S11E7 - Teaching Consent From the Start

I want to start this episode with something that might change the way that you think about consent.

Consent is not a teenage conversation. It's something we introduce at 14, when relationships start to happen, but that's not how it should be.

Don't wait for it to get complicated.

It's not a one-off talk about sex. It's not a list of rules we hand our young people and hope they remember in the moment.

Consent is something that we begin teaching at about three years old, whether it's at the dinner table, the front door when a relative arrives, in the bath, in the playground, in every small, ordinary moment where a child learns—or doesn't—that their body belongs to them, that no means no regardless of who is doing the asking, and that how they feel about being touched matters.

By the time we get to a teenage conversation about sex and relationships, consent should already be language that a young person has been speaking for nearly a decade.

Those kinds of words should already be familiar, and the principle should already be lived.

The problem is that, for most young people, it isn't.

Because nobody told their parents to start at three.

Nobody explained that, in the moment you tell a child they have to hug someone if they don't want to, you've taught them something about whose feelings matter in that physical interaction—and it wasn't theirs.

Today, we're going to talk about consent from the very beginning: what it looks like at three, at seven, at 11 and at 15; what it teaches children about themselves; and what happens, in the most human and heartbreaking way, when a parent realises a conversation they hadn't got around to yet suddenly becomes urgent overnight.

I'm Ashley Costello.

This is **The Resilient Kid Podcast**, and this is **Teaching Consent from the Start**.

I want to tell you about two families.

The first family I'm going to call the Smiths. Very inventive.

Mum is Sarah. Dad is Daniel. They have two children: Poppy, who's nine, and a son called Reuben, who is five.

They are really thoughtful parents. They're the kind who read things, ask questions, turn the radio off and have conversations in the car.

When they came to us, it wasn't because anything had gone wrong. It was because Sarah had been listening to this podcast—earlier episodes in the season—and had realised, with a start, that they had been talking about bodies and puberty with their children, but had never talked about the principle underneath it all.

Sarah said to me,

"We've talked about what bodies do, but we haven't talked about who they belong to."

That was one of the most precise things a parent has ever said.

Because it is that gap—exactly that gap.

The information about bodies without the framework of ownership and autonomy is incomplete.

It's a map without a compass.

The second family I'm going to call... the mum, Nadia.

Nadia came to us in a very different state than Sarah.

She was not thoughtful or prepared.

She was shaken.

Her daughter, Chloe, was 13, and two weeks before Nadia came to see me, Chloe had come home from school and told her something that had turned Nadia's world upside down.

A boy in Chloe's year had been sending her messages, pushing her to send photos, telling her that if she liked him, she would.

Telling her that everyone did it.

Telling her it was no big deal.

Chloe hadn't sent anything, but she had almost.

She'd been on the edge—not because she wanted to, but because she didn't have the language to name what was happening.

She didn't have the words for the feeling that something was wrong, and she didn't have the framework to say clearly, even to herself,

"This is pressure. I don't have to respond, and what he's doing is not okay."

She'd come home and told her mum, not because she knew it was wrong, but because something felt off, and she didn't know what to do with that feeling.

Nadia sat across from me and said,

"Why didn't she just say no? Why didn't she think she could say no?"

And I said, as gently as I could,

"When did you teach her that she could say no?"

The silence that followed was not comfortable for either of us in the room.

But it was honest.

And it was the beginning of something important.

So let's have a look at the research.

We're going to come back to our stories in a little while, but I want to spend a little time on the research here because the evidence around consent education is compelling and very specific.

It tells us the kinds of things that should change what we do at every age.

So let's start from the beginning.

Body autonomy—the foundation of consent—begins at toddler age.

Research, including the NSPCC **Speak Out Stay Safe** programme and child safeguarding practice, is consistent on this point.

The earliest and most effective education is not about sex.

It's about ownership of the body.

It's a conversation that happens when a child doesn't want to be hugged and an adult insists.

When a child doesn't want to be tickled and somebody continues to do it, even over their protests.

And even—and this is a hard one—when a child is told to give Grandma a kiss, whether they want to or not.

These are the small moments that feel very harmless, that we probably don't even think about.

But what they teach—what they lay down in our children's nervous systems before they have the words to understand it—is that the feelings of others about their body matter more than their own feelings.

That saying no is not enough.

The obligation to be polite, to keep others comfortable and happy, overrides the right to say,

"I don't want this."

Now, Professor Liz Kelly's research on the continuum of sexual violence is important here because she argues that sexual violence doesn't emerge from nowhere.

It exists on a continuum that begins with the normalisation of small boundary violations—the ones that we're talking about: the unwanted hug, the tickling that continues, the social pressure to perform physical affection.

Teaching children from a very early stage that **no** is real and respected—that's prevention.

It's not traumatic.

It doesn't require a formal lesson.

It happens in the small moments every day when a trusted adult says,

"You don't have to."

I'm just going to pause here.

I can remember at least three incidents when I was young.

One was with my grandparents' neighbour, who was a lovely elderly gentleman. He would have been a similar age to my grandparents. He was a widower. He did things for my grandma and grandad, and my grandma used to cook him dinner a couple of times a week.

He was a really nice old gentleman.

Quite often, from an early age, I used to take his dinner in on a little tray, and there would be pudding and all of that.

As I got older, I remember going in one time and he said to me,

"Oh, why don't you sit down?"

So I did because I didn't think anything of it.

Then he put his hand on my knee.

At that point, I felt uncomfortable.

This is a man I'd grown up with.

This is a man who I was very fond of.

This was a man who was respected in my family.

And I remember the feeling changed.

"Hold on... this just doesn't feel comfortable."

Now, do I think he had any intention?

No.

Probably not.

However, I do feel that we have to get our kids to trust that gut instinct.

I remember never, ever going into his house alone again.

Now, I don't remember explicitly saying to my grandma,

"I don't feel comfortable."

I don't remember ever saying to her,

"He put his hand on my knee."

But what I did do was say,

"I don't want to go on my own."

She never, ever asked me to go alone again.

That was a really important turning point for me.

I'm trying to remember how old I was, and I'm not sure that I can, but I want to say I was about 10.

I remember thinking at the time that it would have been really easy for my grandma to say,

"Oh, go on. Don't worry, it's just so-and-so next door."

Or,

"Can you just do me a favour?"

And I probably would have gone.

But the fact that I'd voiced it, and she heard me, and she listened, and she never once asked me again, really underpinned that I could ask for that kind of thing.

I could listen to my gut because she also agreed.

It wasn't that she was saying there was anything wrong, or even that she probably suspected anything.

I think she simply underpinned my feelings.

That was so important at that time.

So important.

As children move into primary age, that consent conversation develops.

So let's go back to the research.

The NSPCC's research on what protects children from abuse shows that children who have been explicitly told, in age-appropriate language, that their body belongs to them, that no one has the right to touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable, and that they will always be believed and will never be in trouble if they tell a trusted adult something has happened, are significantly more likely to disclose abuse when it occurs and significantly more likely to recognise it as abuse in the first place.

This is a safeguarding argument for consent education that every parent needs to hear.

We're not talking about sex when we talk to a seven-year-old about consent.

We're talking about safety.

Their safety.

We're giving them a framework to recognise when something's wrong before they even have the vocabulary for it, so that they can tell us when they need to.

By the time young people reach secondary school, the consent conversation does need to extend to relationships and sex.

Here, the research is clear, and it's urgent.

Rape Crisis England and Wales publishes data showing that the majority of sexual assaults on young people are perpetrated by someone they know.

Not a stranger.

A peer.

A person who may have used exactly the kind of pressure that we just heard about Chloe experiencing.

The relentless pushing.

The normalisation.

The,

"Everyone does it."

"It's not a big deal."

Because they have absorbed from culture, and from the absence of consent education, that persistence is an acceptable response to **no**.

I've had this conversation a couple of times this week.

I'm just going to pause the research and tell you why.

The conversations I've had this week were with primary school parents.

Their children are in primary school, and we were talking about boundaries and how important boundaries are.

The parents were saying,

"Oh, I know, but sometimes I'm tired. Sometimes it's just easier. Sometimes I think, 'Why don't we just let them do it? Is it really that big a deal?'"

And I said to them,

"Okay, so if your pattern is **no... yes**—whether it's sweets, whether it's staying up past bedtime, whether it's extra screen time—and your children know that you might say no at first...

You might say, 'No, you're not doing that.'

Then you might say no again.

But if they ask a third time, the likelihood is you're going to say yes."

They all went,

"Yeah... probably."

So I said,

"Okay. So when they're older, at this particular age that we're talking about in the research, when they're in their teens and somebody asks them to do something, in their brain the pattern is set up as:

No. No. Yes.

Now, how important are boundaries?

How important is it that when you say **no**, you mean **no**?

Because it's not just your boundaries you're letting slip.

You're teaching them that it's okay, and that with persistence we will let our boundaries down."

That changed everything for them.

In that very conversation, they could suddenly see why boundaries matter.

Boundaries make children feel safe.

This cannot be a better example of that.

So when we, as parents and educators, are keeping those boundaries with our young people, this is why.

Because we are saying to them,

"No means no.

Boundaries keep us safe."

Okay.

The UK's government Relationships and Sex Education guidance, introduced in 2020, is now mandatory in all schools, and it includes a core component.

Schools are required to teach consent.

But what schools can do in a 45-minute lesson cannot replace what a parent can do in a decade of small conversations.

Finally, Dr Nina Burrowes' trauma-informed work on consent is worth naming here specifically.

She makes a really good point that I want everyone to hear.

One of the most common reasons young people do not say **no**, even when they want to, is that they've never practised it.

They have never been in a context where saying **no** was safe, was respected, or was received without a consequence.

The parents who've been saying,

"You don't have to hug Grandma."

since their child was three, have been doing something more important than they knew.

They have been giving their child practice.

Practice in using a word.

Practice in having it respected.

Practice in the knowledge that no one is going to get them to change their mind.

That practice is the whole thing.

It can't be front-loaded into a single conversation at 15.

It has to be built slowly, consistently, from the very beginning.

Okay.

Top tips.

I'm going to do this roughly by age.

So, teaching consent at every age.

Five things.

So, one.

From the very beginning, respect their no.

If your toddler or young person does not want to be hugged, kissed or tickled, respect it.

This does not mean being rude, okay?

It just means finding another way.

Sometimes you're going to have to swallow your embarrassment, because we will get,

"Why doesn't Poppy want to hug Grandma?"

Do you know what?

Maybe she's just not in the mood.

Maybe it's too hot.

That's okay.

So we're going to have to swallow that rather than make them do it.

You can simply say,

"Poppy doesn't want a hug. Maybe she'd love a wave instead, or a high five."

Simple.

Dignified.

It tells your child, in the clearest possible language—and that's what's most important, not Grandma's feelings right now—that their feelings about their body matter.

Your **no** is respected.

Top tip two.

Primary age: name the principle explicitly.

Children between the ages of five and ten can absolutely understand:

"Your body belongs to you.

Nobody has the right to touch it in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable.

If somebody ever does—even if it's somebody you know, even if they say it's a secret—you will never, ever get in trouble for telling me."

Say it more than once.

Say it in ordinary moments, not emergency ones.

Make it a thread that runs through childhood, not a one-off announcement.

It's particularly important to have these conversations if you're in mixed company, if you're going to a party, if you're going on holiday with another family, or if you're going to a big family gathering.

It's really important.

Three. Pre-teen.

Extend it to pressure and online.

Before secondary school begins—ideally around 10 or 11—have the conversation about pressure.

Sometimes people try to make you do things by making you feel bad, making you look bad if you don't, or by saying,

"Everyone else is doing it."

That's called pressure.

Pressure is never a good reason to do something, particularly if your instincts or your gut are saying **no**.

Name online pressure specifically because, in this day and age, that's where most of it will come from.

Four. Make it mutual.

By the time young people hit their teens, the consent conversation needs to include both directions:

The right to say **no**...

...and the responsibility to hear it from others.

Consent means that everyone involved genuinely wants to be there and is free to say **no** without any bad consequences.

If someone seems uncertain, goes quiet or changes the subject, that is not a **yes**.

A **yes** has to be clear.

And it has to be free.

This is the conversation Chloe needed before that boy sent his first message.

And, by the way, that's no judgement on Chloe's mum.

You don't know what you don't know until you do.

Five. After something has happened, it's never too late.

If you're a parent who's just had your own Nadia moment...

...a child has come home with something that has made you realise the conversation didn't happen enough...

...please hear this.

It is **not** too late.

The conversation you have still matters.

The message that **what happened is not okay**, that they were right to tell you, and that their **no** was real, even if it wasn't heard—that message will still land.

Start now.

Start from where they're at.

I had a conversation this week with a client's mum, and we were talking about them going off to university. In fact, I think they were going away with friends first.

I said,

"Have you had the conversation around different areas? Have you got the secret word?"

She said,

"Oh yeah, we do have that, but we've not used it for years."

So I said,

"Maybe now, as old as they are, is a good point to reiterate it."

We have a secret word.

It's not this, because obviously I'm not going to give that out over the airwaves. I have probably mentioned it before on a podcast, but we have a secret word.

Let's say it's **banana**.

If one of my kids is at a party and they text me, or I ring them and they say,

"Banana."

I just go and pick them up.

No questions asked.

I think it's really important to have that with your child.

That's not saying you might not pick up the conversation the next day.

But in that moment, on that night, at that time...

No questions.

Just pick them up so they know they're safe.

You're not going to kick off.

You're just going to pick them up.

Whether they've had a drink, whether they've tried some drugs, whatever it is, knowing that you are their safe port of call and you want them to ring you—that has to come first.

So that's why I'm saying to you, have that with your kids.

It doesn't matter if they're on a playdate when they're little or they're at university at a party.

You need to be their backup.

So have that secret word, whatever it is.

Okay.

Let's go back to the story.

Back to the Smiths.

Sarah and Daniel went home and started with Reuben, who was five.

They started at a birthday party with a distant relative who expected a hug and a kiss on arrival.

In the past, Sarah told me she would have nudged Reuben forward.

She would have given him the gentle parent push.

"Be polite. Give a hug."

She'd never even thought about what she was teaching him.

This time, she crouched down and said,

"You don't have to if you don't want to. Would you like a wave instead?"

Reuben looked at her for a second.

Then he waved.

The relative smiled.

Nothing was damaged.

Something was built.

"It took about five seconds," Sarah told me.

"I don't know why I never did it before."

With Poppy, who was nine, they'd had a longer conversation.

Not a formal one.

Nothing scripted.

Nothing sat down.

Just in the car, as they often did—and when kids are often at their best, when we're not staring them in the face.

Sarah told Poppy that her body belonged to her.

She never had to hug or kiss somebody she didn't want to.

Not even family.

That if anyone ever touched her in a way that felt wrong, she would never, ever be in trouble for telling Mum and Dad.

Poppy was quiet for a moment.

Then she said,

"Even if it's someone we know?"

"Especially if it's someone we know," Mum said.

Sarah said she had to breathe through that one because the fact that Poppy had asked that particular question told her that some part of her daughter had observed something Sarah hadn't intended to teach her.

That she'd learned the rules were different with people you were supposed to trust.

They aren't.

And the work began there.

Nadia's journey was harder.

Slower.

And, for both mum and daughter, more painful.

After that first session, she went home and sat with Chloe.

Not to interrogate.

Not to go through what had happened and why she hadn't said no, or whether she understood how serious it was.

Just to sit.

She said,

"I'm really glad you told me.

I want you to know that what he did was not okay.

None of it.

And you did nothing wrong."

Chloe cried.

Not a little.

The kind of crying that's been waiting in the wings to come out.

In the weeks that followed, Nadia and Chloe talked about what consent actually meant.

About pressure.

About the difference between wanting something and going along with something.

About how sometimes we don't say **no**, not because we want to say **yes**, but because we haven't had enough practice in having our **no** respected.

About how none of it was Chloe's fault.

It wasn't anybody's fault except the boy who pushed and the culture that taught him that pushing was okay.

Somewhere in the middle of it all, Chloe asked,

"Why didn't anyone tell me this before?"

Nadia didn't have the answer.

She told me that later, through tears of her own.

But she had one thing.

"I'm telling her now.

And that's got to be at least five years before any of this really matters in the way it nearly mattered."

I'm going to use them.

That is all any of us can do.

Use the time we have.

Start where we are.

Trust that it's not too late.

Because it isn't.

So let's have a look at the bigger picture.

I want to say something clearly because I think it needs to be said.

Consent education is not about teaching children to be afraid of other people.

It's not about making sex seem dangerous or relationships seem threatening.

It's not about removing trust or innocence from childhood.

It's about giving children the most fundamental thing that parents can give:

The knowledge that their body belongs to them.

Their feelings matter.

And that the adults in their life will always take their side.

The statistics around sexual harassment and assault amongst young people in the UK are not comfortable reading.

They're horrific.

Rape Crisis England and Wales data shows that one in four women in the UK has been raped or sexually assaulted as an adult.

One in four.

The End Violence Against Women Coalition reports that a significant proportion of those assaults occur during adolescence.

The Ofsted review we talked about in Episode One found that sexual harassment amongst young people in schools had become so normalised that young people had stopped reporting it.

These are not statistics about monsters or strangers.

They're about ordinary young people in ordinary schools who did not have the language to name what was happening to them.

Who did not have the framework to say,

"This is wrong."

A culture that never quite said it clearly enough.

The pressure.

The persistence.

The going along with things.

They're just part of growing up.

They're not.

And they don't have to be.

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation, which works on the prevention of sexual harm, is clear.

The most powerful intervention is early education.

It's not just for potential victims.

It's for everybody.

For the boys who need to hear, as explicitly as the girls, that **no means no**.

That going quiet means **stop**.

That enthusiasm is the only version of **yes** that counts.

For young people who are not sure where the line is because nobody ever drew it for them.

Consent education—from the toddler who does not have to hug Grandma to the fifteen-year-old who knows that pressure is not a reason to do anything—that's where the work is.

It's the quiet work.

The daily work.

The little, small conversations.

It doesn't have to be dramatic.

But it saves people.

I want to end this episode by going back to something that Nadia said.

She said,

"Why didn't anyone tell me this before so I could have told her?"

That question stayed with me because it's the question underneath this whole season.

The whole reason we came to this was because a very good friend of mine said,

"I feel so embarrassed and so uncomfortable having these conversations with my young son that we need to do something about it."

That's why we're doing this.

That's why we're having this long, drawn-out conversation around sex, the education that comes with it, our bodies, the anatomy of our bodies, pleasure, and why we need to get over this uncomfortable feeling and start putting some of this into place for our kids now.

Irrespective of age.

It's not too late.

The answer to why we got through our own childhoods without the words, without the framework, without the map, is complicated.

But it's nobody's fault.

And at this point, it's beside the point.

Because we know now.

Knowing is enough to start.

You don't have to have a Nadia moment to begin this conversation.

You don't need something to go wrong before you start.

You just need to start young where you can.

Whether it's a five-year-old who doesn't want to hug somebody, and the willingness to crouch down and say,

"You don't have to."

That's the beginning.

And, as we keep discovering in this season...

...it is everything.

That's **Teaching Consent from the Start**.

Thank you for being here for this one.

I know it's not always easy listening.

But it's necessary.

And so are you.

The next episode is **The Parent's Guide to Talking About Sex**.

Oh, here we go.

The big one.

The one many of you have been waiting for—and probably dreading—in equal measure.

So don't miss it.

All the research references, the age-by-age guide and further support resources are in the show notes below.

If something in this episode has brought something up for you or your child, please reach out either to the organisations listed or to us here at **The Resilient Kid**.

We'll always be happy to support you.

Until next time...

Start the conversation.

You don't have to get it perfect.

You just have to begin.