



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

GIVING YOUTH TOOLS TO STAY SAFE

The Missoula YMCA is committed to helping families keep their children safe. It's important to give youth the tools they need to stay safe and defend themselves against abuse.

- Body autonomy is the ability of a person to determine what happens to their body without external influence or coercion. It is an important concept for children to be taught and understand. A child who knows that they are in control of their body is less likely to fall victim to sexual abuse, sexual assault, and, later, intimate partner violence. They are also more likely to disclose any negative or abusive events that should happen to them. Talk to your children in an age-appropriate way about body autonomy. Ways to practice it are:
- Use actual anatomical terms for private parts from the beginning. When terms like penis and vagina are normalized, it is easier for children to accurately describe things that may have happened, and discuss their body parts without shame.
- Don't force physical contact to show affection. Don't make them hug someone unless they want to, even if it is a close relative. Give them options on how to greet people, and defend them to friends and relatives when they aren't comfortable hugging someone. Empower your children now and they're less likely to fall victim to unwanted touching as they grow older.
- In the same way, teach children that they should ask permission before touching others. Not everyone appreciates hugs or physical contact. Children should know not to yield control over their own body and they should learn to use consent before touching others.

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- Help children understand the difference between okay touches (those that make them feel happy) and not-okay touches (any touch that makes them feel uncomfortable, scared, or confused). Similarly, teach them the difference between okay secrets and not-okay secrets. Okay secrets are for things like gift giving. Not-okay secrets are about things that hurt or are about their private parts. Let them know that they can always come tell you what's bothering them.

Visit [preventabuse.com](https://www.preventabuse.com) for more abuse prevention resources.