

yes yes yes

## GOOD SEXUAL COMMUNICATION AND MUTUAL CONSENT

### INTRODUCTION

In July 2019, NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Lothian, asked the University of Edinburgh to carry out research with young people aged 16-19 years about sexual consent.

They wanted to understand what helps young people to communicate well about sexual consent and about how young people know when a sexual experience is going well and everyone is enjoying themselves.

The researchers were helped by 4 youth advisors and talked to a total of 58 young people in Scotland across different genders and sexualities.

This report is a summary of our research findings. If you would like to read the full research report please contact [Jill.Wilson@ggc.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:Jill.Wilson@ggc.scot.nhs.uk).



## KEY MESSAGES



1. When young people talk about or are asked about consent they often talk about lack of consent and not about what consent is like when everything is going well. Young people think about rape, sexual abuse and sexual harassment when they see the word 'consent'.



2. Age, sexual experience and length of time with a partner affect the ease with which young people communicate about consent.



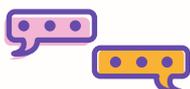
3. Reading body language and knowing when/how to ask if everything is ok are important skills for young people to develop.



4. In heterosexual relationships, most young people think that men ask for consent and women give consent.



5. The more comfortable young people feel talking about sex in general, the more likely they are to talk about consent with the person they are about to have sex with.



6. Most young people only talk about consent when they are about to have sex (if at all). The few young people who do talk about it beforehand usually speak online.



7. Friends are important in how young people think about consent and this can be in positive or in negative ways.



8. Young people are often worried that saying no might upset the person they are having sex with or that the person might treat them badly.



9. Consent is more difficult if young people don't know what they like and want. This can come with age and experience.

**SEX ED**

10. Most young people in this study thought their sex education had not been good enough.



**1. WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE TALK ABOUT OR ARE ASKED ABOUT CONSENT THEY OFTEN TALK ABOUT LACK OF CONSENT AND NOT ABOUT WHAT CONSENT IS LIKE WHEN EVERYTHING IS GOING WELL. YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT RAPE, SEXUAL ABUSE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT WHEN THEY SEE THE WORD 'CONSENT'.**

Some young people said that the connection of 'consent' with accusations of harassment or rape can make it difficult to talk about consent with someone you might have sex with. To get young people to think positively about consent the researchers found it was more helpful to ask about 'what sex is like when things are going well and everyone feels good' or about 'good sexual communication'.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** Why do you think most people find it easier to think about lack of consent than positive consent?



**2. AGE, SEXUAL EXPERIENCE AND LENGTH OF TIME WITH A PARTNER AFFECT THE EASE WITH WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE COMMUNICATE ABOUT CONSENT.**

Older young people and those with more sexual experience have more confidence talking about sexual consent. Most young people said it is easier to talk about consent if you are in a relationship with someone that you trust and know well and you know each other's likes and dislikes. However, some young people think that it is more important to communicate about consent before a hook-up because you don't know the other person.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** In what situations have you felt most comfortable talking about consent?



**3. READING BODY LANGUAGE AND KNOWING WHEN/HOW TO ASK IF EVERYTHING IS OK ARE IMPORTANT SKILLS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO DEVELOP.**

Different people communicate about what they want and don't want sexually in different ways. When sex is going well, both people are in tune with each other, respond to changes in body language and 'check in' about how the other person is feeling both before and during sex. Many young people are aware that body language can be misinterpreted and suggested that asking how the other person is enjoying themselves is particularly important if you aren't sure about their body language.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** How do you like to tell a sexual partner if you want to do something or don't want to do something? How do they tell you?



**4. IN HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS, MOST YOUNG PEOPLE THINK THAT MEN ASK FOR CONSENT AND WOMEN GIVE CONSENT.**

Some young men think that women don't want them to ask for consent because it 'kills the vibe' and that both parties should just know that they both want to have sex. →

They talked about how they would be seen as ‘creepy’ if they did ask for consent and ‘a beast’ if they didn’t. However, young women clearly said that they would like men to ask them if they want to have sex and whether they are enjoying themselves.

Young heterosexual women and young gay men talked about sometimes feeling unsafe to talk about consent both physically – “I don’t know how he would react and he would probably be bigger than me” - and socially – “I’d be scared he’d go and laugh about me with his pals”.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** Why do you think that most people think men should ask for consent and women give consent? Do you think it's true?



### **5. THE MORE COMFORTABLE YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL TALKING ABOUT SEX IN GENERAL, THE MORE LIKELY THEY ARE TO TALK ABOUT CONSENT WITH THE PERSON THEY ARE ABOUT TO HAVE SEX WITH.**

‘Making consent something normal to talk about’ is important. Young people who had been given negative messages about sex at home or had not been able to talk about sex at home find it more difficult to communicate about sex in other situations, including with a sexual partner.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** How comfortable did you feel talking about sex growing up? How is this affecting you now?



### **6. MOST YOUNG PEOPLE ONLY TALK ABOUT CONSENT WHEN THEY ARE ABOUT TO HAVE SEX (IF AT ALL). THE FEW YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DO TALK ABOUT IT BEFOREHAND USUALLY SPEAK ONLINE.**

If they did talk about consent, most left it until they were just about to have sex when ‘it just has to be done’. If there is communication about consent before being in a sexual situation it usually happens by text, phone or social media to check out whether the other person feels the same way and wants the same things. Messaging is seen as more comfortable than talking because it is easier to end the communication and you do not confront the other person’s reaction or body language.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** Have you ever talked with a sexual partner about the kind of sex you like before you had sex? Do you think that’s a good idea?



### **7. FRIENDS ARE IMPORTANT IN HOW YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT CONSENT AND THIS CAN BE IN POSITIVE OR IN NEGATIVE WAYS.**

Some young people talk openly with their close friends about sex, how the person you are having sex with should behave and to compare experiences. Some groups of friends have conversations about consent and ‘educate’ one another. Others feel that their confidence in communicating in sexual situations had grown from talking to their friends. →

Other young people are scared that their friends will hear gossip about them if they decide to have sex or not to have sex. Young women are judged equally for having sex (slut) and for not having sex (virgin/frigid) whereas young men are almost always judged negatively for not having sex ('pussy').



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** Can you think of a situation where you've heard one of your friends being called names related to their sexual decisions or preferences? How did you respond?



### 8. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE OFTEN WORRIED THAT SAYING 'NO' MIGHT UPSET THE PERSON THEY ARE HAVING SEX WITH OR THAT THE PERSON MIGHT TREAT THEM BADLY.

Young people agreed that it can be difficult to say 'no' to something sexually because either, they think they might be laughed at or because they might hurt the other person's feelings. Some young people described doing things that they don't particularly like because they thought their partner enjoyed it and they might be upset if they refused.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** How do you feel if you and your sexual partner want to do different things when you have sex? How can you let the other person know it's okay to say what they want and don't want?



### 9. CONSENT IS MORE DIFFICULT IF YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY LIKE AND WANT. THIS CAN COME WITH AGE AND EXPERIENCE. BEFOREHAND

When young people don't know what they want they are more likely to 'go along' with something that they are not sure about.

Young people who know their own wants/preferences and the ways they like to communicate are more likely to have positive experiences of consent.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** Do you think about what you want before you get into sexual situations and can you communicate that?

**SEX ED**

### 10. MOST YOUNG PEOPLE IN THIS STUDY THOUGHT THEIR SEX EDUCATION HAD NOT BEEN GOOD ENOUGH.

Young people are highly critical of the sex education they have received in school. Many did not recall having received any consent education at all or were unable to recall anything about it or felt that there were significant gaps. In particular, where young people repeatedly commented that their sex education had been completely heteronormative.



**QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT.** Did you talk about consent in sex education? Was what was said helpful?

## QUOTES

 "Some people could see it as a rejection or like, some men could take it – I keep saying men but primarily it is men – that sort of feel entitled to like women, it's normally women." (Young woman, bisexual)

 "I like it when people say, do you want me to do this? Do you not want me to do this?" (Young woman, heterosexual)

"Good communication is both talking and both telling each other what they want and how they feel about it" (Young man, gay) 

 "I think when it's the start of a relationship, when you don't know how serious it is yet, you are scared of scaring them off. Or being, I don't know, I don't know, being that person that, that's like, 'oh we need to talk about this', no-one wants to be that person who kind of kills the fun!" (Non-binary young person, queer) 

 "If they were maybe relaxed before and they've went a bit tense maybe ask them if they're alright, if they still kind of want to, because you've noticed that change in the person." (Young woman, lesbian)

"I don't care if it hurts their feelings 'cos they'd hurt my feelings if they went any further." (Young woman, heterosexual) 

 "The consent we got taught in school was like that tea video, it's very yes/no, black/white, whilst it's not like that in real life." (Young woman, bisexual)

## MESSAGES TO YOUNGER SELF

We asked young people if they had a message to a younger young person or to their younger self about sex and relationships. These are just a few of their responses.

 "Just straight up say it – don't beat around the bush." 

 "Work out what it is that you want so that you can communicate that to someone else."

 "Don't feel pressured to have sex because you feel that you 'should' do it or because your partner or friends are pressuring you. It's ok to wait." 

"Know it is okay to talk about sex, not just to do whatever your partner wants. Harassment is not alright!" 

 Sex can be emotionally important, not just fun. 

## RESOURCES

Resources about sexual consent:

- <https://www.gov.scot/publications/key-messages-young-people-healthy-relationships-consent-resource-professionals-working-young-people/>
- <https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life/how-to-give-and-get-consent/>

YouTube and TV resources that helped our youth advisers think about consent:

- Hannah Whitton [YOUTUBE]
- Sex Education [NETFLIX]
- I May Destroy You [BBC]

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If you want to talk confidentially to someone about the issues in this report you can call Rape Crisis Scotland's helpline at: 08088 01 03 02