

“We say what's OKAY”

WE CAN SAY NO

Lydia Bowers illustrated by Isabel Muñoz



With Song from
Peaceful Schools



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We say what's OKAY

free spirit
PUBLISHING®



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DEDICATION

To the real-life people behind the characters in my stories,
who make the world so much more interesting.

Sami and Harrison, you are the reason I wanted to write children's books.

Jared, you always believed I could do this. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book series on consent would not be complete without a conversation on what “counts” as our body boundaries in general and about often-ignored boundaries with Black hair specifically. My perspective as a White woman does not offer a complete picture. *We Can Say No* and the character of Zakiya would not have been possible without insight from Tara Hurdle, Sonya Goins, and Dr. Donna Oriowo. They brought personal experience and historical perspective to our communications about multiple drafts of this book, and I am incredibly grateful for that. Thank you also to Melissa Pintor Carnagey and Rachel Heinbaugh for pointing me in the right direction.

At circle time, Mr. B announced that Ms. Cindy, the librarian, would visit later to read to the class. Jovan jumped up and cheered. Zakiya watched him quietly.

Zakiya enjoyed Ms. Cindy's reading. She loved listening to stories. But she didn't like how Ms. Cindy said hello to her. Some people, like Ms. Cindy, thought it was okay to touch Zakiya's hair. Zakiya did not like that.





Zakiya tossed her head. She listened to the beads on her braids go *click-clack*. Her auntie had done Zakiya's braids last night. She was so proud of them. But a worried feeling made her tummy hurt. She stopped shaking her head. She pushed her braids behind her shoulders.



CONSENT: A GUIDE FOR CARING ADULTS

CONSENT FOUNDATIONS

What Is Consent?

Consent is a nuanced concept. Its meaning expands as children and situations mature. With young children, we can use the definition *agreeing because you want to*. This child-friendly definition inspired the series title *We Say What's Okay*.

Why Consent?

As high-profile assault allegations and hidden abuse have come to light in recent years, more and more people have called for the need to teach about consent. These conversations tend to focus on high schools, colleges, and places of employment. However, they need to happen much earlier to be the most effective—just as it is important to read to young children and give them opportunities to run and play to support cognitive and physical development. Consent is a social and emotional skill that requires learning and practice. Caring adults can help children build the foundations of consent early on.

Consent is a principle that we as adults can practice in our lives and model for children. When we create a culture of consent, we provide a safe space for children and empower them to have a voice. This guide offers help in that effort. It is not just a one-time lesson plan. This is ongoing work. The more we and the children in our care practice trusting our instincts and saying no when some-

thing feels off in the day-to-day, the more likely we are to trust ourselves when we are in danger. When we as parents, teachers, social workers, and caregivers can make our spaces safe, consensual, and communicative, children know that they can come to us for support.

The Fallacy of Stranger Danger

Of children who are sexually abused, 93 percent are abused by someone they know.* Saying no to someone you know and trust can be difficult, but it is a vital skill. We need to empower children to say no at home and in other familiar, day-to-day environments. It is not children's job to protect themselves from abuse. That is our job. But we can use consent foundations to empower children and to mitigate risk.

Five Steps for Teaching Consent

Building consent foundations involves teaching children five key concepts:

- I listen to my body.
- I am in charge of my body.
- I ask permission.
- I check in.
- I accept no.

* RAINN. 2022. "Child Sexual Abuse." rainn.org/articles/child-sexual-abuse.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

I Can Say No!

Why is it so important that children be able to say no to physical affection? When children feel comfortable and confident saying no to safe people and safe touch, they also feel comfortable and confident saying no in other situations.

"Abusers will often start to touch a victim in ways that appear harmless, such as hugging, wrestling and tickling, and later escalate to increasingly more sexual contact."

—RAINN

There may be times when you, as a child's safe adult, need to step in and support a child's decision to say no. It might feel awkward or even disrespectful to do so when a relative is asking for a hug, the child says no, and the relative replies, "But I'll be sad if you don't hug me!" You may not want to hurt their feelings or upset them. But it's critical that you don't let an adult's discomfort overrule a child's bodily autonomy. The child is not responsible for the relative's emotional comfort—or yours. In the story, Mr. B may have felt awkward, but he backed up Sami and Zakiya's desire to not have their hair touched. And while Ms. Cindy was momentarily surprised, she soon recognized that although she meant well, the negative impact of her touching the girls' hair was more important than the positive intent behind her action.

Zakiya and Sami reminded Ms. Cindy that their hair is part of their bodies, and it is not for anyone else to handle without their permission. The touching of Black people's hair by others—particularly by White people—often comes from a place of seeing Black people as "other." This perspective is rooted in racism.

"In history, Black women were ridiculed because of our hair texture. Noticeably different, we were shamed into thinking it was unacceptable to wear our natural hair. It was unacceptable for us to look different."

—Sonya Goins, *Soul of a Doula*

