

Helping your child to learn about consent

Learning about consent through Social, Personal and Health Education

One of the subjects your child learns about at school is Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). During SPHE classes your child will learn about consent. Consent covers how a child can:

- give or refuse permission
- understand when someone else is giving or refusing permission.

Why your child needs to learn about consent

Your child needs to understand consent because it will help them to:

- build healthy and respectful relationships
- protect them from harm
- have good relationships later in life.

You can help your child too

This document offers practical advice about how you can support your child's learning about consent.

What is consent?

Consent is when we:

- ask for permission for something to happen
- agree to do something.

Consent means people need to respect each other and communicate well.

When learning about consent, your child will learn to understand the boundaries for:

- themselves
- other people.

If your child understands the concept of consent, they will be better able to:

- remove themselves from situations where they feel uncomfortable
- respect when others want to do the same.

Children's understanding of consent starts from an early age. By the time they begin junior infants most children already understand many of the basic principles of consent.

If your child understands consent as a child, they are more likely to understand sexual consent later in life.

How can I support my child's understanding of consent?

While consent is taught at school, much of children's learning about consent takes place through their daily interactions with the people around them, especially in their home.

Here are some ways you can support your child's understanding of consent.

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Explain what consent means

Use examples

Talk to your child about what consent means. Use examples from their life where they need to ask for or give consent. For example, they may need to ask for consent to play outside.

Refer to stories

Reading picture books can be a great way of exploring big concepts with young children. You probably already have books in your home that can be used.

For example, 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'. Did she look for permission before touching someone else's things?

Use books for children that explain consent

Other picture books deal specifically with the topic of consent, for example 'Let's Talk about Body Boundaries, Consent and Respect', by Jayne Sanders.

Develop a clear way of speaking about consent

Children need to be able to:

- ask for consent
- give consent
- refuse consent.

Give your child examples

Give your child the words they need. Practise sentences like:

"Can I?..."

"Yes, you can..."

"No, I don't like when you..."

"I don't want you to..."

"Please don't touch me..."

It is also important for your child to be able to name their body parts. They need to know the correct language that they can use to express or refuse consent, for example:

"No, I don't want you to touch my arm."

This will help your child to talk openly and clearly about what they do and do not consent to.

The following resource gives the correct names for the body parts and may be helpful to you:

www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-parents/sample-questions-and-answers/

Talk about bodily autonomy and boundaries

Control over their own body

Bodily autonomy means that you have control over what happens to your body. This includes who gets to touch it.

Personal boundaries

Talk to your child about their own personal boundaries. You could do this by talking to your child about what they like and dislike when it comes to physical contact.

For example, while they may like giving hugs to their parents, they may not like hugging someone they know less well.

Other people's personal boundaries

It is also important to encourage your child to respect the personal boundaries of others. An easy place to begin is to encourage children to seek permission before touching someone, for example:

"Can I hold your hand?"

They should also learn to respect when someone says 'No'.

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Recognising and responding to your child's emotions

For your child, understanding their own and other people's emotions is an important part of consent. It helps your child to explain the statements they make, for example:

"I want you to stop touching my arm, it makes me feel scared and I don't like it."

Listen to your child and give them opportunities to express how they are feeling.

Parents often discourage children from showing:

- sadness
- anger
- discomfort.

But learning to identify these emotions can help your child to explain when they are hurt. It also helps them to recognise similar emotions in other children when their actions are making others uncomfortable.

Gut feelings are important

Talk to your child about their 'gut feelings' or 'natural instincts'. Children will often have these types of feelings when they are in a situation that makes them feel:

- weird
- scared
- uncomfortable.

They may not know why they feel like this.

Tell your child that these feelings are sometimes correct. Tell them that if they ever feel like that, they can:

- say 'No'
- leave the situation
- go and get help from someone they trust.

Encourage your child to read facial expressions and body language

Some children will find it easy to read facial expressions and body language. But others may need time and help to do so.

Charade-style guessing games with facial expressions and body language can be a great way to help your child to read body language.

Sometimes you may need to step in where your child has been in a disagreement with another child. Take time to point out the facial expressions and body language that are telling you that the other child is upset:

"I can see Mary is upset because she is frowning, and she has tears in her eyes."

If you say this out loud it will enable your child to take notice of how body language can help us to understand the emotions the other person is trying to communicate.

Talk to your child about how their behaviour affects other people

Explain to your child that our actions and words can affect other people. If we are aware of how we make others feel, we are more likely to understand when someone is giving or refusing consent.

Through stories and while watching movies, explore how characters affect each other. For example, how does the Big Bad Wolf make the Three Little Pigs feel?

For older children, read different versions of a story written from the perspectives of different characters. This can highlight how things can be understood differently by different people. It also shows how important it is to stop and think about a situation from the other person's point of view.

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Help your child to develop critical thinking skills

Critical thinking skills can help children to assess real-life situations and make good decisions about consent.

You can help your child to develop critical thinking skills around consent by discussing different situations. It can help to use stories or videos that show examples where consent is required.

In real life situations, if your child makes a bad choice around consent ask them to 'rewind'. Ask them to consider how they could have handled the situation better or what they would do differently next time.

With older children, consider examples that make it difficult for someone to give consent, for example:

- their age
- substance use
- peer pressure.

Be a role model

It helps your child if you behave in a way that gives your child a good example about consent. You can do this by:

- giving your child an opportunity to make choices
- respecting their wishes about their body.

This will help your child to understand that their voice and opinion is important. They will know that they will be listened to and you will act on what they say.

What does sexual consent mean?

Sexual consent means that both partners engaging in sexual activity understand and give permission for the activity.

Consent must be given every time people engage in sexual activity with each other.

Even when a person consents to a sexual act, they are free to change their mind:

- before the act begins
- at any time before it ends.

You must be at least 17 to be able to give consent

The law protects people in certain situations who are not considered able to give consent, even if they have said 'Yes'.

Lessons and discussions around sexual consent in school should begin by explaining that the age of sexual consent in Ireland is 17 years of age. To protect a young person from pressure to have sex, the law says it is a crime for anyone to have sex with a young person under 17.

This means that children under 17 are not legally old enough to agree to (or consent to) having sex.

More information about sexual consent and the law is available here:

www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/sexual-consent/sexual-consent/

Will my child learn about sexual consent?

In the SPHE curriculum for 5th and 6th class, children learn about:

- sexual intercourse
- conception (joining of egg and sperm)
- birth.

This is explained to them within the context of a committed, loving relationship, (SPHE Curriculum, 1999, p. 58).

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They also learn about how important it is to stick to the rules in society. They learn:

- to recognise inappropriate or unsafe touches
- what to do if they find themselves with people who make them feel unsafe.

They discuss a variety of risky situations and behaviour and assess and evaluate how to avoid and minimise these risks.

They discuss and appreciate the role each person has in keeping others safe.

They identify occasions when their actions could threaten the safety of others (SPHE Curriculum, 1999a, p. 59).

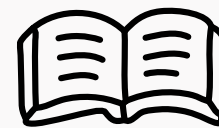
Consent, and in some cases sexual consent, may possibly be highlighted when your child is learning about these topics in 5th and 6th class. However, the focus will be that children under the age of 17 cannot consent to sexual activity.

To find out more about what and how this is taught you can go visit the [Stay Safe](#) website.

The [updated Busy Bodies booklet](#) (2020, p. 48) has a section about sexual consent that will help you when talking about sexual consent with your child. As your child moves to post-primary school, and nears the age of sexual consent, this topic will be explored in more detail.

If you have any questions about your child's learning in relation to consent you should arrange to talk to your child's teacher.

Further reading



- [Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks - Consent](#)
- [Busy Bodies Programme](#)
- [Busy Bodies Videos](#)
- [An introduction to consent](#)
- [What does consent mean?](#)
- [Consent Matters Resources](#)

References

HSE. (2020). Busy Bodies A booklet about puberty and adolescence for you and your parents. Kerry: Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme

NCCA. (1999a). Social, Personal and Health Education. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

NCCA. (1999b). Social Personal and Health Education Teacher Guidelines. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.