



ParentingNI  
Supporting Families

“Is this okay?”  
Talking to Teens about  
Consent

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## Introduction

“Consent” has been a major news story both locally in Northern Ireland and more generally in the world recently. While it is a new issue, high-profile events have brought it into sharp focus for many parents. However, as children and young people gain easier and more diverse access to information regarding sexual activity, parents are often at a loss as to how to best talk to their children about what consent really means.

Formal education often covers the more biological aspects of this topic, such as how pregnancy occurs or sexually-transmitted diseases. The Department of Education does provide guidelines for relationships and sexual education (RSE) for schools, but the implementation of this is up to the school. So, although teenagers will get some advice and learning from school, explaining the more intricate, delicate social aspects of relationships and what is – or is not – okay is the responsibility of parents which can be tricky for many.

While it is natural that parents should have some oversight of what their child knows and when, many find it embarrassing or challenging to have a “talk” about consent with their children. Clashes in morals, ideas and viewpoints are common.

This report will outline how consent is defined, and give suggestions about talking to teenagers about consent.

## Legality

Firstly – age. The Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 specifies that the “age of consent” is 16. The exact legal definition of giving consent in the order is:

“A person consents if he agrees by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice.”

Legally, any sexual activity with someone aged under 16 cannot be legally defined as consensual. This is very important for parents to make clear to their young people – especially if they are in a relationship around the age of consent. The NSPCC (2018) notes that the laws are not designed to be used for under-16s who engage in mutually consensual activities.

However, this simply means that police are unlikely to pursue such a conviction, not that it is legal. The age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland is 10, meaning anyone above that age could theoretically be prosecuted for a crime. Parents should talk to their children, especially if they are in and around the age of consent. If one party is aged 18 or over, the risks are far greater, even if their partner is 16 or 17. The penalties for sexual activity involving someone under 13 are very severe, as they cannot give consent under any circumstances.

When parents talk to their children regarding the age of consent, it is unhelpful to simply attempt to scare them with potential legal consequences. Instead, a better approach might be to talk to them, and ensure that they understand how the law works, and what they can or cannot do without serious risk. It is best to address the issue head on – but do so in a way that suggests that you value and respect your child. Make sure to answer their questions as honestly as you can – if you aren't sure of answers, seek them out together.

## Talking to Children – How do I explain consent to very young children?

When to have “the talk”, and what to include is a challenge every parent goes through. Every child is different. While your own parental experiences are useful, modern sexuality and sexual behaviour may be quite different than your own experiences. Many parents struggle with what they should or shouldn't share with children, particularly those who are very young. Research suggests though, that it is almost never too early to discuss consent.

The most basic principle of consent is simple – that there are two people involved and their wishes are equally valid. Therefore, if one person doesn't wish to participate in an activity, then the other shouldn't try to force them. This applies to sexual activity, but equally it is relevant to play or other age-appropriate activities.

While young children are not ready for this information with regards to sexual consent, they can understand this in terms of other activities. Hamam (2017) notes that even toddlers can be taught basic principles regarding consent. It is natural for young children to want to kiss or hug friends or strangers. Parents should ensure that they encourage their children to ask if their friends want to hug goodbye. Additionally, it is helpful for parents to lead by example not forcing them to kiss or hug a relative or friend if it is clear they would prefer not to.

The point of these exercises is not to dampen the affection between a child and the parent. Instead, it is to allow the child to gain an early understanding that affection – even when it is meant with positivity – is something that involves two-way consent, and about teaching them about choice, not being forced to do something.

When they are a little older and more ready, it is useful to start to discuss these issues with children. Wilson et al. (2010) noted that parents who “had started talking to their children about sex when their children were very young, with issues like boys' and girls' anatomy and where babies come from” found it easier to discuss sexual consent later. By beginning to speak about these issues, parents can ease into more serious or difficult conversations later in life.

Another important aspect of talking about consent to young children is making sure they understand that there are areas of their own bodies that are private. This helps to keep them safe by explaining boundaries. Making sure that they know that people

have parts of their bodies that are not to be touched or seen without consent also teaches them early about what is okay for them to do. There are a number of excellent resources to support parents with this – for example the NSPCC’s “Pants” campaign.

In the end, only the parent themselves can know how ready their child is to talk about these issues. However, discussing giving and getting consent in a non-sexual manner early on, and stressing the importance of consent can be helpful in defining attitudes later in life.

## What do they know? – Teens

There are aspects of consent that are relevant regardless of gender. These become acutely important as your child develops into adolescence. Coy et al. (2013) found that:

“Young people’s understandings of consent in the abstract are relatively clear, but when applied to real situations, gendered codes of behaviour and victim blame change how they make sense of sexual negotiation”

This means that teenagers often understand that consent is important, but struggle to see how this applies to them. The common idea is that girls are the “gatekeepers” and boys are “initiators”. This means that boys are imagined to be on a permanent quest to engage in sexual activity, while girls are responsible for preventing “immoral” behaviour. This is reinforced by popular culture, social circles and society as a whole.

Jacobson (2018) notes that often, conversations between parents and girls or boys about sex and consent are dramatically different. Girls are told that they “need to keep themselves safe”, but this puts the burden of consent purely on the girl. By contrast, “boys get the message that sex — having it, or getting it — is tied to being confident, and powerful, and masculine”.

However, this can be damaging.

For girls, it is disempowering. They are taught confusing ideas that their job is to “just say no”, but at the same time experiencing real-life situations where they find it difficult (or dangerous) to do so. Burkett & Hamilton (2012) noted “the contradictory ways in which [girls] perceptions of their personal sexual agency ... contrasted to their constrained experiences of having sex”.

Allowing your teenage daughter to believe that this is the truth about consent shames her for desiring sex. It also causes her to potentially blame herself for “not saying no” to an encounter she did not desire, but felt pressured into. This can have long-lasting psychological impacts, for example Donde (2017) found that “women who had experienced rape blamed their perpetrators the least, whereas they blamed themselves and society the most”. Part of this is related to the victim’s understanding

of consent – women who “had not been as clear in refusing sex blamed themselves more” (Donde, 2017). Clearly, this self-blame is not only destructive to the victim, but perpetuates the myth that consent means “not saying no”, rather than being told “yes”.

For young boys, this often works in the reverse. Boys can feel shamed if they do not relentlessly seek sexual activity. According to a 2003 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, one in three teen boys feel pressurised to have sex. Potard et al (2008) found that “Boys felt more pressure than girls did” to have sex, and that 42% of teens studied had felt either moderate or significant pressures to have sex.

Sexual activity is tied to self-image and confidence with boys. Hilton (2001) suggested that “low self-esteem is one of the causes of disaffection with school and the retreat into macho attitudes towards girls and towards sexual relationships”. The result of these attitudes is that boys often fail to seek consistent, enduring and repeated consent for sexual activity. This also increases the risk that boys will not report abuse, because they think people will assume that “they must have wanted it”.

With these contradictory and damaging societal ideas about consent, it is easy to see how parents might struggle to discuss it. Not only do parents have to overcome the embarrassment of talking about sex and consent, but they must also break through cultural ideas that have become embedded over generations.

## How to talk to your teenager

Thankfully, parents are not alone in this. There are a number of organisations that can help plan the best way to talk to your teenage children about consent. Once your child is a teenager, there are a number of strategies that can work. These are:

- Talk to your teen: Ask their opinions on consent. You might want to use a high-profile event as a starting point. You might ask “Did you hear about that in the news? What do you think about that?” By starting the discussion by asking their views, you avoid them feeling like this is a lecture.
- Talk about what is and is not consent. Make sure that they understand how important verbal, consistent and repeated consent is. Make sure both boys and girls know that flirting, clothing and “not being told no” do not necessarily mean consent is given.
- Encourage your children to make sure others are okay too – talk to them about what they might do if one of their friends seemed to be in an uncomfortable situation. Ask them what they might do if their friend was the one acting irresponsibly.
- Eliminate self-blame. Tell them that they always have a right to be respected, and that consent needs to be sought and given by both parties.

- Make sure they understand how to say no, and how to recognise when someone else might be saying no.
- Get rid of notions about gatekeepers and initiators. Make sure your teen knows that it is normal for both boys and girls to want to have sex, but that is also okay if they don't want to.
- Ask for support! There are plenty of organisations that can help you.

Keep in mind that your teen will most likely not get this information from school. If parents shy away to have a conversation about consent with their teens, the likelihood is that they will learn about it from friends or the internet.

This conversation is awkward and difficult, but it is also highly important.

Contact **Parenting NI** for more support and guidance on consent or any other parenting issue **Parentingni.org / 08088010722**