



PERSPECTIVES ON 'CONSENT EDUCATION'

'Consent' education has emerged as a strategy to address the problem of sexual exploitation, abuse, harassment and assault experienced across the community in schools, workplaces, and social and intimate settings. **Parents of primary age children** may be wondering how they should respond to the calls for mandated 'consent education'. Your questions might include:

- at what age should I talk to my child about 'consent'?
- what should my child know and understand about sex before I talk about 'consent'?
- will talking about 'consent' give my child the impression I am giving him/her permission to have sex?

Your starting point is always the best interests of your child, the age and stage of their development (physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual) and your job as their parent to 'be the parent', ie: to exercise your judgement as the responsible adult and to provide appropriately protective guidance and boundaries.

The following perspectives are offered to help you consider the bigger picture, of which 'consent' is just a part.

Readiness

Pre-teen children are in a stage of development known as 'latency' where sexual awareness is dormant. It's a vital phase when 6 to 12 year-olds ideally channel their energy into non-sexual development – learning and practising all kinds of other skills (physical, coordination, mental, social, etc) they'll need in life.

Yes, physical maturity does come early for some of these children, particularly girls, however mentally and psychologically they are still immature. Primary age children are only just learning about foundational concepts such as puberty and reproduction. They are not ready or able to get their heads around a discussion about 'consent' to sexual activity.

They would have to know and understand the full nature of what they were consenting or not consenting to, as well as imagine how it might impact them afterwards, next day, next month and 10 years down the track. This is abstract thinking of a high order which most teenagers and even many adults struggle with.

In order to understand the big picture surrounding 'consent', they would also have to know and understand higher order concepts including legal ramifications, sexual pleasure, sexual assault and harassment, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy decisions.

Imagine loading a 40kg weight on a 9 year-old and expecting the work out will make him or her stronger... In fact, the child won't cope. The task is beyond them and damage will be the result. Maturity and readiness really are important concepts to consider.

Foundation stones

Rather than opening up a discussion about 'consent', teaching some foundational concepts is more appropriate and more beneficial for this age group. Lay the groundwork for a healthy adult understanding of sexual relationships as they mature.

What foundational concepts?

Emotional mentoring –

- help them recognize, express and meet their emotional needs. This builds self-awareness and trust that their feelings are important and listened to
- teach them empathy for the feelings of others. Begin by pointing out what you observe the people around you might be feeling, progress to asking your child to observe and take a guess at what the people they see might be feeling. Empathy is the basis of respect.
- teach them how to find positive ways to cope with anger, anxiety, sadness, etc. Emotional wellness is a foundation for future healthy intimacy.
- model these in your own life.



Respect for boundaries –

- the concept of ‘No means no’ can be taught to young children without discussing sex
- don’t allow your child to use ‘pester power’ with you and get away with it. Learn to say no and stick to it. Don’t teach kids that if you pester long enough you can eventually get what you want.

Body safety –

- use the correct names for private body parts: penis, scrotum, vulva, vagina, breasts, anus, buttocks
- talk about the differences between appropriate (OK) and inappropriate (not OK) touch
- explain that it is ok for the child to say no to hugs from others, even relatives. Give child alternatives to suggest, such as a high five, if a relative is expecting a hug and they don’t want to give it.

Support Networks –

- explain that there is nothing so awful we can’t talk about it to an adult we trust
- encourage child to develop a support network of 5 trusted adults to call upon if feeling anxious, worried, scared, etc.

Sex Education -

- teach them about their bodies, how they develop and how babies begin
- teach them that their bodies are wonderfully made and worthy of respect, as are the bodies of others – I deserve to be cared for and in turn I should care for others.

Resources to assist in the above:

Emotional wellness and resilience: *Resilient Kids Book* from Open Doors – <https://opendoors.com.au/catalogue>

Sex education: *Wonder of Living Book* from Open Doors – babies & birth, puberty & growing up
<https://opendoors.com.au/catalogue>

Body Safety: Protect Young Minds - <https://www.protectyoungminds.org>, and

I Said No! A Kid-to-kid Guide to Keeping Private Parts Private by Kimberly King: (available Amazon)

Further thoughts that may resonate with you:

Sexual intimacy and values –

- Elevating ‘consent’ in the cultural conversation promotes acceptance of sex as transactional rather than mutual self-giving
- a consent model perpetuates a ‘hunter-prey’ model of relating
- a consent model implies sex is ‘good’ if both parties consent to it. This may not be the case where ‘consent’ is obtained through continued pressure, or by the exercise of unequal power, or where one party is cognitively immature or emotionally needy and thus vulnerable to giving unreasoned or dubious consent.

Pornography and Consent – *extract from an article from Melinda Tankard Reist of Collective Shout.*

“Consent education won’t be effective if women are not first seen as human and worthy of dignity and respect. All the best intentions and efforts cannot compete with the world’s biggest department of education: pornography. The porn industry is a mammoth dispenser of sexualised violence and misogyny; it is the world’s most powerful sexual groomer. Boys see girls as something to act-out on rather than fully engage with... the porn industry takes pre-existing harmful codes of masculinity and entitlement and turbo-charges them.”

Read in full: https://www.collectiveshout.org/why_consent_doesn_t_stand_a_chance_against_porn_culture

Be ready to teach the facts of sexual consent by the time your child commences secondary school

Young people need good information to make good decisions. You don’t have to teach anything that is against your values. Comfortable kids come from families with clear values. Ultimately, children learn most from what they see, not what they hear. We need to role model respect and care in our marriages, our friendships...in all relationships. The very best role modelling is the way you treat your child. In that relationship, you create a standard of respect that they should have for themselves and for others.