

## Sexual Relationships and Consent

Trust and respect are the foundations of a relationship. Trust is not just about lying; you should also be able to trust your partner never to hurt you; there should NEVER be any sort of hitting in a relationship. Respect is not just about respecting your boundaries (eg reading your mail/texts/etc. permission) but also is about how you speak to your partner and how you speak about them to others. Healthy relationships do not include hurtful criticism, demeaning speech, etc.

Sex is most enjoyable when it is between two people who trust and respect one another and care for one another. Sex should be fun and pain-free. Both parties must consent to have sex and YOU CAN NOT CONSENT IF YOU ARE DRINKING OR USING DRUGS. If you do decide to have sex, ALWAYS USE A CONDOM! Sexually transmitted diseases are not prevented by other methods of birth control! And remember, "No" does not mean "convince me." For more about specific ways consent can be negotiated, see the excellent article attached by Dr. Vrangalova.

One in 5 women are victims of attempted or completed sexual assault while in college.

Things you can do if you have been sexually assaulted:

1. Call 911 if you're in immediate danger or injured
2. Reach out to someone you trust...you don't have to go through this alone....
3. Contact the police to report the assault; it is a crime!
4. Go to a hospital or clinic to get a "rape kit" to collect evidence even if you have not decided to report the assault to the police - the evidence can be used later. Also, you may want to consider medical treatments (emergency birth control, screening for sexually transmitted disease, etc.)
5. Contact your local sexual assault center to seek counseling
6. Call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673

## Everything You Need to Know About Consent That You Never Learned in Sex Ed

What it looks like, what it sounds like, how to give it, and how to get it. By Zhana Vrangalova, PhD

Over the past couple of years, we have started emphasizing the importance of sexual consent more than ever before in U.S. history. But what often gets left out of these discussions is how exactly you go about the business of obtaining and providing consent in real-life sexual situations. And especially, how to do it without the much-feared "ruining of the mood."

There's more than one way to approach consensual sex. The debate is still raging over where exactly the line of consensual sex versus sexual assault should be drawn: Some insist that the old "only no means no" approach is adequate, which is the idea that unless you explicitly say "no," you are implicitly consenting to whatever is being done to your body. Others argue that we need a new standard of "only yes means yes," which is the idea that unless you explicitly say "yes," you are not giving consent. But regardless of where you think the *legal* lines should be drawn, we can all agree that we want both ourselves and our partners to be enthusiastic about any sexual encounter. That is to say that every sexual encounter is ideally met with *enthusiastic* consent, rather than a situation where someone feels obligated or pressured to say yes, despite not being totally excited about participating.

There is no single approach for negotiating enthusiastic consent that will work for every person in every situation, but here are some things you can do to ensure that both you and your partner will be happy and comfortable with the physical activity you engage in.

### 1. Obtaining Enthusiastic Consent

The person initiating the sexual encounter, or initiating the escalation of sexual intimacy in the sexual encounter has a lot of responsibility in making sure the other person feels safe, comfortable, and is truly enjoying themselves. Here's what you need to know about obtaining enthusiastic consent.

### 2. Avoid partners who are vulnerable

When people are intoxicated, sexually inexperienced, in a new situation, or acting recklessly or immature, their physical and/or mental capacity to make informed sexual decisions is impaired or limited. The more vulnerable they are — and the more vulnerable than you they are — the greater the risk they will feel coerced or regretful the next day. If they are particularly vulnerable (like heavily intoxicated, asleep, unconscious, or not of legal age), they are not legally capable of providing consent, and sex with them is by default sexual assault, no matter how eager they seem.

3. **Establish reciprocal interest before you start thinking about physical touch.**

Part of this is the good old art of flirting and building erotic tension: Are they making eye contact, smiling at you, leaning in, chatting excitedly... Don't just come up to someone out of nowhere and ask them if you can kiss them, or worse, touch them. The other part of this has to do with trying to ensure your partner's intentions and expectations of the sexual encounter are in line with yours. If you just want a casual hookup, but they are hoping for a relationship, try to find out if they'd be OK with it.

4. **Negotiate consent verbally.**

Explicitly asking for permission is the most obvious way to escalate to physical touch, and the one most commonly discussed when enthusiastic consent is brought up: "May I kiss/touch/take your shirt off..." "Is it OK if I \_\_\_\_?" For safest results, it's good to ask permission for any escalation in intimacy, so a permission to kiss someone is not an automatic permission to touch them below the belt. This is an effective method that is preferred by some people, but it is also the one many people feel is a potential mood-killer.

Luckily, there are other ways to verbally obtain consent. Instead of asking for permission, you can offer your partner something you'd like to do for them. "I would love to kiss you/give you a massage/take your shirt off... Would you like that?" Or, alternatively, you could invite them to do something to/for you: "I'd love a massage. Would you like to give me a back rub?"

Another way to do this is to tell your partner what you plan on doing for/with/to them before you actually do it, an approach known as safe-porting. That gives them a chance to process that info and decide whether they are on board with your ideas. For example, if you're making out with your clothes on, you can say "I'm gonna slide my hand underneath your shirt..." then wait for their reaction — verbal or nonverbal — before you decide whether you should actually do it or not.

5. **Establish "blanket consent" ahead of time.**

One strategy for people who are more experienced is what sex educator [Kenneth Play](#) calls "blanket consent." Explicitly agreeing on a "only no means no" policy. At some point — either before you start anything physical or after you've already obtained consent for a few individual acts — tell your partner something like, "I'd like the freedom to hook up without continually asking permission for each individual act. But consent is really important to me, so I'd like you to tell me if something doesn't feel good, if you want me to slow down or stop. Does this work for you? Do you feel comfortable saying 'no' when you want to say 'no'? Or would you rather me check in with you more regularly? Totally cool either way."

This is for people who are more sexually experienced, because it assumes that both partners know exactly what they (don't) want and are assertive enough to communicate that. While this is an ideal we should all strive to, in reality, many people are not ready for an agreement like this. I would caution against taking a blanket consent approach with partners who are in any way vulnerable (see point #1). Remember that at any point, no matter what you agreed to, you or your partner can say no or change your mind about what you already established.

6. **Negotiate consent nonverbally.**

Some people argue that consent must always be verbal, that trying to decipher body language is just too uncertain, too much room for error. Indeed, trying to negotiate consent without any words is riskier: Unlike spoken language, not everybody is good at reading body language, and not everyone is good at "speaking" body language.

That said, there are some partners and some situations where you can successfully negotiate consent nonverbally, but it requires a lot more experience, carefulness, and perceptiveness. The basic rule is build it up slowly, and get continued, reciprocated, and enthusiastic responses before you escalate to each subsequent intimate act. Like, don't just grab someone's butt or thigh right away; start with touch that is noninvasive, like briefly touching their hand, patting their back or arm, lightly grazing their knee with yours (and all of these should come only after you've already established basic mutual interest, see point #2). Then, and this is absolutely critical, read their body language (or verbal response) very carefully. Are they responding with a smile, leaning in closer, letting out a little sigh, reciprocating with a similar touch, saying "your hand feels so soft"? If so, that usually means "yes, continue." Are they pulling away, freezing in fear, do they seem uncomfortable, or do they not respond in any sort of way? Those are all the nonverbal equivalent of a "no" and you should stop touching them. If their body language is ambiguous, or if you're not quite sure what it is saying, don't assume it's saying what you want it to be saying! Defer to one of the verbal consent options instead. And in general, for best and safest results, combine nonverbal consent with verbal consent options.

**7. Encourage your partner to say "no" (as well as "yes") at any point.**

Regardless of the primary method of obtaining consent you choose to take, you can always add this to the mix. Some time early in the physical encounter, pause for a moment and say something like what author Michael Ellsberg says: "I want you badly, but I'm also committed to you feeling totally safe and comfortable with me. So if anything I do with you makes you feel even slightly uncomfortable, I want you to say 'Stop' or 'Slow down' immediately and I'll stop or slow down."

**8. Err on the side of caution.**

If you're not sure whether your partner is providing enthusiastic consent, err on the side of caution — especially if you're hooking up with a new partner, or someone more vulnerable than you. General rules of thumb: Only take enthusiastic "yes" (either verbal or nonverbal) as "yes." Take "no," "maybe," and doing nothing all as no; even take a hesitant "yes" as no. If they seem hesitant, give them time and space to make a decision without pressure. Say something like, "You seem hesitant right now, why don't you think it over and maybe we'll do that next/some other time." There will be other opportunities.

**9. Providing Enthusiastic Consent**

Most of the conversations around consent revolve around obtaining consent, placing all the responsibility in the hands of the person initiating the action. But in every sexual encounter, each of us has just as much responsibility to provide continuous enthusiastic consent as we have to obtain it. It is important to let your partner know you are really into it — and you have to be completely honest about it. You must own your "yes" as well as your "no."

**10. Share your intentions and limitations.**

What are you looking for in this scenario? If you wouldn't be hooking up unless this had potential to be more than a hookup, let your partner know. If you wouldn't be doing this if they had another partner, ask them whether they're single. Don't assume that just because you want or don't want something that the other person is on the same page.

**11. Let your partner know what kind of consent works for you.** And do this before or as soon as things start turning sexual. Are you the kind of person who likes to take things slow, be asked verbally before any escalation of physical closeness, and checked in with often? Tell them that. If you're new to sex, or with a new partner, this might be the way to go. Or do you prefer the more traditional "only no means no" approach? Say "Feel free to explore my body without asking. I'll let you know if something is uncomfortable." But keep in mind, giving people this type of blanket consent carries the responsibility of actually saying "no" when you want them to stop.

**12. Provide continuous positive feedback.**

Provide continued "yes" feedback. You can do this verbally, by saying things like "yes," "that feels good," "I like that," and by telling your partner how and where to touch you. Or you can do it nonverbally, by touching your partner, returning their kisses, taking their clothes off, and showing them how and where to touch you.

**13. Learn how to convey "no" effectively and get comfortable doing it.**

Saying "no" is not easy; it can be awkward, uncomfortable, anxiety-provoking. But you are your own first line of defense: Research shows there are far more people out there willing to disregard a lack of enthusiastic "yes" than there are people willing to push through a strong "no." You can say "no" gently (but firmly), either nonverbally (by moving away, moving their hand away) or verbally (e.g., "I'm not interested, thanks for asking," "I don't like \_\_\_\_\_,"). If people aren't getting more subtle signs, you can move on to saying "no" more forcefully. Doing nothing is NOT a very clear "no."

**14. Err on the side of caution.**

If you're not sure what you want, err on the side of caution and say "no." Especially with new partners you don't know well or when you're feeling vulnerable. You can always change your mind to a "yes" later.

Keep in mind, there is no one type or form of consent that works for everyone in every situation. Which approach you take will depend on who you are, who your partners are, and what the situation is. Also keep in mind that no one was born knowing how to negotiate these situations. We're all always learning and improving, and making mistakes. When you screw up, make amends (as much as possible), then learn from your mistakes and don't repeat them. And remember, like with many things in life, practice makes perfect.

The law defines Sexual Assault as a physical sexual act done against a person's will. This includes situations in which a person is incapable of giving consent due to drug or alcohol use. The law also requires schools to adopt and publish procedure to complain of sexual harassment including assault and to take immediate action to stop harassment, prevent its recurrence and address its effects if they learn of a sexual discrimination and to investigate complaints independent of the police.