

# my body belongs to me

Jill Starishevsky  
Illustrated by Angela Padrón



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A book about body safety

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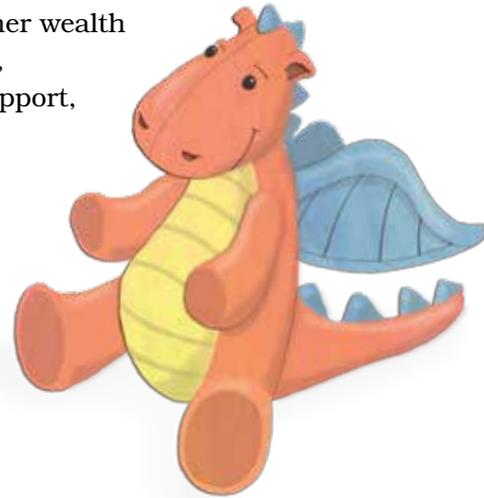
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For Ted, Ally, Becca, and Emma,  
the loves of my life. And for T.T.,  
whose courage beyond her years  
became my inspiration.

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## A Letter to Grown-Ups

Among the first things we teach children is to name the various parts of their bodies. As they grow older, this conversation should go a step further: Some parts of their bodies are private and belong just to them.

Just as we teach young people what to do in case of fire, we must teach them what to do if someone touches them inappropriately—or forces them to touch others inappropriately. The central message of *My Body Belongs to Me* is this: If someone touches you, *tell*.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of sexually abused children *don't* immediately disclose the abuse. As a result, the abuse can often grow more serious. There are many reasons for a child's silence. Perhaps the abuser says it's a secret. Maybe the child believes that he or she is at fault. Without being taught that his or her body has boundaries, a child may be too young to understand that the behavior is wrong.

Any child—regardless of gender, age, or background—may become a victim of abuse. Yet adults often don't know how or when to approach this topic with young children. Written for 3- to 8-year-olds, *My Body Belongs to Me* can help you start this difficult discussion and talk about body boundaries and safety with children in a straightforward, sensitive way.

**Jill**

P.S. On pages 24–26, you'll find suggestions for sharing this book with children. And on pages 26–27, you'll see a list of other sources of help and information.

This is my body,  
and it belongs just to me.

I have **knees**  
and  
**elbows**  
and lots of parts you see.



Other parts I have  
are not in open view.

I call them my private parts.  
Of course, you have them too.



## Suggestions for Sharing This Book with Children

The following are some tips for using *My Body Belongs to Me* with children.

- 1. Use the story as a tool** to begin a conversation. Address the topic periodically to reinforce the message.
- 2. Teach children the correct terms for their body parts.** Enable them to use language that will make them comfortable talking to you.
- 3. Help children understand that their bodies have boundaries** and no one else has the right to cross those boundaries. Ask: What would you do if someone touched you on your \_\_\_\_\_? What if someone made you touch his or her \_\_\_\_\_? Who would you tell? Why is it important to tell? What would you do if the person said it was a secret?

Encourage children to say that they should and would tell a trusted adult—whether that be a parent, a teacher, or another grown-up—right away.

- 4. Discuss the importance of the rule “no secrets.”** If you are using this book with your own children or with children in your family, put this rule into practice: If someone, even a

grandparent, says something to the child like, “I’ll get you an ice cream later, but it will be our secret,” firmly but politely say, “We don’t do secrets in our family.” Then turn to the child and repeat, “We don’t do secrets. We can tell each other everything.”

- 5. Be aware and open.** Keep in mind, especially when reading the book in a group setting, that you may be reading to a child who has already been touched in some way and is keeping it a secret. Convey that it is okay for the child to tell someone even if he or she has been keeping it a secret for a long time.
- 6. Know the guidelines.** If you are using the book in an educational or counseling setting, be sure you have an understanding of how to respond if a child makes a disclosure. Every state has mandatory reporting laws that require teachers, counselors, and other professionals to make an immediate report when they learn of abusive situations. Several states have passed laws requiring schools to teach kids about sexual abuse prevention.
- 7. Be sure not to respond to a disclosure with anger,** whether you are a

parent, teacher, caregiver, or other adult working with children. Children will often confuse anger toward the perpetrator with anger at them, which can then make them afraid to tell adults about abuse. If a child does make a disclosure, it is important to take it seriously and promptly report it to the appropriate authorities.

- 8. Help each child identify a “safety zone person.”** A safety zone person can be a teacher, a neighbor, a counselor, a family friend, a figure in the child’s faith community, or anyone the child trusts and feels comfortable confiding in. Teach children that if they feel unable, unwilling, or afraid to tell a parent about behavior that made them feel uncomfortable, they should tell their safety zone person. Children can also go to this person for help with other challenging issues, such as bullying. Ideally, the safety zone person should be advised that they have been chosen and should be instructed to discuss any red-flag situations with the child’s parents or caregivers in a timely manner.
- 9. Keep in mind that child predators often try to entice or intrigue children** they target by offering something inappropriate, such as letting them watch an adult movie, miss school, smoke a cigarette, or drink alcohol.

Children will often be reluctant to tell about inappropriate touching for fear they will get in trouble for the forbidden behavior. Explain to children that if someone touches them inappropriately, they should tell a parent or safety zone person, even if they did something that they were not allowed to do. Similarly, if you are sharing this book with children in your own family, teach them that they can come to you to discuss anything, even if they are worried about getting in trouble. Convey to them that you will listen with an open mind, even if they were doing something they should not have been doing.

- 10. Encourage children to tell you or other adults about things that happen to them** that make them feel scared, sad, or uncomfortable. If children have an open line of communication, they will be more inclined to alert you to something inappropriate early on.
- 11. Let children decide for themselves how they want to express affection.** Children should not be forced to hug or kiss if it makes them feel uncomfortable. Allowing children to set these boundaries regarding physical contact will empower them to say no to inappropriate touching.