



news

Maintaining acceptable boundaries

We learned in the news recently about a strict policy issued in an email to coaches of the Toronto Leaside Girls Hockey Association.

The email included this directive regarding physical contact with players: "Putting hands on shoulders, slapping butts, tapping them on the helmet, NOTHING, this can make some of the girls uncomfortable and you won't know which ones, so no contact, period."

The directive followed a complaint about what

Achieving Justice

PAUL HERGOTT



was referred to as "a congratulations doled out by a volunteer parent," which included slapping the child's behind.

I have previously written about issues that I argue bear an important relationship to this one.

In a past column, I wrote about consent in the context of adults,

stating: "There is no gray area in consent. You can't 'innocently' engage in a non-consensual act. There is either a 'yes' (unimpaired) or there is no

consent."

Recent news stories about underreported sexual assaults in Canadian universities underscore the much more serious aspect of this issue. So how best do we change our culture of, perhaps "presumed consent," to where consent is never presumed and always obtained?

Perhaps raising generations of children with firm boundaries about uninvited physical touching will lead to generations of adults with those same boundaries?

Do we not owe this to our children anyway? Should we not be empowering our children to have firmly established boundaries about uninvited physical contact, particularly from

those in positions of authority?

Are we giving our children confusing, mixed messages if we don't insist that absolutely every adult having care of our children follow the directive issued by the Toronto Leaside Girls Hockey Association?

Is it enough to leave it up to our children to speak up if they are touched in a way that makes them uncomfortable?

We have learned through the prevalence of child sexual abuse in our society that this is not enough. Would such a strict policy result in a loss of the consoling hug from a kindergarten teacher and other elements of physical touch that we feel is beneficial to our children? Yes.

Would that loss be outweighed by the benefits to our children and future generations of establishing and maintaining firm boundaries around consent? I argue that it would.

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