



Developing Appropriate, Effective Bodily Autonomy Socialization Strategies for Young Children

Ireti Aderayo Adegbesan, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Bodily autonomy is defined as the right of an individual to have control over their body, and withdraw consent from activities involving their body at any time. Bodily autonomy requires respecting boundaries, affirmative consent, and self-defined personal comfort with affectionate touch. This control over oneself is critical to prevent sexual violence. All people are socialized, from an early age, to define and experience bodily autonomy according to the definitions and experiences of those around them; what, then, is the significance of the concept of bodily autonomy for children's development, and how is it shaped by their interactions with parents, caregivers, and others?

Young children are rarely the subjects of social science research on bodily autonomy. Knowing very little about the earliest roots of our understanding, beliefs, and feelings surrounding this topic makes it difficult to have a lifetime developmentally appropriate consent curriculum: that is, a curriculum that focuses on ways to teach everyone, at all ages and stages, that they have the right to accept or reject interpersonal touch interactions according to their own sense of comfort and safety. My study focused on a group of 21 mothers from diverse backgrounds with children ages two to five, and explored the roots of children's understanding of bodily autonomy and how that understanding might inform sexual violence prevention approaches.

Mothers' Perspectives on Pro-Bodily Autonomy Socialization

In convening focus groups and interviewing mothers one-on-one, I sought to address the significant gap in the literature on consent with young children and to explore similarities and differences in the bodily autonomy socialization of young children from a maternal perspective.

Mothers' beliefs and perspectives reflected the following five themes:

- **Mothers' socialization:** The mothers I spoke with reported that their own upbringings—the messages they received about their bodies, and the impact that conforming to certain cultural norms had on their development—informed their adult understanding of bodily autonomy.
- **Connection between past and present:** Mothers connected their own socialization process to how they socialize their children related to comfortability with touch and boundary setting with their bodies. Mothers either reinforced what they had learned (mostly what they viewed as positive messages), or intentionally chose to socialize their children in a new way.
- **Children as individuals:** Mothers described their children as being unique, or having specific temperaments; personalization of socialization techniques, rather than a one-size-fits-all method, mattered to them.

- **Maternal advocacy:** Mothers fought for their children's bodily autonomy to be recognized by protecting them, respecting them, and sometimes intervening in situations on their behalf.
- **Complexity of violation:** Mothers evidenced that situations involving unwanted touch are complex, and boundary crossing can happen in any relationship, including with the mother themselves, strangers, relatives, etc.

Ultimately, all the mothers in the study were pro-bodily autonomy and acknowledged the importance of children being given choices. However, there was considerable diversity in the experiences that shaped mothers' perspectives and the strategies they used with their children, suggesting there is no one-size-fits-all model for developing bodily autonomy concepts and practices. Regardless, socializing children is a protective act, because socialization that starts at home builds a solid foundation for both boundary establishment and self-defined comfort during touch interactions out in the world, at later ages.

Strategies for and Benefits of Pro-Bodily Autonomy Socialization

These strategies recommended by the mothers in the study can be used to help socialize children toward an accurate and empowered understanding of their bodies, safe touch, and how to safely reject or accept affection. The following socialization techniques can give children the skills and tools to navigate their relationships with affection and establish boundaries around physical touch:

- **Model language:** Using boundary-enforcing language ("I don't like it," "all done") helps children communicate when they do or do not want to receive physical affection.
- **Give power to words:** Pairing words and actions ("Stop means stop," "down means down") helps children understand these cues and how they are meant to change actions that follow.
- **Make a scene:** Disrupting things when they need to be disrupted brings outside attention to situations involving unwanted touch.
- **Normalize "private parts":** Openly talking about body parts and refusing to shame children when they touch their own private parts creates a culture of normalcy, where no part of the body is inherently shameful.
- **Deploy media messaging:** Using kid-friendly media can help facilitate conversations about best practices in difficult situations. For example, *The Lion King* offers the opportunity to discuss what to do if someone asks you to keep a secret from your parents, even if that someone is a relative or close to the family.
- **Be a role model:** Demonstrating how to respectfully reject affection and inappropriate touch gives children the tools to navigate unfamiliar situations involving things "that bug them."
- **Use appropriate names for body parts:** Vagina and penis are not bad words; they are accurate terms for parts of the body. Destigmatizing appropriate discussion of private parts empowers children to accurately describe inappropriate touch, if it happens to them.

These findings from my research illustrate how consent, boundaries, and positive touch can be taught to children in a developmentally appropriate way without introducing the topic of sex. Mothers indicated many ways they used various strategies alongside considerations of their children's unique personalities and temperaments, without having to employ concepts of "safe touch" or sexual violation as the basis for their teaching and modeling.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for socializing children about their bodily autonomy, affection, touch, and consent; instead, the learnings from my study participants indicate that socialization strategies abound, and can be adapted to suit individual children or specific circumstances at the discretion of the parent. This research should inform curriculum development for bodily autonomy teaching strategies that are adaptable across a variety of learners, and that help children understand they are respected, seen, and heard—and worthy of appropriate affection on their terms.

Read more in Irete A. Adegbesan, “Bodily Autonomy of Young Children: Mothers’ Perspectives of Appropriate Acceptance or Rejection of Affection for their Toddler and Preschool-Aged Children,” University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2021.