others are doing.

2 Tilting situations

It can happen that both kids want to play such a game and that in the beginning it's nice and interesting to both and that then the good feeling changes. Like a seesaw that suddenly tilts to one side. Or a stop light that goes from green to red right away. At that moment the game needs to stop. Because it's no longer a game, when it doesn't feel good for one child. Even if the game was exciting and nice at first, no child had to keep playing. Nobody needs to be ashamed and it's nobody's fault. The seesaw just tilted. That can happen at any time.

3 Deliberate Infringements

Sometimes kids notice that the other child is no longer enjoying something, and persuade, or force them to keep playing anyway. Because kids feel strong and powerful that way. That's not okay. Sometimes the powerful child makes the other child keep it a secret or even threatens them: 'if you tell, I won't be your friend anymore, I won't play with you anymore.', 'I'll do something bad if you tattle' No one is allowed to threaten others or demand they keep secrets. Kids who do such things need to be stopped by adults.

4 infringement as 'post-traumatic play' due to sexual violence

Sometimes kids demand other kids touch them on the butt, penis or vulva or vagina, or to let them touch them there. They do this because they themselves had something weird happen to them, e.g. being touched between the legs on the buttock, or the penis or the vagina by adults. No one is allowed to do that, it is forbidden. Kids should definitely tell another adult person they like about this. Both kids definitely need help.

If you arrive at the conclusion, or fear that there have been sexual infringements, every child who is involved needs support through conversations and from adults in general, but most of all the affected child needs help.

Talking to the afflicted child

Comfort and praise are first up, e.g. as follows

I'm sorry that you experienced this. No one is allowed to touch you in ways you don't want. Neither adults nor other children. Thank you for talking (to me) about this. That's very brave and strong.

Often we don't find out what happened from the child themselves, but from other kids, or parents. If a third party tells you about the situation, inform the child about it, tell them what you know/what you heard. That way the child is less confused and can trust more easily. Try to address feelings that the child might have. It will relieve the child, strengthen their perception and help them grasp what even happened.

It may be that you're confused. It may be that you don't even know how you're feeling. It may be that you're angry. Maybe you're also a little bit proud, because you felt brave for playing such games in the beginning. Maybe you're scared that the child who didn't take good care of you won't be your friend anymore, or will threaten you. Or makes a threat come true.

You can tell me how the situation was for you.

Ask openly how the situation was for the child. If you start with that question before offering help sorting through the situation, you may be confronted with silence. Help the child assess how you would react if they did talk, and what you know and think about situations like these. Only then is it helpful to ask questions to the child, without them feeling cornered or afraid of being berated.

Talking to the infringing child

Show the infringing child clear boundaries, but also understanding and compassion. Under no circumstances should they be left with the message: "Kids are not allowed to play such games, it's all forbidden". With this approach we would prevent kids from talking to us. A more fitting message that is aligned with violence prevention would be:

It's okay when kids are naked together, look at each other and touch, as long as that's okay for both of them. When a child doesn't want that (anymore) the game needs to be stopped. We can't hurt anybody.

The infringing child needs help sorting through the situation with the help of the different forms of infringements. You can then also discuss possible motives for the infringing behaviour:

1 carelessness and exuberance

It may be that the game was very exciting for you and you were very happy and then didn't notice that the other child didn't want something. Even when a game is very exciting everyone needs to look out for each other.

We can find ways for you to feel big and strong together, without hurting other kids.

2 Tilting situations

It may be that the situation was fun for both of you at first. Maybe the other kid even started it. But then the mood changed for the other kid, it tilted like a seesaw and they didn't want to keep playing. The seesaw can always tilt. Then you need to stop even if you'd rather keep playing.

4 infringement as 'post-traumatic play' due to sexual violence

I know there are kids who get touched weirdly by adults or older youths on the penis or butt or labia or the vagina. Or maybe someone showed them confusing sexual videos. And sometimes kids who experience that do something to other kids. Sometimes they do that again and again and can't stop. Then they urgently need help. They are allowed to and even should talk about what happened to them with an adult they trust. Even if they themselves were mean to another child.

3 Deliberate Infringements

It may be that you noticed that the other child didn't want to keep playing, but continued anyway. Because you felt powerful and strong. It's not okay to make someone feel weird on purpose. We can't make another child feel small or hurt them just to feel big ourselves.

I don't know if the situation was like any of these "It may be" examples I just mentioned. What do you think about the situation?

Clarity and Exceptions

When sexual infringements happen among kids it is up to us adults to provide clarity and make new trust possible. For this purpose it can make sense to create new rules e.g. kids shouldn't be naked for a while, not get undressed. Or maybe the cosy corner gets closed off for a while. Or the infringing child is no longer allowed to be alone with the afflicted child. When you make these new rules, make sure they're only for a limited time e.g. two weeks, and inform the kids about this. Give reasons for the new rules:

Recently it didn't work out that everyone took good care with each other. It's important that everyone feels comfortable when you play together. That's why we came up with these rules for the near future, until you can all take good care with each other again.

General prevention

Some general sentences about prevention that have helped many kindergartens, schools and homes.

No one is allowed to hurt others. And when you play no one is allowed to put fingers, or objects into body openings. Neither into the mouth, nose, ears, nor the butthole or the vagina, because you could get hurt. It's important to all take good care with each other and themselves.

Grown ups can change diapers and wash babies and help kids wash themselves, but no adult is allowed to play with the vulva or penis or anus (butthole) of a child. Or to have a child touch the adult or "wash" them between the legs. That's forbidden.

Consent

Even with young kids it's possible to practise consent and to talk about voluntariness:

When you play games with touching it's important that every kid who is involved feels Yes-feelings. No matter if it's about tickling, wrestling, cuddling, kissing, huffing or touching sex organs. You can't always know if the other child wants a specific touch. That's why it's always important to ask first.

When a child doesn't want something, you have to stop. Some kids say it very clearly: No, stop, I don't want this. Some don't say it that clearly. Sometimes you want to say no, but the body freezes and doesn't move. That also means Stop.

Sometimes it's not so easy to say no to something. Because maybe you're not sure about it. Or because a touch or a game may be exciting and too much and stressful at the same time. Or maybe because it's hard to say no to a good friend, because you don't want them to find a different friend instead. Saying no takes practise and courage. Even when a child doesn't manage to say Stop or No, it's not the child's fault.

*How do you show that you don't like a touch?
How do you show when you like something?*

The stop light system

Some touches give us nice feelings in our bodies and our inner stop light turns green. Some touches give us bad feelings in our bodies, an 'I don't want that feeling': Red. Then it's clear we don't want something. Some touches make the stop light go Yellow - they are in between, we're not sure if something is pleasant or uncomfortable. Yellow means 'Watch out, it might become Red soon'.

Which touches from which people are red, green or yellow for you?