

Exceptions for Children on Society's Rules about Being "Polite"

By [Sharon Doty, J.D., M.H.R.](#)

Editor's note: *The emphasis on training to prevent child sexual abuse falls on the shoulders of adults. Caring adults are trained in how to create safe environments for the children in their care, and ensuring the safety of children is the primary responsibility of adults. In addition, we must give children tools to be able to protect themselves in settings outside of the presence of safe, caring adults.*



For over 25 years, experts in child sexual abuse prevention have focused their attention on teaching children words and actions that help them resist the overtures of a potential child molester. We have worked hard to teach them to say "No!", to try and run away, and tell another adult any time they feel uncomfortable or threatened. These are obviously good lessons for children to learn and can help them be safer. However, some parents and experts are finding that there is more to this conversation and adding to it will require all of us to rethink our own behavior.

The reason for the emphasis on educating children is two-fold. One of the elements that must be present for child sexual abuse to happen is that the predator must be able to overcome any resistance from the child.¹ Teaching children how to speak up and speak out to protect themselves from sexual abuse thwarts the efforts of a sexual predator. Second, children attend school and therefore, they are a captive audience for this prevention education. Of course, parents can opt their children out of training, but for the most part, a program presented in a school setting offers the best opportunity to train the most people in prevention tactics.

These two elements are the foundation of over two decades of program development and implementation for children. We have looked for new ways to communicate the message. We have developed creative messages to impress this message on our children. We have trained teachers to watch for signs of abuse in students and to listen for disclosures of abuse. Through all this, the message has concentrated on the three components of the basic message: say "NO!," GO, and TELL.

Today we are seeing that there is something more to be said if we want our children to grow up knowing how to protect themselves from predators. Some have realized that the basic "No!," go, and tell message is missing something. It doesn't really teach children that the reason for "No!" is that someone has violated our boundaries. These experts are recommending that programs be expanded to include teaching children about setting and enforcing personal boundaries. They see that when children learn to identify and set boundaries and enforce them, there are benefits that continue through adulthood.

In a local news interview, an expert from the Minnesota Coalition against Sexual Assault talked about how to best train children to resist the grooming activities of an adult predator. She recommended that we turn our focus when teaching children on telling them they have the right to personal safety boundaries and that standing up for those boundaries is both a personal safety issue and a protection for others.ⁱⁱ Going beyond the basic message allows us to help guide the children in our care into becoming healthy, responsible adults who continue to look out for their own safety and well-being long after they leave the nest or safe havens of our ministries. We want nothing more for our children than their health and well-being and a long and happy life. Expanding this conversation can help assure that.

The one challenge for us all in this expansion is that we have to be willing to deal with a long-held belief and expectation that everyone should always be polite to one another. Telling someone "no" is not impolite, although sometimes it can be perceived that way. In our society, drawing a hard line in the sand by placing a boundary is often treated as though the person setting limits is being rude and disrespectful. It is time that we reconsider that attitude in favor of an approach that promotes respect as a two-way street and realizes that people have the right to say "No!" and have that response respected.

As a society, we seem to be obsessed with being polite. In a recent Google search there were 266,000,000 responses to the inquiry "being polite." The most visited site explains why it is important to be polite and avoid rudeness of any kind.ⁱⁱⁱ Being polite does decrease the distance between people and make communication easier. It can help you make a good first impression and is a useful tool in defusing tense or difficult situations. In fact, we could use a bit more politeness in many of our public interactions these days. However, being polite has its limits and teaching children those limits can help them stay safe for a lifetime and learn confidence for themselves.^{iv}

As some have pointed out, these basic rules for children include something that goes against the rules of polite society. We teach children to say "No!" even to adults and to speak up to protect themselves in difficult situations. We also teach them to be respectful and polite to others at all times. These messages can sometimes be at odds with one another and cause confusion for the child. Therefore, if we want to keep our children safe, we have to add something to the message. We need to let them know that there are exceptions to society's rules about being polite. There are boundaries that are not to be crossed and you don't have to be nice about resisting those advances.

We teach our children how to politely and respectfully resist something that they don't like or something that makes them uncomfortable. That is an important lesson. However, they also need to know that if the other person ignores their polite request to stop, they have permission to be rude—if that's what it takes—to protect themselves and others from harm. Teaching our children both lessons gives them tools for living that will help them throughout life. Expanding the prevention education of our children to include this message will make a real difference for them throughout their life. Ultimately, that's exactly what we all want and this is a great way to accomplish it.