

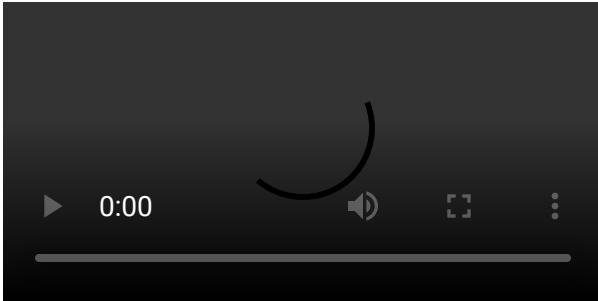
How to Talk to Kids About Sex and Consent

childmind.org/article/how-talk-kids-sex-consent-boundaries

When it comes to sex, setting boundaries and respecting them are both important

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When it comes to adolescents and sex, we now teach kids that a prerequisite for appropriate sexual activity — [and the way to avoid abuse](#) — is consent. Consent needs to be explicit, and it needs to be given repeatedly as a sexual encounter becomes more intimate.

While that concept might seem simple, many teenagers find it awkward and difficult to ask, grant or withhold consent.

One way to help kids get better at both setting and respecting boundaries is to give them lots of practice at doing both when they're younger. And for parents to address the issue directly in the context of sex when they get to be teenagers.

Even [parents who start talking about consent](#) early on may be in for their share of eye-rolling and exclamations of “Ew!” when sex becomes part of the conversation, says [David Anderson](#), PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. But that shouldn't stop parents from raising it.

“One of the big lessons we want to be sending to kids at any age is that there are two people to consider here. So often when sexual assault or [any kind of unwanted attention](#) occurs it's because the person applying the pressure is so focused on their own wants,” Dr. Anderson explains. For kids to truly understand consent, he says, they need to view others with empathy — something that doesn't always come naturally during the self-centered years of *adolescence*.

Talk about pressure

The stereotype of non-consensual sex includes a woman repeatedly saying “No,” and a man who ignores what she says and acts, perhaps violently. But the reality isn't always like that.

“When one or both parties are feeling some kind of pressure, they may end up doing something they regret,” says Dr. Anderson. Parents should address the dangerous role of pressure — feeling or applying it

— when it comes to consent.

- It's never okay to pressure someone to engage in any kind of [sexual or romantic activity](#) — or to go further or faster than they're ready for. Likewise, no one should ever pressure you to do the same.
- Peer pressure can also play a role. Kids may worry that they're "behind" their friends sexually, or feel pressure to do things they're not ready for to win approval.
- If someone is applying pressure, don't be quiet or stay put. "It's okay to say, 'You know, you're really making me feel uncomfortable, I don't want to do this,' and leave the situation," says Stephanie Dowd, PsyD, a clinical psychologist.

Paying attention to how others are feeling is an essential [part of any relationship](#), but when it comes to romantic or sexual interactions, it can mean the difference between a safe, positive encounter, and one that ends up causing harm.

Substance use and consent

"For starters, we have to acknowledge that a lot of non-consensual encounters happen in situations where one or both parties are intoxicated," says Dr. Dowd. "So if [alcohol or drugs](#) are involved, that's a warning sign right away." [Talking frankly with your child about substance use](#) is important no matter what, but, she says, parents should take special care to focus on the role it plays in a person's ability to give, or get, consent.

"This is an area where the potential for harm is high," she says, "so having hard and fast rules is important." For example:

- People who are intoxicated, asleep or otherwise impaired can't give consent — no matter what.
- When it comes to substance use, parents may be tempted to stick with "Don't do it," and leave it at that. However, when it comes to helping your child stay safe, it's important to go a little deeper. Set up a safety plan for situations where drugs or alcohol are likely to be involved. For example, your child could agree to go on the buddy system with a friend to ensure that both leave the party safely. Or you could make a plan for her to call to check in or be picked up at a specific time.
- Encourage your child to help others stay safe as well. "Don't be a bystander," says Dr. Dowd. If you notice someone is intoxicated and in an unsafe situation or being pushed to do something they don't want to do, don't ignore it. Instead, do what you can to safely help them escape and find help.

Verbal consent

Even when situations seem cut-and-dried, it's important for kids to check in with their partners and themselves throughout. Help kids avoid potentially dangerous situations by working out some questions they can use to check in with their partner. For example:

- Are you enjoying yourself?
- Are we moving too fast?
- Are you still okay with this?
- Are you comfortable with me touching you here?

"We also want kids to remember that only a resounding 'yes' equals consent," says Dr. Dowd. "Anything less committal, or less clear, is a sign that it's time to stop and check in before you continue."

Non-verbal consent

Asking questions throughout is a big part of ensuring both parties are feeling comfortable, but verbal consent isn't always enough. "It can be hard to know how you feel in the moment, especially if you like the other person, or you worry that saying no could hurt their feelings, or make the situation awkward or embarrassing," says Dr. Dowd. "It's not uncommon for people to say 'I'm fine,' when they're not." Kids should also be tuned into non-verbal cues, for example:

- Pay attention to body language. Does your partner seem physically comfortable? Are they leaning in or pulling away? Are they responding well or avoiding being touched?
- Are both people initiating sexual contact — or is it one-sided?
- Do they seem relaxed?

What *isn't* consent

Helping kids identify what isn't consent can be just as important as helping them understand what is. Examples of things that do not equal consent include:

- Flirting
- Wearing a sexy outfit
- Any answer other than a clear "yes" when asked if it's okay to continue
- The other person hasn't asked you to stop
- The other person seems like they're "into it"

Checking in with yourself

And finally, kids should also be asking *themselves* these same questions during any kind of sexual or romantic encounter. Dr. Dowd says parents should encourage kids to check in with themselves frequently. "We want them to be saying, 'Is this something I actually want? Do I feel safe and respected? Am I feeling any kind of pressure to do something I'm not ready for, from this other person or from my friends?'" "

Helping kids develop a mental checklist of questions to fall back on will help them navigate difficult situations, but above all parents should make sure kids understand that it's always okay to say "stop" at any time, for any reason — even if they aren't sure what that reason is right away.

Talking to boys

Consent is an important thing for all kids to learn, but for boys the lesson is often more complicated — and more vital. From a very young age boys and girls begin to get different — and often conflicting — messages about sex, and what is (and isn't) acceptable behavior.

"As a society we have a terrible habit of telling girls, 'You need to learn how to stay safe,' and stopping there," says Dr. Dowd, "but that falsely places the entire burden of having a consensual encounter on girls, and implies that if it goes wrong, they're at fault."

Conversely, she says, boys get the message that sex — having it, or getting it — is tied to being confident, and powerful, and masculine. For boys, especially during their teen years, these stereotypes are often backed up by media and, even more intensely, by peer pressures. In movies and television shows men are frequently seen strategizing how to trick women into bed. And not taking no for an answer is often portrayed as a successful, and sometimes even romantic, strategy.

These conflicting messages can often set the stage for situations where a girl's preferences and boundaries are seen as unimportant even before she opens her mouth. Parents, says Dr. Dowd, can help by taking special care to talk to their sons about respectful behavior, and emphasizing their role – and responsibility – in consent.

- Be clear about what confidence *really* looks like, says Dr. Dowd. “Confident people listen and respect the needs of their partner. Continuing to push when someone says ‘stop’ isn’t cool or powerful, it’s creepy and dangerous.”
- Don’t mince words. Talk frankly with your son about the emotional, personal, social and legal consequences of sexual misconduct.
- Call out negative behavior when you see it. Whether it’s a man catcalling a woman on the street, or a non-consensual scene in a movie or TV show.
- “Consent is everyone’s business,” says Dr. Anderson, “and it’s especially important for boys to hold one another accountable.” This could be as simple as saying, “Not cool!” when one of his buddies makes a gross comment about a girl at school, or as serious as stopping a friend from taking advantage of someone who’s intoxicated – then helping her get home safely.

Call for back-up

Talking about sex and consent is vital, but it may not be easy for all parents. If you’re uncomfortable, or unsure of what to say try calling in reinforcements. Reach out to a friend or relative who’s good at dealing with sensitive subjects for advice, or ask your child’s guidance counselor for tips on getting the conversation started. For more resources on talking to kids and teens about consent, check out [Teach Consent](#), [RAINN](#) or any of these [books](#).

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