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Teaching Young People about Consent

by Elizabeth Schroeder, EdD, MSW

Over the past few years, the subject of couples obtaining active consent from each other before having sex has received increased attention in the media and on college campuses nationwide, with good reason. Sexual assault is all too common, especially among young adults. In a culture that too often deprives adolescents of sex education, young people do not always understand what assault and consent actually are, let alone how to talk to partners about sex. We continue to hear from those who are accused of rape or sexual assault that they didn't know the other person wanted to stop, or that they have heard that when someone says "no" they really are just flirting and want to be coaxed into saying "yes."



Some argue that changing laws and policies is the answer. Requiring active or affirmative consent by policy, as some states have done, is a positive step -- but is it enough? College is too late to begin: as commentators have pointed out, many youth establish sexual beliefs and behaviors before college (Abramson & Dautch, 2014), and dating violence is common among younger teens as well (Kann et al., 2014). What's more, positive changes on college campuses don't reach all youth. We can do better by teaching consent early and often.

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October 2015

Saying “Yes” Rather Than Saying “No”

In 2014, California became the first state to pass a law designed to remove any of the guess work: any college or university receiving public funds in that state must have a sexual assault policy that specifically requires an active statement of consent by all partners involved in a sexual encounter (National Public Radio, 2015). Other states have followed or are considering similar legislation (Affirmativeconsent.com, 2015).

What does affirmative consent look like? That’s when things become a bit complicated. According to the California law:

“Affirmative consent” means affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. It is the responsibility of each person involved in the sexual activity to ensure that he or she has the affirmative consent of the other or others to engage in the sexual activity. Lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent. Affirmative consent must be ongoing throughout a sexual activity and can be revoked at any time. The existence of a dating relationship between the persons involved, or the fact of past sexual relations between them, should never by itself be assumed to be an indicator of consent (California State Legislature, 2014).

These laws are designed to eliminate any confusion by requiring clear communication between couples about their sexual relationships and boundaries within those relationships. In practice, however, this can be difficult.

The disheartening reality is that sexual assault and harassment have very deep roots in gender expectations and self-image. Boys and men are socialized from the earliest ages that they are supposed to have sex as early as possible, with as many (female) partners as possible. Girls and women are still socialized from the earliest ages that they are supposed to get a (male) partner, and do whatever they can to keep that partner. While having policies may help at a much higher level, they really don’t do much to change the attitudes and beliefs of a culture that remains strongly invested in perpetuating the attitude that “boys will be boys” and the belief that girls and women should be the moral gatekeepers of heterosexual sexual interactions.

We’re Already Teaching About Consent... Kind Of...

The idea of teaching consent is nothing new, we just don’t tend to call it that. We teach young people about boundaries from very young ages. Phrases like “hands on your own body” and “hands are not for hitting” are repeated in classroom and daycare settings as well as at home. Children are taught they must share with others and should ask before taking something that belongs to someone else. They are taught how to tolerate disappointment – that sometimes they will be told, “No you cannot do this,” and other times “Yes, you can.”

Somewhere along the way, however, we begin to teach these concepts less frequently and explicitly. Middle school age, around 11 – 14, is a crucial time to reinforce earlier childhood messages and teaching, particularly about sexuality and relationships, as adolescents’ sexual awareness and interest begins to expand and deepen with the normal changes of puberty. Yet during this particularly vulnerable time in a young



person's life, we make three key mistakes:

- **We touch them less**, even though they continue to need safe, appropriate physical contact at this time;
- **We talk with them less**, even though they urgently need our guidance around many things, including sexuality and relationships;
- **We think they know more than they do about sexuality**, when they are only at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what they need to know about sexuality and relationships – let alone about giving and receiving active consent.

Given these realities, is it any wonder that the incidence of relationship abuse and sexual assault among young people is so high? We are letting them learn about sexuality and relationships from the media (specifically porn), from peers, and from other people in their lives who are more interested in reinforcing gender role stereotypes than they are in creating sexually healthy young people who will grow into sexually healthy adults. This must change if we want to make a difference in the rates of sexual abuse and assault.

We can, however, make a difference. Here's how.

How Should We Be Teaching about Consent?

Tip 1: Start early, and keep the conversations going. This applies to many sexuality-related topics, but is especially important when it comes to sexual abuse and assault prevention. In addition to teaching children what to do if someone touches them inappropriately, we need to teach them far more clearly that they cannot do this to others.

Tip 2: Do not require children to hug or kiss others – including relatives. Children need to know that no one has the right to touch them in ways they don't want to be touched. While it is understandable that we don't want Grandma's feelings hurt, requiring an unwilling child to hug or kiss her goodbye is inconsistent and confusing. The message that all people have the right to say whether and when they want to be touched by another person must start early and be consistent.

Tip 3: Directly connect lessons about friendship to romantic and sexual relationships. With middle school young people, we can use lessons about respectful friendships to teach explicitly about how these characteristics apply to romantic and sexual relationships. Middle schoolers remain concrete thinkers who need help connecting the dots – especially about something as abstract as relationships and consent.

Tip 4: Reinforce that consent applies to all genders and sexual orientations. It is true that the vast majority of cases – reported cases – of sexual assault and abuse involve a cisgender boy or man assaulting a cisgender girl or woman. We cannot, however, exclude people in same-sex relationships, cases where girls or women



are abusive to male partners, or cases involving transgender individuals. Replace language like “boys shouldn’t hit girls” with “no one should hit any other person.”

Having written that, however...

Tip 5: When talking about consent, talk about gender. Yes, abuse and assault can happen by anyone, to anyone. But it’s also true that society’s deep investment in retaining gender role stereotypes prompts some to think that sex without consent is okay (“When girls say no, they really mean yes”), and some to believe that it is more important to be in a relationship with a person who does not respect boundaries than it is to be alone or unwanted.

Tip 6: Integrate consent throughout other lessons rather than simply teaching it as its own topic. Repetition is key to retaining information. If consent is treated as a separate subject in a school sexuality education program, it will likely be forgotten soon after. Instead, introduce consent early on and keep bringing it up in many subject areas, not just in sexuality education. Addressing power and control is at the heart of teaching about consent – and school classes and culture provide many opportunities to do this. Use the word “consent” again and again to help it become part of daily conversation.

Tip 7: Help youth understand that a person who is incapacitated cannot give consent. A person who has been drinking or using drugs, or who is asleep, may not be in a condition to consent. Ethically – and in many states, legally – a person who is unable to understand what is happening cannot be said to have given consent.

Tip 8: Give skills for saying “yes” as you teach young people how to say “no.” The vast majority of lessons relating to sexual boundaries are biased toward refusing sexual behaviors. Young people need to be taught that relationships, like many things in life, are not always all-or-nothing. Teaching them how to say “No, but...” will help them to navigate relationships throughout their lives. “No, I am not ready to have sex – but I do like when we make out. The farthest I’m willing to go right now is this” clearly defines a boundary while not making the other person feel like the relationship is over.

Conclusion

The amount of sexuality education young people receive in the United States is typically too little, too late. The amount of education relating to sexual consent is almost nonexistent and happens even later, if it happens at all. If we truly want young people to learn to treat others with respect; if we truly want to support them in growing to be sexually healthy adults; if we truly understand that youth have as much right to give their consent to sexual relationships as they do to refuse sex, we must start discussions earlier and keep them going throughout their childhood, adolescence, and young adult years. ★



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The ACT for Youth Center of Excellence is a partnership among Cornell University Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research, Cornell University Cooperative Extension of New York City, the Center for School Safety at Ulster BOCES, and the University of Rochester Medical Center.