

# PISC

PARTNERS  
IN  
SOCIAL  
CHANGE

A Publication of the  
**Sexual Assault  
Prevention Resource  
Center**, dedicated to  
providing technical  
assistance to those  
engaged in sexual  
violence prevention  
in Washington State

WASHINGTON COALITION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT PROGRAMS

SUMMER 2013

Volume XVI Issue 2  
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## Contextualizing Consent

*Maybe ...*

*That's Great!*


*Can We Talk?*



**I**n our work to end sexual violence, we have come to realize we need to do more than just tell people that sexual violence is a problem. We need to help communities build skills to engage in the proactive, positive behaviors we want to see. A great place to start is with a discussion of consent. As preventionists, it's our role to help communities understand and hopefully practice meaningful consent.

The articles in this issue of PISC are a starting place for the discussion of sexual consent – What does it look like? How do you get it? How do you ask for it? Consent is a nuanced topic; there are many conversations we were not able to include in this issue—this is just the first piece of the puzzle of conceptualizing consent. We begin with an in-depth article that answers the questions above. Next, we learn about consent programming examples

in articles about the popular trend of making consent sexy, a middle school campaign in Vermont, and finally a program highlight of the work being done in Olympia. We finish this issue with our Question Oppression and Resources sections to help further the conversation about consent in your work.

We hope this issue will provide you with ideas and tools to engage communities and build skills around sexual consent in your efforts to end sexual violence. We welcome feedback at [prevention@wcsap.org](mailto:prevention@wcsap.org). 

Cordially,

Kat Monusky, Prevention Specialist  
WCSAP, Prevention Resource Center



**WCSAP**  
Washington Coalition of  
Sexual Assault Programs



Volume XVI Issue 2  
CONTEXTUALIZING CONSENT

*The mission of the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs is to unite agencies engaged in the elimination of sexual violence through education, advocacy, victim services, and social change.*

*The Prevention Resource Center is a project of WCSAP, designed to provide support and technical assistance to individuals, communities, and agencies engaged in sexual violence prevention within Washington State.*

### **Partners in Social Change**

*is published by the WCSAP Prevention Resource Center from its office in Olympia, Washington. The focus of this publication is to present information and resources for the prevention of sexual violence, with a special emphasis on social change.*

*For membership information, visit [www.wcsap.org](http://www.wcsap.org).*

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# **PISC** | PARTNERS IN SOCIAL CHANGE

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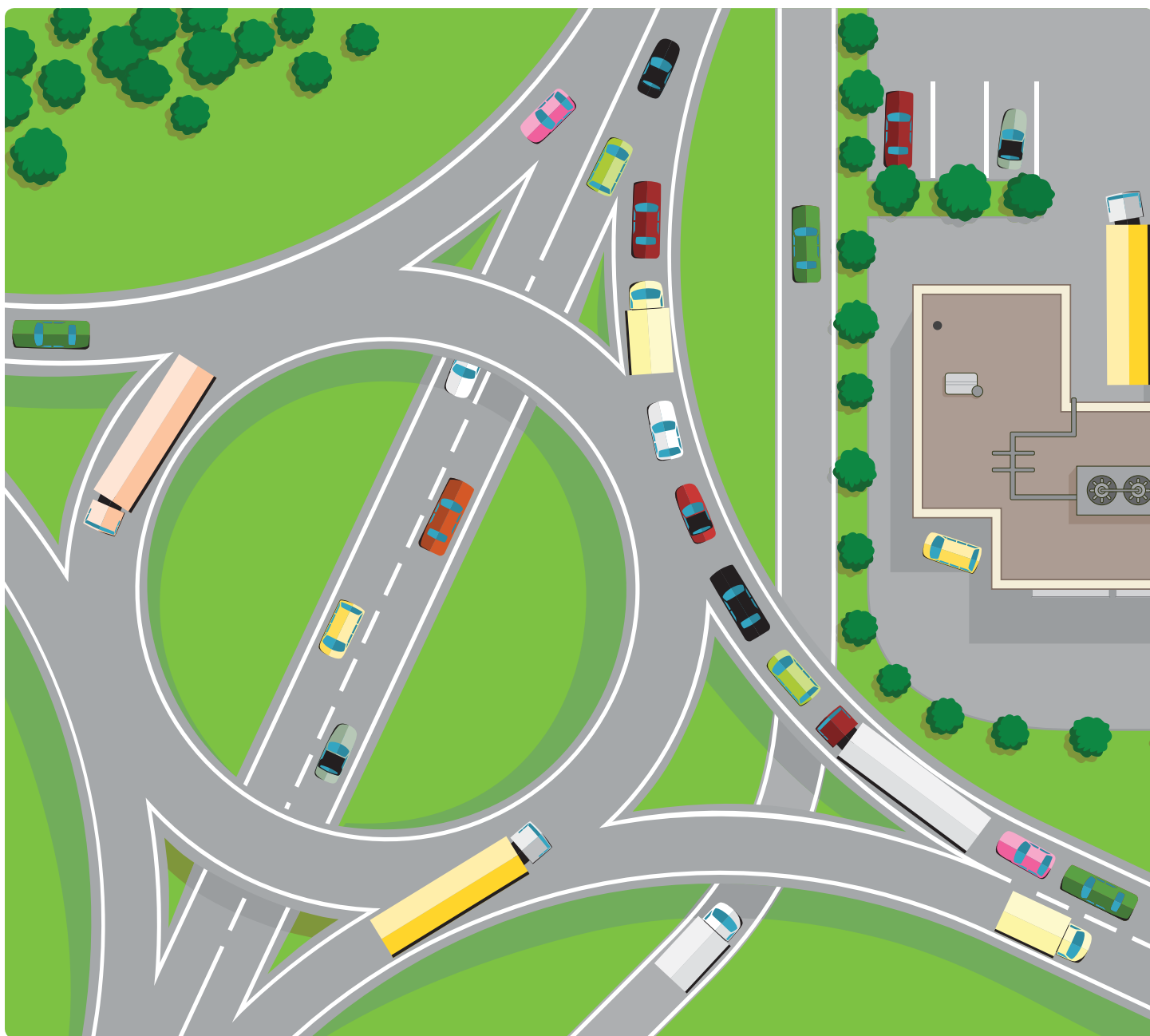
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# Driver's Ed for the Sexual Superhighway: Navigating Consent

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Heather Corinna, Scarleteen





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Whether we walk, bike, skate, wheel, or drive, when we're on the road there are traffic lights, signs and signals we know we and everyone else needs to pay attention to. We also know we need to clearly give our own signals: when we turn, we use a turn signal for good reason, rather than muttering under our breath that we're going to be turning or just veering left in an intersection without signaling. All of that helps keep us and others from crashing or getting run over: we all agree to follow and give those signs as part of an ongoing, mutual agreement to help keep each other safe. As well, if we want to get somewhere, we usually have to pay attention to signs: if we keep ignoring the signs that say "Dead End," or don't read street signs at all, we're not likely to be able to get to where we meant to go.

Most of us understand being in transit means there's a possibility of getting hurt, hurting others, having a good time turn into a bad one, or just not getting to where we intended, and to try and prevent those outcomes, we need to follow basic rules of the road like being attentive to and actively giving clear signs and signals. Just like it's important on the road, it's important between the sheets.

### What is sexual consent?

An active process of willingly and freely choosing to participate in sex of any kind with someone else, and a shared responsibility for everyone engaging in, or who wants to engage in, any kind of sexual interaction with someone. When there is a question or invitation about sex of any kind, when consent is mutually given or affirmed, the answer on everyone's part is an enthusiastic yes.

Willingly and freely choosing means we and our partners feel able to make and voice any choice without being forced, manipulated, intentionally misled, or pressured. It means we're in an interpersonal environment where what we want is mutually meaningful, and where we aren't in a situation where the other person is not in a position where they have or have had, in our history with them, radically more power than we have and/or has not used that power to influence or guide our sexual choices. It means we and our partners are and feel safe. It means we feel able to say and accept yes, no, or maybe without fear, and that our limits and boundaries are completely respected. Feeling free and able to say yes and to say no isn't only important to keep from getting hurt or hurting others: it's important because a big part of a satisfying, healthy sex life and sexuality, one people enjoy, is grounded in free choice.

Participating means everyone is an active, whole part of what is going on. It means we or a partner are treated like a whole, separate person, not like a thing someone is doing things to. If consensual sex was a sport, participating would mean that we're out on the field running around with the team, not sitting on the bench while people throw balls at our heads.

What about enthusiasm? Sex that people really want and fully participate in does not tend to be a whatever or something we need to be dragged into. When we

have strong sexual feelings, and want and feel ready to put those feelings into action in some way, we experience that as a strong desire, much like we can feel when we're hungry and smell our favorite meal cooking. When someone shares our sexual feelings and also wants to put them into action at the same time, it's mutually exciting. Sometimes younger people express they have a hard time figuring out when they are and are not feeling sexual desire. While sexual desire doesn't always look the same way, so that's not simple to explain, when any of us really, truly wants to engage in something sexual, we'll feel enthusiastic, stoked and excited, not apathetic, bored, fearful or doubtful.

If you want one word to define consent with it's **yes**. Consent is a yes a million times over, for the love of all things sparkly, awesome and delicious, and not a minute longer if you want to do it too, *please, yes*. Everyone's yes doesn't always look or sound the same, of course, but there are often common threads. There also isn't always a question, exactly, to say yes to. Sometimes yes is inviting someone else to do something with us. Sometimes it's saying what we want, even if the other person says no or not now. Sometimes yes is using hands to pull someone closer, or an excited squeal or moan. A yes with words is a lot easier to understand and know as consent than some other kinds of yes.

Consent isn't something we just do or give once: it's something we're doing (or not) in every moment of every sexual activity. If someone consents to one thing, that doesn't mean they're consenting to anything, just to that one thing. Consent is also always something we or others can revoke: in other words, everyone gets to change their mind, at any time, including after they've already said yes.

Jaclyn Friedman, co-editor of *Yes Means Yes*, explains that well [here](#): "Sexual consent isn't like a light switch, which can be either "on," or "off." It's not like there's this one thing called "sex" you can consent to anyhow. "Sex" is an evolving series of actions and interactions. You have to have the enthusiastic consent of your partner for all of them. In addition, even if you have your partner's consent for a particular activity, you have to be prepared for it to change. Consent isn't a question. It's a state. If, instead of lovers, the two of you were synchronized swimmers, consent would be the water. It's not enough to jump in, get wet, and climb out -- if you want to swim, you have to be in the water continually. And if you want to have sex, you have to be continually in a state of enthusiastic consent with your partner."

- **Consent is about *everyone* involved in a sexual or possibly sexual interaction.** Not just women, not just young people, not just whoever didn't initiate sex to begin with, not just the person whose body part someone else's body part may be touching or going into. *Everyone*. For sex to be fully consensual, everyone needs to seek consent, everyone needs to be affirming it, and everyone needs to accept and respect each other's answers, nixing sex or stepping back, pronto, if and when someone expresses a stop.
- **Consent can *ALWAYS* be withdrawn.** Consent to any kind of sex is not a binding contract nor does consent obligate anyone to follow through. It is also one-time-only: because someone consented to sex Tuesday does not mean they were giving consent for sex on Thursday.
- **Nothing makes consent automatic or unnecessary.** Being someone's spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend doesn't give anyone consent by default. Someone loving you or saying they love you doesn't mean they have your sexual consent or you have theirs. No one kind of sex means consent to another, or that anyone is "owed" any sex. For instance, someone who engages in oral sex is not asking for or consenting to intercourse; someone who says yes to kissing is not saying yes to any other kind of touching. Because someone has had any kind of sex in the past does not mean they will have sex or consent to sex again with that same person or anyone else nor that they are obligated in any way to do so.

## Consent 101: Use Your Words

Consent works best centered in communication in words; words in whatever language everyone involved can use and understand. There are other ways to express and affirm consent, but they're way trickier, and when those ways work well, it's usually because the people involved already use and have used words with consent and have established good, solid patterns of communication with words.



- **In some situations, full, informed, and free consent cannot truly be given or shared.**

Those include: being drunk or wasted, being asleep, being unable to really understand what one is saying yes to, including possible risks and outcomes; being under severe duress, like when seriously upset, ill, grieving, or scared or being unable to understand another person's words or other means of communication. Consider things like these to be a red light to even asking about sex: sex should usually be off the table entirely in these situations. Legally, when someone is under the age of legal consent, with someone of an age where sex is not lawful, and in most of the above situations, sex is a crime.

- **Nonconsent means STOP:** If someone is NOT consenting to something or says no with their words and/or actions, the other person MUST stop trying to do that thing AND must not try to convince that person to do that thing in any way. If they do not stop, or exert emotional or other pressure and that person gives up and gives in, they are sexually assaulting that person. Sex is not sex if everyone is not consenting. If anyone is not consenting or not asking for consent, then what is happening is or may be rape, sexual abuse, or assault.

- **A lack of no does not mean yes.**

**What are some clues someone doesn't care about consent?**

They act like they're in a big hurry. They act like you or others owe them sex or they owe you sex. They're not asking how you're feeling or what you want: they seem only or mostly focused on themselves or they are ONLY focused on you and seem to have none of their own desires or limits. They don't really seem to be all there. They're ignoring or trying to change some of your stop signs, like pushing them away, not wanting to get naked, saying you're not sure or saying no. You feel unsafe or worried; unable to speak up or say no or are worried they're unsafe or can't speak up. They react with anger, resentment or self-injury when you don't immediately say yes to sex. They don't seem to have personal boundaries.

**If any of those things are going on, do yourself a favor and just get away from that person or situation pronto.** If you were wrong, it's okay: no one is done big harm by not getting laid.

**This kind of consent is a must for:**

- First-time sexual partners
- When a relationship is new or when you or a partner are new to sex in general
- When you or a sexual partner want to take the LEAST amount of risk in crossing a line or having your lines crossed
- When you or a partner are just learning what you each like sexually
- If you've had a sexual relationship with someone before, but it's been a while since you were sexual together
- When you know or suspect you have a hard time reading nonverbal cues or that your own nonverbal cues may be tricky for someone else to interpret
- People who have been sexually assaulted or abused, especially recently or before a lot of healing (not only can a lack of clear consent-seeking be triggering, when nonconsent has been refused in the past, we often need extra effort put into assuring consent)

Consent with words is about mutually voicing what we want and don't want, what our desires are and are not, and what we do and don't feel ready for. Sometimes it's about one person asking for something and the other replying, sometimes it's more organic. But when any of us says or expresses an "I want," we're voicing desire. Desire can be a strong feeling, so we might not always voice it delicately. The way we voice sexual desire matters when it comes to consent, though: we need to be mindful of how our words express what we want while still leaving room for others to express what they want, especially since we won't always want the same things or want them at the same times. There are ways to voice desires and seek consent that support consent and good sexual communication, and there are ways to voice desires or seek consent that can stifle mutual consent and communication, and make it hard for someone to make and voice their own choices freely in response.

## Verbal Signals of Consent and Nonconsent

What can consent sound like?	What can nonconsent sound like?
Yes	No
I'm sure	I'm not sure
I know	I don't know
Don't stop	Stop
Whoohoo! Yippee! Hot damn! Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah!	[silence]
Dah!	No more
I want to . . .	I want to, but . . .
I'm not worried	I feel worried about . . .
I want you/it/that	I don't want you/it/that
Can you please do [whatever]	Can you please not do [whatever]
I still want to . . .	I thought I wanted to, but . . .
That feels good	That hurts
Mmmmmm	[silence]
Yes	Maybe
I love you/this	I love you/this, but . . .
I want to do this right now	I want to do this, but not right now
I feel good about this	I don't know how I feel about this
I want to keep doing this	I don't want to do this anymore
[insert praise to your deity of choice here]	[insert pleas for help to your deity of choice here]
This feels right	This feels wrong
Yes	[silence]

### Some good ways to ask for and assure consent are questions like:

- May I [do whatever sexual thing]?
- I'd like to [do whatever sexual thing]: would you like to? If not, what would you like to do?
- How do you feel about doing [whatever sexual thing]?
- Are there things you know you don't want to do: what are they? Mine are [whatever they are].
- Is there anything you need to feel comfortable or safe when we do [whatever sexual thing]?
- I'm really interested in doing [whatever sexual thing] with you, and it feels like the right time for me: do you want to do that and does the timing feel right to you?
- I'd like to have sex tonight, would you? What do you want to do or try?

See how all of those were questions, or statements that ended with questions? That opens the door to communication and makes clear you understand that while you want something, that doesn't mean someone else does, or wants them with you, right then or without certain things they may need. Any time we ask a question like that where we haven't answered it first ourselves, we can take our turn answering it after the other person answers.

**Some not-so-hot ways to voice desires and invite others into sex when it comes to consent are:** *Let's do [whatever sexual thing.] I want [whatever sexual thing]. Last week you really liked it when I [whatever it was you did], so we'll do that again tonight. I heard guys/girls really like it when someone*



*[does whatever], so let's do that, you'll probably like it. Let's just do it: I'll take care of you. You're okay, right? I know you trust me, right?*

Most of those are statements, not questions: they're conversation stoppers, not starters. They address one person's wants without acknowledging the other, or kind of make someone else into a non-person. Even the ones that are questions aren't really questions. *"I know you trust me, right?"* doesn't really leave room for the other person to answer: it basically answers the question for them and tells them there's only one right answer. It also makes having the wrong answer seriously loaded. Most of those statements are one person making decisions for everyone: that's not consent. Consent is about everyone involved actively making choices together.

Who's the person who should voice their desires and asks for a partner's own input and wants? **Everyone.** Not just one person, or one gender, or one person with a given kind of body, or of a given age. Obviously, someone has to make the first move sometimes and put it out there. Who does is usually who gets the gumption to first. In a healthy sexual relationship where both people share mutual feelings of sexual desire, mutual desire to enact them (even if not always at the same time or on the same days) and both feel ready to fully participate in sexual activities with a partner, there tends to be a lot of back and forth, rather than sexual initiation, and initiation of consent, being one person's doing.

What can consent-in-words and nonconsent tend to sound like, whether we're putting our desires out there, saying we don't want or aren't sure about, or providing an answer to someone else's voiced wants? (See *chart on page 4.*)

Really being able to give, withhold, or share consent has a lot to do with feeling like an interpersonal environment or relationship supports consent. So many people have been raised with the idea that sex is a power struggle, a performance of gender or that they automatically don't have equal voice, so they may need to have partners affirm very clearly that their wants and not-wants are important. Some people may have been reared with ideas about sex that have given them the impression they don't have to seek out or ask for consent, or may have had partners in the past who did not assert themselves, so they got the impression they could just assume consent.

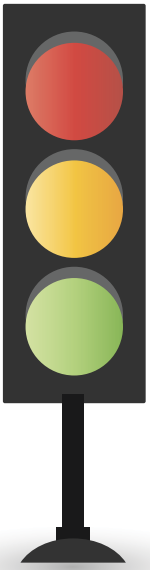
There are things we can say to each other to help support consent and make everyone involved feel more able to voice what they want, rather than just echo a partner

or a cultural expectation. To help create that kind of environment, when we and someone else are talking about becoming sexual, we can make clear right from the start that we care about real consent, shared desire, and mutual pleasure. To express that, we might say something like: *"If something doesn't feel good or turns out to be something other than you want, please let me know. I only want to do what feels good for both of us."* Or, *"I think it's hot when someone tells me what they want during sex, rather than just me saying what I want."* Or, *"I'd rather put sex off for another time when someone isn't really into it. I don't want to have sex when the other person doesn't totally want it: each of us really wanting it is the best part!"* Or, *"This is about us doing something together that's from and for both of us, not about someone tending to just my needs or just my tending to theirs. It's really important to me that we're both always honest about what we want and don't so that it's really about both of us, and about pleasure and desire, not guilt or obligation."*

Because consent is ongoing, it's also important to check-in with each other as we continue sexual activities. Check-ins don't have to be formal, or even stop anything we're enjoying. Of course, we can use moments to check-in that may already have presented a pause, like someone having to pee, the phone ringing, falling off the bed, switching up a position or a big laugh we're trying to catch our breath from.

Consent check-ins can sound like: *How does this feel? Are you still liking this? Are you comfortable? Is there anything you need or want right now? You seem quiet: are you okay? Anything I should stop doing or do that I'm not doing? I feel good: are you feeling good?*

Before we move into a more complex kind of consent, let's review. Columbia University Health Service's Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Program provides these consent traffic lights on page 7.



### Signs You Should Stop

- » You or a partner are too intoxicated to gauge or give consent.
- » Your partner is asleep or passed out.
- » You hope your partner will say nothing and go with the flow.
- » You intend to have sex by any means necessary.

### Signs You Should Pause and Talk

- » You are not sure what the other person wants.
- » You feel like you are getting mixed signals.
- » You have not talked about what you want to do.
- » You assume that you will do the same thing as before.
- » Your partner stops or is not responsive.

### Keep Communicating

- » Partners come to a mutual decision about how far they want to go.
- » Partners clearly express their comfort with the situation.
- » You feel comfortable and safe stopping at any time.
- » Partners are excited!
- » You assume that you will do the same thing as before.
- » Your partner stops or is not responsive.

### What if talking ruins the moment?

When people are worried about talking "ruining the moment" they're usually either worried their partner will have an opportunity to say no, or that they themselves will pay attention to their own feelings and not do something a partner wants or they wanted, but didn't feel really right about. Either way, those two things are both reasons talking is **ESSENTIAL**. If someone really doesn't want to do something, no one should be doing that thing to or with them. If we really don't want to be doing something or have doubts? We should nix it, press pause and take whatever time we need to figure out or get what we need to make sex right for us.

### Consent 102: Other Kinds of Communication

Over time, people who have sex together will tend to get more comfortable with each other, and will get to know each other better, and so they may use less consent-in-words and start using more nonverbal cues. That's generally okay so long as it feels okay to everyone involved, but it's a lot trickier than words, because body language is often a lot less clear. Sometimes people try to have sex right from the start using only body language as communication. While it can work sometimes, more often it results in either someone getting hurt, having boundaries or lines crossed, or in people just not connecting well.

**This kind of consent, paired with consent-in-words, is best saved for:**

- Longtime sexual partners
- When everyone involved has already had a good deal of sexual experience
- When you and/or a partner understand that you are taking far greater risks of overstepping boundaries and limits, are each okay with that, and when you're each willing to take good care of each other if signals get crossed

- When you and a partner already communicate nonverbally well in other situations
- When you and/or a partner each feel **VERY** confident you can read each other's more subtle cues
- When you have used verbal consent to establish that you're going to start using more nonverbal consent

A lot of folks ask how they can tell by looking when someone is aroused, in part to try and establish nonverbal consent. The trouble is, physical signs of arousal are often lousy nonverbal signals of consent. Why? Because we can be sexually excited but still not want to have any kind of sex at a given time; just because we feel sexually excited around someone else, after all, doesn't mean it's right for us to act on those feelings. To boot, some ways people can look or feel when sexually excited are also ways they can look or feel because of other things. A wet vulva can mean someone is simply at a fertile time in their cycle, hard nipples can be about being cold, and an erection can be a physical response to friction. Some of the ways our bodies react with sexual arousal are also the ways our bodies can react when we're afraid, like flushing, having an elevated pulse, or breathing faster. When it comes to nonverbal cues, it's usually better to look to whole bodies or faces for those than to look to genitals.

## Nonverbal Consent

Possible nonverbal signs of consent	Possible nonverbal signs of NONconsent
Direct eye contact	Avoiding eye contact
Initiating sexual activity	Not initiating any sexual activity
Pulling someone closer	Pushing someone away
Actively touching someone	Avoiding touch
Nodding yes	Shaking head no
Comfort with nudity	Discomfort with nudity
Laughter and/or smiling (upturned mouth)	Crying and/or looking sad or fearful (clunched or downturned mouth)
"Open" body language, like relaxed, loose and open arms and legs, relaxed facial expressions, turning towards someone	"Closed" body language, like tense, stiff or closed arms and legs, tight or tense facial expressions, turning away from someone
Sounds of enjoyment, like a satisfied hum or enthusiastic moan	Silence or sounds of fear or sadness, like whimpering or a trembling voice
An active body	"Just lying there"

A study recently done by **The Havens Sexual Assault Referral Centres** (*Where is Your Line? Survey Summary Report*) of over 1,000 people ages 18-25 found that less than half of young adults interpret someone pushing them away as a no, and over 60% would not assume crying means nonconsent. That same study found that more than one in five people expect intercourse after other kinds of touching, and that 25% of women have been silent when a partner did something sexual to them that they did not want.

What does that mean? That we need to be VERY cautious about ditching consent in words and make sure that before we do, we've established good communication and verbal consent first, and have it as a pattern and precedent we know we can fall back on any time we or a partner are not 100% sure we are interpreting or can interpret nonverbal consent correctly. We also want to be sure to still do check-ins with partners during less-talky sex time. And before moving on to this kind of consent, you should be very sure it's really the right situation and relationship to ditch a lot of talking, for you and for a partner.

Above are some very general nonverbal cues that can often—but don't always—signal consent or nonconsent.

If you and a partner are moving more towards nonverbal sexual communication, talk about it. Looking at a list like the one above, do you and/or your partner feel like these things are true for each of you? Do either of you know nonverbal cues or responses you tend to have when you want something sexual or don't that you can share with each other to make this kind of communication easier? Maybe you even want to come up with a safeword, or "stop-word," to use when you want to be expressly nonverbal: one word or gesture you can use to say stop clearly that both agree means stop.

### Accepting & Respecting Nonconsent

Everyone knows it can suck when we want something with or from someone else that they don't want to share or give, most certainly including with sex. Sometimes it's just a momentary bummer, and other times it can feel like a real heartbreaker.

But when someone is not clearly giving, sharing or continuing consent or is nonconsenting, there's only one sound way we should all respond: to absolutely accept and respect their response or their lack of agreement and participation, and to immediately stop the action (if something physical was going on) or not move forward. It's really important that while we are allowed to have whatever feelings we have that we manage our own

feelings well, avoiding things like voicing anger, sulking or emotionally withdrawing, which puts sexual pressure on someone else.

We may need or want to work through our feelings and theirs (they might be bummed out, too!). That might be sensitively -- not manipulatively -- asking for some time to ourselves to clear our heads and cool down our heart rate, then calling each other later to check in and assure each other it's all okay. Maybe we'll need to have the other person affirm that they still like us. You can ask if they want to do something to share some comfort, or to get close in other ways, like having a cuddle, holding hands, or doing something else entirely, like taking a walk together, catching a movie, or hitting some Karaoke to have a laugh. If we want to extend the on-the-road shtick, it's worth noting that sometimes running out of gas or getting a flat tire can actually turn into a whole new adventure on its own right, one more fun and interesting than our original plan (I know that's certainly true of a couple of my own thwarted road trips). It's always possible that what starts out seeming like a bummer can turn into something really great. Not having the sex we want blows, but if it means we wind up having an ad-hoc roof party, a moonlight swim together or a really deep talk that brings us closer than having sex would have, it can be a blessing in disguise.

If their "no" wasn't about sex full-stop, it is okay to ask if there's something else they'd like to do sexually. It's also okay to ask why someone doesn't want to do something sexual at all or anymore, but you want to make clear that question isn't about you trying to convince them to change their mind, or suggesting they need to justify their no. You want to be sure you're asking that at the right time, too: if they seem upset or stressed -- or you are -- it's probably not a good time and is probably best to talk about it a few days down the road when everyone is feeling less vulnerable. You can open a conversation like this with something like "I was totally okay with you not wanting to do [whatever it was] anymore yesterday, but if you're up for talking about it, I'd like to hear about why so I can better understand you and also do my best to help us create a sex life together that's best for us both."


### Some Bits of BS About Consent

- Most people with sex lives they and their partners enjoy do NOT have sex in silence or with only moans, groans, and oh-baby's. While media doesn't often show a lot of sexual communication (or a lot of good communication, period!), and plenty of people were reared with sexual shame that may have made it, or may make it, challenging for them to communicate

or even understand that they can, people who have mutually satisfying sex lives often talk during sex, and enjoy communication, even when it's challenging.

- Women are not "naturally" submissive, silent, or passive in sex. Women are also not less feminine if they voice their own desires or set limits and boundaries and insist partners respect them. Some people internalize social or interpersonal messages that that's true, and may believe it to be true, but it is not true. Some people know that message isn't true, but use it as an excuse, knowing enough other people think it's true, they can get away with it. Usually being passive means that someone is not fully consenting or does not feel able to give nonconsent.
- Men are NOT "supposed to" be in charge of or dominate everything with sex: partnered sex is supposed to be mutually active and engaged. Men also do not want to say yes to sex any or every time it is made available to them nor should they be assumed to be obligated to or less masculine if they decline. Some people internalize social or interpersonal messages that those things are true, and may believe it to be true, but it is not true. Some people know those messages aren't true, but use them as excuses, knowing enough other people think they're true, they can get away with it.
- Consent is NOT less important for people with same-sex partners just because pregnancy is not a risk. Consent is no less important for people wanting or trying to become pregnant, or who already share an STI or who have been monogamous and tested to know they do not likely have any STIs. Consent is important for everyone, and for everyone any kind of sex carries a multitude of possible outcomes, wanted and unwanted, positive and negative, not just pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections.
- Pain is NOT a given with any kind of sex (save kinds of sex where people are purposefully trying to cause or experience pain) and often means someone is not getting something they need or feel nervous or fearful. Pain is a signal to stop, not something for anyone to ignore, stay silent about or suck up.
- No does NOT mean yes. Maybe does not mean yes. Yes means yes. And saying yes should always feel just as awesome as hearing it.

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[http://www.scarleteen.com/article/boyfriend/drivers\\_ed\\_for\\_the\\_sexual\\_superhighway\\_navigating\\_consent](http://www.scarleteen.com/article/boyfriend/drivers_ed_for_the_sexual_superhighway_navigating_consent). 

# Vermont's Consent Campaign

**Bethany Pombar, Prevention Specialist**  
**Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence**

*[Editor's note: This article discusses standards and laws in Vermont. For information about consent and sexual assault statutes in Washington, please contact WCSAP!]*

**T**he Vermont Consent Campaign was started in 2009, after a survey released by the Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force (SVPTF) found, among other things, that both educators and community prevention practitioners were largely unaware of the change in the age of consent law that occurred in 2006. The Legislature directed the SVPTF to conduct a statewide awareness campaign. The SVPTF created a small work group to complete the task. The work group consisted of representatives from the disability and LGBTTQ community, school personnel including a school nurse and a guidance counselor, and sexual violence prevention experts.

The Consent Campaign work group, led by the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, secured a very small grant, but not nearly enough to produce and distribute a media campaign, and we felt it would better serve our purpose if we could create materials to support schools in creating and implementing their own, community-based, educational campaign. What grew out of that was the Consent Campaign Guidebook, which you can find here: <http://www.vtnetwork.org/publications/>

The campaign is designed for middle and high school youth. At the time of the creation of the campaign, there were also changes happening to the state's definition of health education, which was being broadened to include the prevention of sexual violence and healthy relationship education. The concepts of consent fit perfectly within those new additions, so the work group jumped on the ripe opportunity and we were able to proactively create tools for schools to use within their health education settings.

To encourage schools to use the campaign, and to help in our planning, we looked at the standards for health education in Vermont and highlighted the ones with which our work aligned. This was a useful process and created some common language between educators and prevention practitioners. We were able to show that what we were doing was best practice prevention work.





# Lesson Plans

## Inside the Campaign

The campaign is comprised of two parts, the first being the lesson plans and the second being resources for developing a school-based social campaign.

The lesson plans are brief, a total of 90 minutes for each grade cluster (7/8 and 9/10). We lead students through a process that engages them and is grounded in their realities. One of the first activities we do is to look at pictures of people touching and discuss whether both people are totally into it. Many of the pictures we use come from currently popular movies or TV shows, allowing us to think about how media portrays consent in these stories. This activity also grounds us in the use of body language as a tool of communication.

We have all heard the phrase “yes means yes and no means no,” but that oversimplifies what we need to ensure that consent is present. We completely agree that “no” always means “no” in our definition of consent. When we talk about what “yes” means, we need words AND actions that indicate that both people really want to engage in the activity and do so freely. For example, one person is saying “yes” with words, nodding, or not resisting, but at the same time is very tense or seems physically uncomfortable. That person may not actually want to do what they are about to do. They may have said “yes” because they felt pressured or because they didn’t feel safe to say no. The other person has to be “tuned in” to this and then stop and check in with their partner.

From a couple of body language exercises, which are fun and light, we move into really defining what we mean by consent and what elements need to be present for consent to be freely given. In brief, those elements are:

- There needs to be a sufficient balance of power in the relationship.
- Both people are aware of the consequences of sexual activity, both positive and negative, and know what will happen next.
- If someone says “yes,” they can change their mind or stop at any time.
- Neither party is under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- It is safe to say “no.”

We go over these in detail, giving examples and talking through some scenarios. What is important in this section is that we practice things you can say if the person you are with puts the brakes on. We find that universally, no matter what age the participants are, this is one of the major missing pieces when we talk about consent. We say that it needs to be safe to say “no,” so we also have to talk about how we make it safe to say “no.” In large part, we do this by being responsive when we hear, see or feel our partner saying “no” or “maybe.”

## We practice phrases like:

- “Hey, it feels like you want to slow down.”
- “Are you okay?”
- “Want to do something else?”
- “You know what, I feel like a sandwich, are you hungry?”
- “How about we just do this tonight and not go any further.”
- “Do you like this?”

We also talk about the need for ALL TOUCH to be consensual, not just in romantic settings or around sexual activity. We should practice consent when we are thinking about hugging or touching our friends or family. In fact, these “non-sexytime” places can be great opportunities to practice our language and consent skills.

It is within the conversations around sufficient balance of power that we review the age of consent law. We stress that the law isn’t about how old youth have to be before they can consent, but that the law is created to keep youth safe from adults making sexual advances towards them. It is actually adults 18 and over who need to know the consent law (besides it being just plain gross and uncool for an adult to want to engage someone under 16 in sexual activity, the punishments apply to them, not the youth). We want to give youth the information that pertains to them and let them know they have legal rights, including being free from sexual advances from adults.

From here, we move into activities where we practice our collaborative decision-making skills. Consent isn’t about one person obtaining a “yes” from the other. It is about a collaborative decision-making process where each person engages equally in deciding what to do together. We get into our thinking around “don’t guess”—examining how we all make assumptions when we make decisions with people and how those might be harmful.



All of these activities are interactive and build knowledge, skills, and attitudes that empower youth to take control of their sexual lives. We are working toward building a society where consent isn't the awkward and abnormal thing it is now, where we expect these conversations to happen and have the tools to engage in them, because in the end, it is far more pleasurable and less awkward when you know the other person is as into it as you are.

## State-level Implementation

When we set out to implement the campaign statewide, we started with a series of regional trainings around the state. We invited schools and youth-serving organizations to come and to bring a team of youth. Having youth present when we engaged in these train-the-trainer events was such an asset. The adults who would be bringing the information back could see how kids interacted with the material and see how the trainers answered the questions that came up. Within those training events, we also encouraged the youth who were present to become peer leaders with the campaign and to advocate with their school board and administration for teaching this information. We also encouraged the educators to include youth as vital stakeholders in the planning and implementation of any school-wide campaigns.

At each of the regional trainings, we also had a trainer from the local rape crisis or domestic violence service agency present. Co-training ensured the local connection was made and people would know where to go to get help if they needed it.

The first year we did the regional trainings, we only had copies of the guidebook and handouts that we had made in our office. We were able to secure some more funding for a second round of trainings that also had enough capacity to allow us to do a mass purchase of campaign giveaway items like posters, bracelets, and stickers, that people loved.

We have now done three rounds of training and have trained more than 500 individuals around the state on the consent materials.

## School-level Implementation

Within the guidebook, we have a section that focuses on creating a school-wide campaign. While embedding the lesson plans into the health education classes is a great first step, we wanted to encourage schools to create multiple opportunities for youth to get clear and consistent messages about consent.

We provided guidance about the planning process, thinking about who would need to be involved, what

# Resources

resources they had available to them, and how to do some basic evaluation of their activities. We have talked to schools who have worked beyond classroom implementation. We are hearing great stories of youth taking this topic on as a senior project, art classes creating their own consent posters, schools hosting parents' nights and using their websites to get information to parents, teams working together to bring in guest speakers, and youth using their school media resources to raise awareness. We acknowledge that most schools are strapped for time and resources, so we love to hear that they are finding little ways that aren't a strain on their capacity to get the message outside of the classroom.

## Utilizing Social Media


As the campaign grew, we wanted to create a way for us to keep in touch with people who had attended and to create an online home for conversations about consent. We decided to use Facebook because it was more interactive than Twitter, and in a brief poll, it seemed as though many youth in Vermont were using Facebook more than Twitter or other social media tools. Usage of our Facebook page has been a little slower growing than we thought, and the majority of people who have "liked" us are adults at this time. We continue to encourage people to participate and are steadily building our youth audience.

For more information about the VT Consent Campaign, contact Bethany Pombar at [bethany@vtnetwork.org](mailto:bethany@vtnetwork.org) or 802-223-1302. You can also download the curriculum for free at <http://vtnetwork.org/publications>

*Bethany Pombar is the Prevention Specialist at the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence where she has worked since 2003. She coordinates prevention strategies, program development, and capacity building activities statewide. As part of her work she has launched the Vermont Consent Campaign, co-chairs the Vermont Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force which creates resources for schools incorporating sexual violence prevention in to their health education curricula, and Chairs the Governor's Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence Task Force. She has a B.S. in Prevention and Community Development and lives in the nation's smallest capital with her dog, cat and human family.*

# Consent Programming: Making it Sexy

Kat Monusky, WCSAP Prevention Specialist

 One common campaign approach is to make the topic of consent “sexy.” This approach is especially popular on college campuses but also internationally. For these campaigns, it is about getting the buzzwords out there on campus or around town in order to get people thinking. This often helps open up space for more meaningful discussions where participants come up with the ways in which consent is a positive thing for them. It is a great way to start conversations about consent, but typically does not replace a nuanced conversation about consent in practice. Below are just a few examples of “sexy” consent campaigns:

The Consent is Sexy Campaign counters date rape and sexual abuse in relationships by promoting the practice of Consent and Respect, and is an available resource for high schools, colleges, universities, and organizations around the world. It contains great dialogue and posters about consent. The posters bring up useful talking points that could lead to a more in-depth conversation or follow-up writing activity. Access the posters: [www.consentissexy.net](http://www.consentissexy.net)

Columbia University's Health Services has developed a campaign that includes posters, a brochure, and postcards. Each of these resources can be downloaded as a PDF. Of course, they contain contact information specific to the University; contact them to inquire about adapting the resources for your community. The brochure has a lot of useful language to explain the importance of consent. It also includes a Stop Light metaphor for how to gauge consent that is creative, easy to understand, and covers many scenarios. <http://www.health.columbia.edu/docs/services/svprp/consent.html>

Amplify, a project of Advocates for Youth, is an online community dedicated to sexual health, reproductive justice, and youth-led grassroots movement building. In a blog post, they highlight how one campus turned their collection of Consent is Sexy responses into a fun awareness V-Day activity: <http://www.amplifyyourvoice.org/u/robocoko/2010/2/4/Consent-is-sexy>. This activity

can be easily replicated with your community! Get your group to write down their definition of consent, how to ask for it, or what is sexy about consent on a piece of paper, a postcard, or even a sticky note. You can compile and display the cards that the group wants to share.

The media clip Consent, presented by Tate USA and produced by Watch Out for the Bears Productions, uses irony and comedy to address consent. This may not be for every audience as it is explicit; you may want to consider using only appropriate portions of the video. The characters use lawyers and contracts to negotiate their sexual activity for the evening. While it will make the audience laugh at the extreme examples, it also can open a discussion about what consent can really look like. It serves as a good icebreaker as it lets the audience laugh while considering a subject that could be uncomfortable, before having a more in-depth discussion. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UH3mQmbC41g>

These campaigns and activities can be a fun approach to discussing consent and can help people to get on board with the idea. To turn these into a more comprehensive approach, consider combining elements from several consent campaigns. One way to use these resources for an interactive, empowering, and educational activity is to show a video or media clip, then have a discussion about it. Later, have participants create their own definitions of consent and how they can obtain it and give it. The group can use these ideas, phrases, examples, and definitions to create their own consent manual or visual display. ♦

**Interested in creating your own workshop on consent? Check out the great 'zine below that goes through the steps: it can be an excellent place to get started.**

**“How to Put Together Your Own Consent Workshop!” Created by Break the Silence.**  
<http://nwbreakthesilence.wordpress.com/zine-project/>





## SafePlace



**Zoe Papasian, Sexual Assault Advocacy Specialist**

**S**afePlace has been offering consent workshops in our community for four years. Amory Ballantine, SafePlace's Sexual Assault Program Coordinator, started facilitating them in the South Sound in 2009 with a member of The Prison Doula Project\* and encouragement from other SafePlace staff. Workshops were typically one-session conversations with different groups around town about complexities of consent, guided by Cindy Crabb's consent questions from the excellent 'zine *Learning Good Consent*. The workshop we use now is a three-session series, using a curriculum adapted from what the Olympia School of Consent and Wizardry (OSCW) developed for Consent Fest in the fall of 2011.

*Consent*  
WORKSHOPS  
FOR EVERYONE



### History

In the summer of 2011, Amory, two other community members, and I began meeting weekly as OSCW to develop a consent curriculum. Our goal was to create a workshop that provides a space for participants to begin developing tools that will support them in practicing meaningful, embodied consent. We decided to break our workshop into three parts, focusing on triggers, boundaries, and accountability as our areas for skill-building. As with any language, the language of consent can be manipulated or engaged in superficially, which is part of why we choose to focus on underlying ideas. Gaining knowledge, insight, and skills in these areas can be a huge part of someone's work toward healing and restoring meaningful choice. Amory and I are currently the SafePlace staff facilitating these workshops in various communities around Thurston County.

We advertise our workshops as open to anyone, rather than primarily for survivors or partners of survivors. Facilitators come to the workshop with the perspective that almost everyone has experienced some form of trauma, almost everyone experiences some form of dissociation, and almost everyone has trouble accessing their own boundaries and desires as a result of growing up in a culture that demands their suppression. This normalization of triggers and challenges can be hugely beneficial for participants in that it makes space for people to work on their embodiment and consent with their selves, without limiting it as work only survivors have to do.

Each workshop involves a selection of handouts with worksheets, journal prompts, and readings on each topic that participants may choose to do on their own, as well as a resource list at the end of the series. This helps to keep the workshop as a skill-building space, rather than a space to process past experiences or dig into personal stories.

## Be Adaptable

As with any workshop, with consent workshops it's important to know our audience and to be able to adapt our plans to meet a group where they're at. We've done our workshops for a variety of folks, including self-selected groups of college students, a church youth group, a queer youth drop-in group, among friends we grew up with in our hometowns, and for local festivals and events. Sometimes a group already has pre-established community norms around consent, triggers, and accountability, and sometimes participants are just beginning to learn what these words can mean. We strike a balance between participants sharing their knowledge with one another and facilitators filling in the blanks with our information from research, experience, and past workshops. When the group is newer to consent, facilitators will often talk more initially, but as a group warms up, participants will share their connections and ideas.

After facilitating consent workshops for four and three years respectively, Amory and I have a pretty awesome, ever-growing toolbox of activities, writing prompts, discussion questions, and handouts to choose from. Based on feedback and the audience we're presenting to, we meet to revise our curriculum before each workshop. This ongoing engagement with the material is so valuable, keeping us engaged, and our information relevant. The introduction to the workshop typically includes asking participants their name, pronouns\*, and some question about the topic for that day, which helps us further in gauging what kinds of activities and discussions we want to have.

In some groups, it may be important to model how to talk safely about sex, while in other groups, it may be useful to discuss consent in nonsexual scenarios, such as deciding what to do on a friend-date, whether someone wants a hug, and if someone feels like they really can take on that new responsibility. As facilitators, our ability to take a workshop in either direction is vital.

## In the Sheets and In the Streets

One consistent point in our workshops is that consent and accountability skills are vital in all realms of human interaction, not just when we're being sexual with one another. We encourage participants to connect their value of consent and accountability to their friendships, where they can get practice and feedback in low-stress situations.

Our last session connects the values and skills of consent with broader social justice goals, opening up the space so participants can discuss ways that skills from the

series can support their endeavors at community and institutional levels, as well as interpersonally. I believe that embodied consent and loving accountability can be methods that support living in liberation\* with one another while cultivating relationships that are healing and transformational. As a sexual and domestic violence agency, putting on this consent series is one place where we can begin to plant seeds for our vision of a world without violence, and to see some glimmers where that world is already a reality.

## More Information

For more information about sexual assault advocacy and prevention, you can contact Zoe Papasian at ZoeP@safeplaceolympia.org. SafePlace is located in Olympia, WA and provides a free, confidential, 24/7 hotline: (360) 754-6300. You can learn more about the services offered at SafePlace by visiting <http://www.safeplaceolympia.org/>.

- \* *The Birth Attendants: Prison Doula Project sees their work as a means to reproductive freedom and justice for the women they serve and resistance to the prison industrial complex (PIC). The Prison Doula Project is a grass roots collective providing informational, physical and emotional resources to incarcerated women and mothers that enhance and extend their reproductive choices.*
- \* *Inviting participants to share their pronoun of choice can be a simple way to incorporate transgender and genderqueer inclusivity. It helps to demonstrate that the workshop space anticipates including people whose gender presentations and identities interact in personal and complicated ways, which may or may not include using a particular pronoun to affirm their gender. Some common pronouns include he, she, ze, and they. You can learn more about working with trans survivors at <http://forge-forward.org/>.*
- \* *Living In Liberation: Boundary Setting, Self-Care, and Social Change by Cristien Storm is part of our resource list!*

*Zoe has been filling many different roles at SafePlace since fall 2009, including Sexual Assault Response Program (SARP) volunteer, an advocate at the shelter, and over the helpline. Currently, they work out of SafePlace's community services office coordinating SARP, planning workshops, and providing advocacy to sexual assault survivors and their loved ones. They hold a BA with a focus on Psychology and Social Justice from Evergreen State College, and they find some form of power in wearing purple lipstick.* ♦



# QUESTION OPPRESSION



## Exploring the Connections Between Sexual Violence & Oppression

Use these questions to explore the connections between sexual violence and oppression with staff, volunteers, or board members. Try discussing one or more at a staff meeting, in-service, volunteer training, or board retreat.

Why is it important to examine or challenge traditional gender roles when discussing consent with communities?

Brainstorm a list of the potential or perceived barriers to practicing consent in marginalized communities and then have a discussion to come up with some possible ways to address and overcome these.

How can participants' identities and experiences with oppression shape the ways in which they view and engage in consent?

## PREVENTION RESOURCES



WCSAP members have access to check out our library materials through the mail. Browse the catalog online! Questions can be directed to [library@wcsap.org](mailto:library@wcsap.org).

**Type:** Recorded Webinar

### **Re-learning Consent from Our ForeQueers**

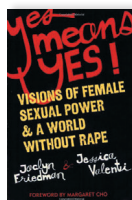
<http://www.wcsap.org/relearning-consent-forequeers>

This webinar explores how Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender & Queer (LGBPTQ) communities have historically worked to build healthy sexual relationships by normalizing open, ongoing communication about safety, boundaries, and consent.

**Type:** Book

### **Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape**

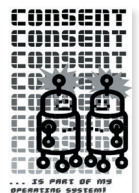
This anthology, edited by Jaclyn Freidman and Jessica Valenti, attempts to dismantle the way we view rape in our culture and replace it with a genuine understanding and respect for female sexual pleasure. Feminist, political, and activist writers alike will present their ideas for a paradigm shift from the "No Means No" model—an approach that while necessary for where we were in 1974, needs an overhaul today. <http://yesmeansyesblog.wordpress.com/>



**Type:** 'Zines

### **Safer Sex & Relationships: Consent is Part of My Operating System Break the Silence**

<http://nwbreakthesilence.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/consent-workshop2.pdf>



### **Let's Talk About Consent Baby Down There Health Collective**

<http://www.phillyspissed.net/sites/default/files/lets%20talk%20about%20consent%20baby.pdf>



### **Learning Good Consent Doris Press**

<http://www.dorisdoris.com/zines2.html>



### **Type:** DVD & Curriculum **The Line**

Told through a "sex-positive" lens, *The Line* is a 24-minute documentary about a young woman who is raped, but her story isn't cut and dry. The film asks the question: where is the line defining consent? <http://whereisyourline.org/film/>. WCSAP members can access The Line's Empower Kit, which contains a study guide, screening tools, and more.





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