

# How do we effectively teach sexual consent?

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The researchers recommended future sexual consent education programs also need to be inclusive, interactive, and participatory. Credit: University of New South Wales

In early 2021, former high school student Chanel Contos launched a petition calling for sexual consent education to be taught earlier. The petition came about because of an Instagram Story poll she conducted,

asking her followers whether they had encountered sexual assault during their high school years. The poll received 1,500 views and 300 responses, and 205 people responded 'yes' to the question.

The petition elicited more revelations of disturbing incidents of [sexual assault](#), with over 6,600 individuals sharing their testimonials. Since its launch, the petition has been signed by more than 44,000 Australians.

So how do we educate young people about sexual consent effectively? A recent study conducted by researchers at the Kirby Institute and the School of Population Health at UNSW Medicine & Health identified several themes that reflected the complexities of sexual consent and issues in global sex and relationships [education](#).

By conducting a systemic review of studies examining sexual consent education programs among young people, the researchers identified several issues with current sexual consent education, including:

- Many programs were short, one-off, 1–2-hour sessions, and in university settings.
- They often framed consent within the context of risks and potential negative impacts of sexual activity, as opposed to healthy relationships.
- Programs rarely involved young people in co-design, which is critical to meeting their needs.
- Many programs were not inclusive enough and lacked diversity.

## **A sex-positive approach**

Senior author of the study, Dr. Allie Carter from the Kirby Institute, said sex-negativity is common in fear-based school sex education.

"It's perhaps not surprising that we found many sexual consent education

programs framed consent within the context of risks and potential negative impacts of sexual activity. This approach creates stigma and shame and can make it challenging for young people to ask questions and talk about sex and healthy relationships."

Dr. Carter, who is also an Associate of the Australian Human Rights Institute, said sexual consent education programs should be sex-positive, meaning discussions should be open, honest, and non-judgmental, and should acknowledge the benefits of consensual, pleasurable sex and healthy relationships.

"Bearing in mind age appropriateness, examples of topics include not only what consent is and what sexual assault is, but also things like developing a positive relationship with your body; identifying your personal values surrounding sex; understanding your right to have autonomy in decisions involving your body; setting healthy sexual boundaries with yourself and others, and being open and communicating with your partner about your wants and needs including what you do not want," explained Dr. Carter.

She said programs should also prioritize critical analysis of the range of factors that can influence how we negotiate sexual encounters with one another.

"This includes unequal power relationships, violence-supportive attitudes, gender role expectations, male-controlled party culture and heavy alcohol consumption. These factors, among others, can create environments that enable not only sexual assault but also consensual sexual experiences that may feel painful, unwanted, uncomfortable, or pressured."

## **When to teach sexual consent education**

On average, Australians are sexually active by ages 16 -17. Dr. Carter said sexual consent education should be taught in an age-appropriate way from primary school to ensure young people understand—before they are sexually active—that each human being has a right to autonomy and self-determination over their own body.

"It's important to teach young people, including little kids, about consent and their bodies as young as possible—long before it has anything to do with sex—scaffolding into more complex issues with each year," said Dr. Carter.

"For example, early education can center around learning the correct names for body parts, respecting a child's choices about touch, teaching children to respect other people's boundaries, asking for consent, and identifying and expressing feelings."

Dr. Carter said this can lay the foundation for open, frank, and informative discussions about sexual consent with teenagers, from helping them develop empathy for others to building positive relationship skills.

The researchers also recommended a whole-school approach to sexual consent education. This approach advocates that a consistent set of policies, principles and values pertaining to consent and respectful relationships is promoted and embodied across a school or college setting.

"A whole-school approach involves both formal and informal practices and conversations in and outside of the classroom, involving multiple audiences across the school that includes parents, teachers and students," said first author of the study, Olivia Burton from the School of Population Health.

She said this approach should be more widely utilized in future programs, as reducing violence requires not just educating students, but changing culture.

"Education needs to move beyond the individual and interpersonal level—where one person assaults another—and include a critical discussion of the structural and institutional environments that enable or allow this behavior."

## **Involve young people in program development**

Ms Burton said it's important to involve young people in the design and delivery of consent education to ensure the program content and outcomes are acceptable, appropriate, and responsive to young people's unique needs and social environments.

"A recent example where inclusion and representation of young people's voices were missing was the federal government's [milkshake consent video](#), which included confusing metaphors and patronized young people, causing significant backlash."

Consent Labs CEO and co-founder Angie Wan said it makes sense for young people to be involved in sexual consent program development and facilitation, as young people are the audience they are targeting.

"We developed Consent Labs because we felt there were huge gaps in the way sex education was being presented. There was a complete lack of focus on consent and communication. Often, it was a complete skirting around anything sex-related, or lessons were laden with euphemisms, misinformation, and awkwardness.

"There is a misconception that if we don't talk about sex, we're 'preserving the innocence' of young people but that is not true at all.

Statistics show that young people in high school are engaging in sexual acts and in sexting. If there's no proactive education, then young people aren't able to make informed choices for themselves that is grounded in evidence and with the backing of experts," said Ms Wan.

Ms Wan explained they wanted to develop a realistic program that addressed experiences young people had and didn't gloss over the surface, considering diverse perspectives.

## **Programs should be interactive and inclusive**

The researchers recommended future sexual consent education programs also need to be inclusive, interactive, and participatory. Ms Burton said this means facilitating discussion between students to learn and engage with each other in and out of the classroom. She said it's also recommended for programs to engage young people through multiple learning styles and methods, such as using presentations, drawing, theater, and problem-solving games.

"This is based on best practice research that interactive education is more effective for [young people](#) to understand and personally engage in what they are learning," explained Ms Burton.

A program that is inclusive means ensuring that diverse communities—on the basis of sexuality, ethnicity, disability and class—are included in [program](#) development and implementation, she said.

"Research indicates there are higher rates of violence against communities that are socially, politically, and economically marginalized, usually by men. Our research also highlighted that many consent programs—at least those that we found in the peer-reviewed literature—were predominately targeted toward white heterosexual

women.

"Young women cannot be held solely responsible for changing consent culture. It is important for all people to be included in consent education and for wider social, political, and cultural shifts about [consent](#).

Programs must also better prioritize social justice issues by including discussion of sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism and their impact on sexual health inequities."

## Addressing the root cause at a societal level

The researchers said changing [sexual consent](#) culture needs to be more than relying on schools to implement programs.

"It needs an intersectoral approach to ensure that governments invest in progressive programming and policies to address the root causes of sexual violence at the institutional and societal level and promote social justice, sexual agency, and health."

**More information:** Olivia Burton et al, Teaching sexual consent to young people in education settings: a narrative systematic review, *Sex Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/14681811.2021.2018676](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2021.2018676)

Provided by University of New South Wales

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