

# Teaching Consent for Healthy Relationships

Why sexual literacy is an important part of the new Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum

## Introduction

There's nothing like controversy and current events to kickstart conversations! It seems we're getting agitated about consent. And we've moved into an era of extremes – some parents are fighting for better Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), while others are looking to protect children's innocence by not mentioning certain aspects of sexuality. This need, or fear, to protect childhood appears to be based on the idea that there is something corrupting about sex. But sex is not the problem; rather it's how we talk about relationships and sexuality to children that's causing controversy.

Starting from the premise that ignorance is not the same as innocence, knowledge protects children from being vulnerable to abuse by or of others. If talking about sexuality is stigmatised, controlled, or forbidden, it doesn't mean young people don't experiment with being sexual. In societies where holistic styles of RSE are delivered, there are fewer teen pregnancies, sexual assaults, and sexually transmitted infections among under-20-year-olds (Shutt, 2023).

As children, we wanted to know how babies were made; as teenagers, we wanted to know how to be good at sex, to avoid embarrassing mistakes. The only thing that has changed is that if we don't answer those questions for today's young people, there is now a vast array of less-than-savoury sources accessible on phones. If that is their source, we miss an opportunity to share how to express and explore sexuality in healthy and positive ways, when or if they ever want to. The messages from pornography and social media appear to be making it almost impossible for young people to talk openly about what they want, don't want, or might be willing to try, when it comes to being intimate.



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**Internet access means that the days of 'if we don't talk about it, it doesn't happen' are gone. This article outlines how education on consent and sexual literacy can help young people make informed decisions that respect themselves and others and lead to healthy attitudes and relationships.**

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## Growing up

Growing up includes establishing independence and creating relationships beyond the family. Adolescents move from the relatively secure and known world of primary school to the completely different social world of secondary school, 'dumped into a society of peers' (Coleman, 1961). From being taken to and from social events, they begin organising socialising between themselves – unstructured and unsupervised. Parents soon don't know many of their friends' names or who their child is with at any one time.

Hence, school and all that happens there becomes a vital source of support and non-judgemental information to counter all the misinformation that teenagers are exposed to. Most of the ideas they buy into about how to be male or female get heightened by media that portray girls' biggest asset as sexual attractiveness while penalising them for expressing their sexuality; many boys, with no information on the importance of consent, feel pushed to see their role as sexually aggressive:

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*Rather than teaching girls about pleasure, we teach them fear and self-hatred. And rather than teaching boys about responsibility, we teach them suspicion and slut-shaming. (Penny, 2014)*

This becomes even more complicated for non-heterosexuals, who have few, if any, examples of how to gradually, openly, and honestly explore expressing their sexuality that doesn't border on kink. Even when non-binary young people find high-profile role models, these may be miles away from their own reality. One's orientation or identity isn't the only deciding factor – it's about being able to express desires and boundaries, while learning to read and care about the other person's experience.

*I wish we could view consent as something that is . . . more about care for the other person, the entire person, both during an encounter and after, when we are often at our most vulnerable. (Sender, 2018)*

Even as an adult, it's not easy to speak up about consent. The essence of respectful, healthy, and positive intimacy lies in everyone being able to express their desires, likes, and needs, and considering the thoughts, feelings, and values of others without letting their own be compromised to fulfil someone else's expectations. That is a huge ask if adults are not prepared to discuss any of this with young people. There certainly isn't much space to find useful, factual, non-judgemental information from peers or the internet, which again highlights the importance of school.

## Learning sexual literacy

Active\* Consent, and others, create resources for the Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) programme to build 'sexual literacy', addressing:

- » how to communicate for mutual consent and enjoyment
- » how sexuality is individual and can change throughout a lifetime
- » how some people are very active in their sexual self-expression, while others prefer not to express it at all
- » how every choice is healthy and normal as long as no one is being hurt and everyone involved is freely giving their clear, ongoing consent.

Sexual literacy is about understanding the different components of sexuality, from sexual feelings to anatomy and physiology, consent to contraception. It's about understanding all the factors that shape one's sex life and that allow for healthy choices that will improve overall wellbeing. Feeling nervous or insecure is normal at first. If sex is a journey of discovery, it helps to have an idea of where someone would like to go by understanding their body. Knowing one's own boundaries is so important.

We need the confidence to share with our young people that taking things slowly and letting tension and desire build is what lovemaking is all about. It would be great if young people were confident to communicate 'This is my first/second time', 'I may change my mind, and I need you to be okay with that', and partners listened. Media creates the fiction that people will know telepathically what another person wants, but in the real world, it's totally okay to ask.

Young people nowadays, as soon as they go online, are bombarded with inappropriate videos that can alter or create ideas of what behaviours are okay for them and others. Our best line of defence is to repeat our values, both in school and at home. We want them to make informed decisions as teenagers and adults, respecting themselves and others, and having happy and healthy relationships. The days of 'If we don't talk about it, it doesn't happen' are gone. We have a short window to instil safe and healthy behaviours; if we don't, internet algorithms and social media will do it for us.

## REFERENCES

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