

“We say what’s OKAY”

WE ARE IN CHARGE OF OUR BODIES

With Song from
Peaceful Schools

Lydia Bowers
illustrated by
Isabel Muñoz

free spirit
PUBLISHING®

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bowers, Lydia, author. | Muñoz, Isabel, illustrator.

Title: We are in charge of our bodies / Lydia Bowers ; illustrated by Isabel Muñoz.

Description: Minneapolis, MN : Free Spirit Publishing Inc., [2022] | Series: We say what's okay | Audience: Ages 3–5

Identifiers: LCCN 2021059958 (print) | LCCN 2021059959 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631987151 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781631987168 (pdf) | ISBN 9781631987175 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Security (Psychology)—Juvenile literature. | Body language—Juvenile literature. | Boundaries (Psychology)—Juvenile relations in children—

Juvenile literature. | BISAC: JUVENILE FICTION / Concepts / Body | JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Sexual Abuse

Classification: LCC BF723.S22 B68 2022 (print) | LCC BF723.S22 (ebook) | DDC 155.4/19—dc23/eng/20220330

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021059958>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021059959>

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DEDICATION

Mom and Dad, thank you for always supporting my writing
and for teaching us the right words for our bodies!

A LETTER TO GROWN-UPS

Dear Adult Reader:

What were the messages you received about bodies when you were growing up? Were genitals given silly names, mentioned in whispers, or just not discussed? Many of us were raised to feel uncomfortable talking about penises and vulvas, so it's important to recognize this and give ourselves grace. Read through this book alone before you read it with children. What emotions do you feel? To help you process these feelings and build your confidence, you'll find more information in the discussion guide and resources at the end of this book. If you're an educator using this book, note that the resources include a reproducible letter to share with families. Thank you for helping children grow into confident, autonomous, and consent-based human beings.



“Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes!” Jackson sang along loudly with his classmates and Ms. H. “Eyes and ears and mouth and nose . . .”

They sang faster and faster, until Jackson couldn’t keep up anymore. He collapsed in giggles on the music center rug.

Ms. H grinned. "How about we mix it up? What's another body part we all have?"

Zakiya called out, "Fingers!"

"Perfect! We all have fingers! Head, fingers, knees and toes, knees and toes . . .,"
Ms. H began to sing.



Next Sami said, "We all have eyebrows!"

"Head, eyebrows, knees and toes, knees and toes . . .," the children sang.



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 something 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.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

I'm In Charge of My Body

Why use the words *penis* and *vulva*? Children need specific, accurate words to be able to tell their caregivers about health and safety concerns. For example, if the word *bottom* is used for everything between the belly button and the thighs, it's hard to know what a child means when they say, "My bottom itches." If children are sore or itchy or have been touched in an unsafe way, they need to be able to talk about it clearly and without shame.

But why the word *vulva* instead of *vagina*? The terms *penis* and *vagina* are often used together, but *vagina* is not the most accurate term to use with young children. The vagina is internal. It is the tube of muscle that goes from the vulva to the uterus. The vulva is the external part. During toileting, the vulva is wiped or gently washed, but never the vagina.

What if you're not comfortable using those words? First, it's important to acknowledge your discomfort. Take some time to consider where it is coming from. There are many reasons someone might feel uncomfortable using anatomical terms. Cultural or family background and past trauma are two things that may make it difficult to use terms like *penis* and *vulva*.



"Which words we use are less important than how we use them—respectfully (respecting the child's agency and the language they feel comfortable using for themselves), matter of factly (without comedy, euphemism, or shaming), and specifically so that children have the language for their own bodies and can tell us when something is wrong."

The bottom line is this: if there's something wrong with a child in your care, can you identify it?

Activities

Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes

You can sing "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" together with children, just as Ms. H does with Jackson and his friends. If you are not familiar with this song, you can find many videos of it by searching the title online. Sing the traditional verse first, then try replacing the word *shoulders* with names for other body parts. People have most body parts in common, but some body parts may differ.

That could be because of differences in genitals. It also could be because there's a lot of diversity in physical traits. Someone may have only one leg or may be missing a finger. Some people have lots of hair, and others have none! As Jackson learns, our bodies are not all identical.

*Pastel et al. 2019. Supporting Gender Diversity in Early Childhood Classrooms. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 132–133.

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