



## Body Safety Education in the Era of #MeToo

By Shawnta S. Barnes – November 17, 2018

Last week, my fourth-grade students attended a body safety session in the cafeteria. Since this presentation took place during the time they were supposed to visit me in the library for their special area class, I was asked to attend the presentation with them. When I was a kid, body

safety wasn't even the words that were used. I remember being herded into the gym when I was in elementary school to listen to a good touch and bad touch presentation. The sole focus of that presentation was to inform us that our bodies are private and no one had the right to touch us in a bad place.

Today, with the #MeToo movement, it is not enough to teach students to report inappropriate touching or assault. We also have to teach children not to be the perpetrator and what the law says. "Age of Consent" was the third episode of season four of *This is Life with Lisa Ling*. During this episode, Ling stated, "More than half a million people are listed on our nation's sex offender registries. Estimates suggest a quarter of them landed there before the age of 18. What some of them were convicted of may surprise you." What was surprising was one case Ling shared during the episode that took place in Minnesota. A 16-year-old boy she interviewed was charged with distribution of child pornography. When he was 14, he sent four pictures of his genitals through a text message to another student. Now, he is on the juvenile sex offender registry until he is 25.

I received my first cell phone freshman year of college, so sexting and the consequences were not even a situation I had to worry about when I was younger. As I sat through the body safety presentation, I reflected upon how much our society has changed and how we all have to be more diligent and more intentional about having conversations with children about their bodies. During this presentation, the presenter did address how sharing photos of other students or even sharing photos of themselves is against the law. Unfortunately, I do not think some children understand they should not send nude photos of themselves to anyone for any reason.

What stood out to me most is how she explained advocating for yourself when you have been violated. When I was younger, I remember being told to tell an adult if anyone touches me in an inappropriate place. There are countless stories where children have told an adult and they were not believed. Those children had to suffer in silence and the trauma rears its head when they become adults. Instead of telling students at my school to tell an adult, she said, "You tell an adult and if that adult doesn't understand you, you tell another adult. If that adult doesn't understand you, you tell another adult. You keep telling your story until someone understands you."

Although I appreciated this program, the responsibility cannot fall just to our schools. Parents, churches, and community groups have a responsibility to teach children how to advocate for themselves and how to avoid violating the safety of others. I'm a mother of two young sons. My

fear with the #MeToo movement is the wave of the #BelieveAllWomen movement that is tied to it. I believe each person has the right to tell his or her truth, but I also worry about my sons and other people's sons finding themselves in a bad situation because they weren't well informed. Some young people are on the sex offender registry because they had consensual sex with another person who was one year younger, but in that state, the one year age difference meant that the younger person could not legally consent. It is all of our jobs to help our young people understand how our society is changing and how they can keep their body safe and not violate the safety of others.