

What is Consent?

by the Consent Academy



CON-SENT
=
"to feel together"

The word 'consent' comes from the Latin 'consentire', meaning "to feel together."

"**Consent**" is a word with many meanings and applications. It is more than 'no means no' and 'yes means yes'. These simple rules are sometimes helpful, but consent applies to every part of our daily lives - and life can get complicated!

Consent is mostly about **feelings, sensations, and power**. And feelings, sensations, and power are really complex things.

How easy is it for you to talk about your feelings?

Do you always understand why your body is having different sensations?

Do you always know how powerful you are?

Consent is about slowing down and taking in the bigger picture.

One way to understand consent is to consider it a shared feeling created together through a process of constant, collaborative discovery. It's a feeling that comes from voluntary agreement (made without coercion) between those with decision-making capacity, knowledge, understanding, and autonomy.

Consent is present in all forms of human interaction (not just sex). Practicing consent creates a space where the safety and agency of all parties is honored, using healthy communication and negotiation to craft informed boundaries. Consent, explicit and implicit, is dependent on the context of the situation, and can be revoked at any time.

In any given day, consent is affirmed and violated multiple times. People do it to us and we do it to other people. Creating the conditions for consent is a skill that gets better the more you practice. We need to practice consent in regular, day-to-day situations so we're prepared for more intense ones like driving a car, being in romantic relationships, and having sex. If we violate consent in these situations, we could cause serious, lasting harm. Practicing consent everyday lowers the risk of consent violations happening, and it also prepares you for what to do when things go wrong.

How Do You Practice Consent?

There are many ways to practice consent. Below are 4 pillars to help you practice consent in your own unique contexts:

1) Capacity

Capacity is about how able you are to both give *and* receive consent. How much ability do you have to describe exactly how you feel and make decisions that are right for you? And how much ability do you have to listen to the feelings and decisions of others? Slow down, pause, and check in with yourself and others on how you are really feeling, emotionally, physically, and mentally.

If someone's capacity is lowered in some way, there's more risk of a consent violation, so try and find out if there's anything you can do to help boost each other's capacity. The mnemonic **H.A.L.T.S.** can be helpful to check in on some important aspects of capacity - Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired, Sad/Sick/Stressed out.

Recognize that alcohol and other substances can lower your capacity a lot, if not entirely - if someone is unconscious, unable to remember what's happening, or otherwise incapacitated, then the risk of consent violations is essentially guaranteed for most activities, but especially intense ones like driving or sex. People who are incapacitated need help to prevent harm occurring, so try to give the care they need, even as a bystander.

2) Information

Informed consent is about **knowing** and **understanding** exactly what you're being asked to consent to. Is everyone answering questions honestly? Is everyone sharing and being open with the information they have? Does everyone understand what the words being used actually mean?

Going through the “who, what, where, when, why, and how” is a good way to gather information. Pay special attention to the ‘what’, ‘why’, and ‘how’. For example, what does ‘hanging out’ mean? What exactly is a ‘date’? What does ‘having sex’ mean? Why do you want to do this activity, and with this person? What are the risks involved and how are you going to address them? The more you share and check for understanding, the less risk there will be of consent violation.

Being clear about what you're asking for is super important if you want to avoid misunderstandings and unintentional consent violations. And if someone asks you to do something, and you're not sure exactly what they mean or want, ask for clarification. You don't have to agree to something you don't fully understand.

3) Agreement or Boundary Setting

Once you have checked in on capacity and shared the information you need, the next step in the ongoing process of consent includes asking questions, making agreements, and setting boundaries.

Being **explicit** is the least risky way to make an ask and set an agreement or boundary. Being explicit means being as clear and specific as possible. This includes:

- *Saying the words!* Accurately describe the activity, how you feel about it, and if relevant, name the body parts involved. If it's too difficult for you to say out loud, it's too risky to do!
- *Setting time limits:* Maybe you want to try something for a certain amount of time, or maybe you only have enough capacity for a limited amount of time. Setting a time limit is a good way to combine agreements and boundaries. For example, you might say, “I'm willing to try this, but if I don't like it after 5 minutes, I want to stop.”

Some people say consensual agreements should be enthusiastic - enthusiasm is great, but sometimes people can seem enthusiastic when they're actually nervous or scared. Judging someone's body language can give you helpful information, but always ask how someone is feeling rather than assume. The way someone's body is responding is not always representative of how they feel.

Again, agreement and boundary setting is part of an ongoing process. Take lots of breaks to check in on sensations specifically - how does your stomach feel? Is it tense or relaxed? Are your hands and feet warm or cold? How is your heart rate? Do you need a bathroom break? Asking questions like this gives someone the chance to figure out how they're feeling by letting their mind and body catch up to each other. It also lets that person know you care about them as a whole person, and you understand that sometimes what we imagine something will feel like isn't always the reality.

Remember that just because someone said ‘yes’ to something before, they don't have to say ‘yes’ again. And if someone changes their mind in the middle of an activity - that's ok! Stop and ask if there's something else they'd rather do. Give people lots of time and space to answer honestly. Lastly, remind people often that saying ‘no’ is ok. It's easy to forget, especially if we don't feel powerful in a situation, or get overwhelmed by sensations.

4) Autonomy

Autonomy is *why* we practice consent at all. Autonomy is everyone's inherent right to decide what's best for their own body, mind, spirit, and story. If anyone wants to do something that involves other people's bodies, minds, spirits, or stories, they have a responsibility to communicate and help create the feeling of consent between everyone involved. If they don't, everyone gets to decide for themselves if they feel a consent violation has happened to them (this is when your boundaries have been crossed and you feel harmed). We all violate consent at some point, even if unintentionally, so we should practice taking **accountability** for our actions, as we would want others to do.

Accountability can be difficult but respecting someone's ‘no’ is one of the easiest ways to honor autonomy. Don't try to convince people to change their mind. Making someone feel afraid or unable to say ‘no’ is coercion, and a guaranteed way to violate consent. Also recognize that the absence of a ‘no’ is not a ‘yes’. Don't assume that the way someone is dressed or behaving means they really want to say ‘yes’. Just don't assume - it's way too risky. Ask questions, listen carefully, and respect how people respond. Despite how complicated things can get, practicing consent can also be this simple.

Want to Learn More about Consent?

Check out the Consent Academy's website for upcoming workshops and ways to get involved in building consent culture:
www.consent.academy

Copyright 2023 Consent Academy