REASONS PARENTS SHOULD TEACH CHILDREN PROPER NAMES FOR PRIVATE BODY PARTS

Genitals, like other body parts, are healthy, good, and essential to our physical well-being. We described them as “private” because they are generally off-limits to others; we keep them covered. However, they are not so private that we can’t speak about them respectfully.

One of our society’s deepest-set norms is that we don’t mention the actual names of our private body parts. Some parents use slang words and silly names when referring to them. In fact, many families don’t use any names at all because they are too embarrassed to even acknowledge those parts exist.

We should promote the practice of using plain and accurate language when referring to private parts. In other words, use the correct medical terms. Incorrect names send the message that genitals are shameful, naughty, wrong, bad, and that’s its rude to mention them.

When incorrect names are taught, kids get the message they will get into trouble if they speak about private parts and so may not confide in adults when they are confused or concerned that someone is touching them inappropriately. This practice can shut down communication which is so vital for children when they need adults to help them understand the world.

Importantly, sexual abusers rely on secrets and silence to commit their sexual acts and if children believe they cannot even say the names of their private parts, they send a message to abusers that they are safe targets and will likely be too embarrassed to ever tell anyone.

Research shows that while 89% of children know the names for their non-genital body parts, only 10% know the correct names for genitalia. There is general consensus from clinicians that using the correct names enhances children’s body image, confidence, and openness. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics supports teaching children the correct medical names, including penis, scrotum, testicles, vagina, vulva and breasts, even before they can speak, and to use opportunities around bathing, diapering, and potty time to mention these words. Kids who are taught the standard medical names are likely to be better protected and better able to avoid abuse or to talk about it, if it should happen.

So parents, we don’t refer to hands as “grabbers,” mouths are not called “chomp-chomps,” and noses are not “smelly-wellies.” So let’s stop referring to private parts with silly, confusing names.

Let’s be the grown-ups in the room. Let’s protect our children!