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Consent at Every Age

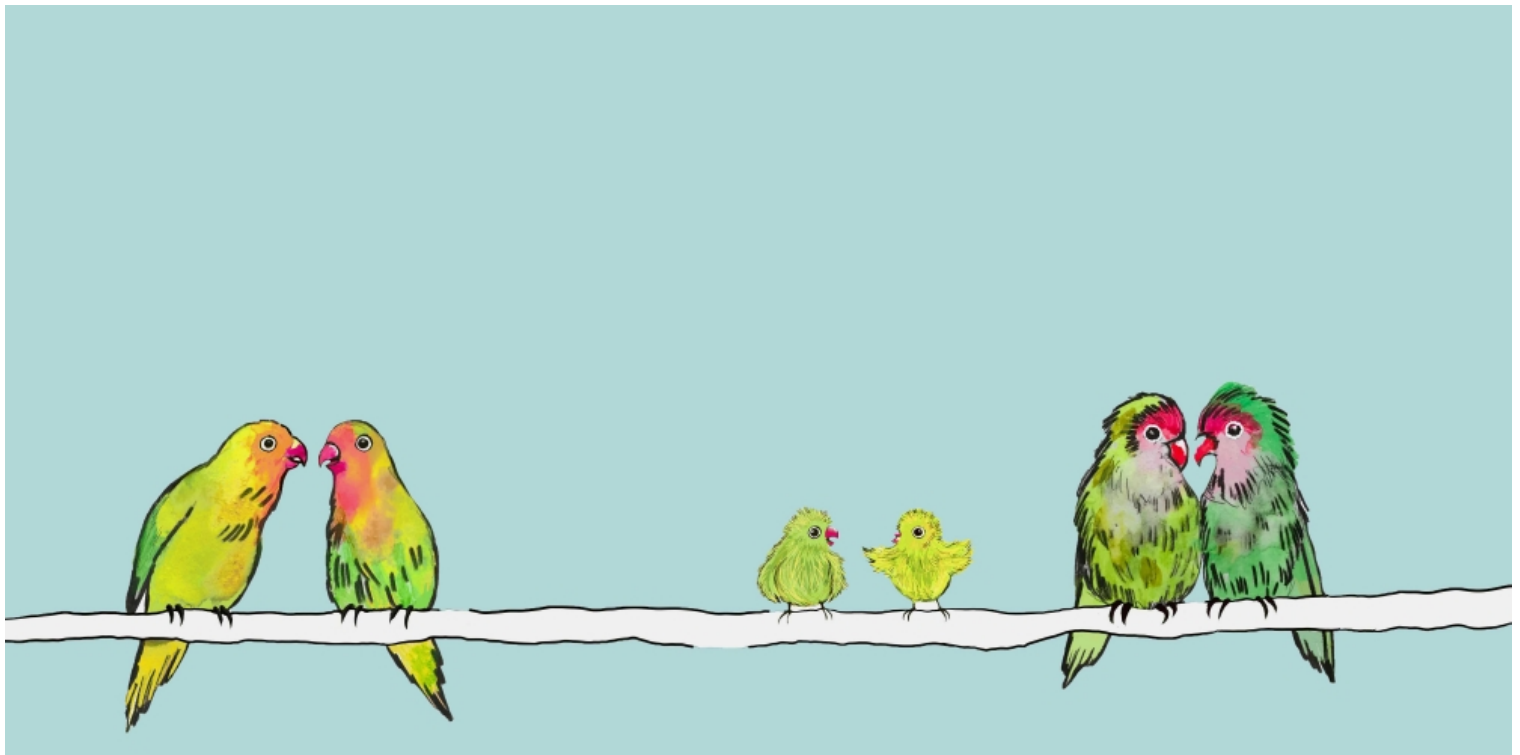
Strategies for educators on how to talk to your students about respecting one another's boundaries — from preschool to high school

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Consent has become a somewhat divisive buzzword in the wake of the #MeToo movement. But at its core, it's an idea that many learn as early as preschool — the notion that we should respect one another's boundaries, in order to be safe, preserve dignity, and build healthy relationships.

For middle school or high school students, discussions around consent will, in part, involve sexuality, but for younger students, the conversation is different. Teaching them about consent can help keep them safe from child predators, but it can also be about simpler things, like whether they want to play a game or get a hug from a

classmate — laying the groundwork for an understanding of sexual relationships much later on, as well as ensuring a safer classroom environment in the present.

Usable Knowledge spoke to educators and researchers, as well as identified resources, on the best ways to discuss consent with different age groups, compiling their ideas into the following strategies for talking about consent with students in early education, elementary school, middle school, and high school:

Early Education

Develop a shared vocabulary, says Gideon Kahn, who has taught in preschools in California and New York. Use a “consistent and clear” vocabulary with students around the *concept* of consent, — simple words like **body, space, and touch**. (“I don’t think I’ve ever used the word ‘consent’ with a three-year-old before,” Kahn says.) The goal is that “if a kid doesn’t want to be hugged by another kid, he can say, ‘This is my body,’ and be understood.”

Lay the social-emotional groundwork. A lot of early education, Kahn says, is centered around giving kids the social-emotional skills to thrive, and these naturally dovetail with the concept of consent and respect. “Emotional intelligence, perspective-taking, empathy — these all allow you to basically understand your own feelings and the feelings of others, and are foundational to respect,” Kahn says.

Teach kids that it’s OK to express hurt. Junlei Li (<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty/junlei-li>), a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is fond of a quote often espoused by Mister Rogers, “Attitudes are caught, not taught.” Listen to children and check in with them about their emotions. Too often, adults try to discourage students from showing sadness, anger, or discomfort, Li says, but learning to identify those emotions can help them advocate for themselves when they’re hurt, as well as develop empathy and recognize similar emotions in other children and adults when their actions are making others uncomfortable. “If a child is really sad, it’s not uncommon for us to tell them, ‘Don’t cry, it’s not that bad,’ or we try to distract them very quickly, so they don’t focus on the sadness,” Li says. “But expressing a certain amount of sadness or anger is important for learning and development.”

Model consent and empower students. Of course, some of consent is skill-based: learning to simply ask questions about what behavior or actions are appropriate. “Would you rather a hug or a high-five?” Give children agency over what is age-appropriate, like what snack to have, or what to read at story time.

Resource:

Boss of My Body (video) (<https://youtu.be/zAALZxa6NCw>)

Elementary school

Break down what consent is. In third grade, “we’re not going to be having conversations about sex and sexual harassment, but there are things all students need to understand about boundaries,” says Liz Kleinrock, who teaches at Citizens of the World Charter School Silver Lake, in Los Angeles. One of Kleinrock’s lessons, in which she and her students broke down what consent means to them, went viral (https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/08/health/california-teacher-explains-consent-trnd/index.html?fbclid=IwAR3cC_p0nwcFExpT64WDb-6nHSE5AjdjIQW9NQ1MJSHYtxMpUozkRNvSkNI) this fall. Some basic ideas explored in the lesson: what it means to give consent, what consent sounds like, and what to say when you don’t want to give consent.

Respect and discuss what students already know. Kleinrock’s students already had insight into where consent comes into play, beyond touching or physical space — questions such as, do you have permission to share something that someone told you in secret? (In a later lesson, students differentiated between secrets that are more like “surprises” and secrets that might mean a friend is in danger and shouldn’t be kept from grown-ups.) “I was impressed that they were able to think about situations from lots of different contexts,” Kleinrock says.

Focus on tone of voice. Elementary students are old enough to understand nuance and to learn that tone of voice and body language are as important as the words being said. In a blog post for Teaching Tolerance (<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/how-my-thirdgraders-and-i-address-consent>), she describes how she play-acted a scenario in which a student asked her for a hug, and she reluctantly said, “Um, OK?” Her students recognized that she was acting uncomfortable, even if she was verbally giving consent. “I want students to know at a very early age that they have the right to lay down boundaries,” she says.

Keep the conversation going. Kleinrock didn’t stop teaching about consent after her lesson gained wide popularity. “It’s not effective as a one-off lesson,” she says. She continues to give students opportunities to practice voicing concern and giving consent — or not. “I want them to have muscle memory experience: ‘This is something I can say,’” she says.

Books recommended by Kleinrock on Teaching Tolerance:

- *My Body! What I Say Goes!* (<https://www.powells.com/book/-9781925089264>) by Jayneen Sanders, illustrated by Anna Hancock (<https://www.powells.com/book/-9781925089264>)
- *Miles Is the Boss of His Body* (<https://www.powells.com/book/-9780989407137>) by Samantha Kurtzman-Counter and Abbie Schiller, illustrated by Valentina Ventimiglia (<https://www.powells.com/book/-9780989407137>)
- *I Said No! A Kid-to-Kid Guide to Keeping Private Parts Private* (<https://www.powells.com/book/-9781878076496>) by Kimberly King and Zack King, illustrated by Sue Rama (<https://www.powells.com/book/-9781878076496>)
- *Personal Space Camp* (<https://www.powells.com/book/-9781931636872>) by Julia Cook, illustrated by Carrie Hartman (<https://www.powells.com/book/-9781931636872>)

Middle school

Remember that it’s a confusing time and that students might be hearing about sex and relationships from unreliable sources. Starting in middle school, students might hear about sex and relationships from their peers, or from the internet. And that can be confusing. In a health education context, remind them that it’s OK to ask questions from adults they trust. “It can be difficult for a middle schooler to parse it all on their own,” says Lauren Schneider, a health educator for Somerville Public Schools in Massachusetts. “Trusted adults can provide helpful guidance as teens learn to navigate all the different messages about sex they are receiving.”

Start defining what sexual harassment is. Schneider and her students talk through scenarios in which an adult bothers a child, and a child bothers another child. The emphasis, Schneider says, stays the same as it does with younger children: “Nobody gets to touch you without your permission” — and you should be respectful of others’ boundaries, as well.

Emphasize the importance of talking with a trusted adult. “At this age, some students think, ‘Well adults just don’t understand,’” Schneider says. “I remind my students, though, that for teachers and parents, it’s our job to keep them safe” and that if they have an interaction they’re uncomfortable with, with either a peer or an adult, they should tell an adult who they trust.

Begin talking about romantic relationships. Kids might not be dating in middle school, but they’re likely at least to be thinking about it. “We talk about how if two partners are going to do something, they have to agree to do it together,” be it holding hands or kissing, or even just talking, says Schneider. She also has kids practice responses when enforcing their own boundaries, so they have an internal script to follow when the need arises.

Resources:

- Consent: It’s as Easy as Tea (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQbei5JGiT8>) (video)
- Teaching Consent Doesn’t Have to be Hard (<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/teaching-consent-doesnt-have-to-be-hard>)

High school

Asking consent isn't just for straight boys. Most victims of sexual assault are women, and most perpetrators are men, and it's likely that heterosexual boys are getting more pressure to coerce girls into sex than the other way around. However, the authors of a report (https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b7c56e255b02c683659fe43/t/5bd51a0324a69425bd079b59/1540692500558/mcc_ from Making Caring Common, a project at HGSE, emphasize that all teens, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, can benefit from thinking deeply about how to engage with boundaries in relationships in an ethical, caring manner.

Talk about consent and alcohol. Oftentimes, consent gets in the news when alcohol is involved, as in the allegations against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who was accused of sexually assaulting a classmate at a high school party. By high school, students should be aware of the role alcohol or other mind-altering substances plays in consent. Remember that talking about drinking is separate from encouraging drinking. In Sharon Lamb's *Sex Ed for Caring Schools* (<https://www.amazon.com/Sex-Caring-Schools-Ethics-Based-Curriculum/dp/080775398X>), she recommends asking students to discuss several scenarios in which alcohol might affect consent, like if you can't tell whether the person you're with is too intoxicated to give consent. Deep thinking about the ethics of sexual encounters and alcohol from the safe space of a classroom will help guide students' decision-making in real life.

Think about consent across disciplines. While some conversations about sex ed are best left to health educators, consent can also come up in other classes, particularly history or literature. For example, KQED developed a lesson plan focusing on the history of fighting against sexual harassment (<https://ww2.kqed.org/lowdown/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2017/12/The-fight-against-sexual-harassment-lesson-plan.pdf>).

Part of a special series about preventing sexual harassment at school. Read the whole series (<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/uk/preventing-sexual-harassment-school>).

Illustration by Wilhelmina Peragine



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Sandy Keith

Preview the Tea video before playing it for middle school students. I'd recommend role playing this instead of using the video - unless you commonly use the F word in class.

Like · Reply · 44w



Alexa Miller

There is also a clean version on youtube!

Like · Reply · 41w



Amelia Sherritt

Thank you for pointing this out! This would have been a disaster if I had just shared the link with my class instead of viewing it first!

Like · Reply · 40w



Naptime Publishing

Some Cats Just Want to be Looked At is the perfect board book for preschoolers to introduce consent. It can be found at <http://nicolelesavoy.com>

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