

Teenage boys uncertain about navigating consent and sexual culture, new study finds

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While typical consent education in secondary schools may rationalize or provide a "road map" for consent, teenage boys feel uncertain and anxious about navigating the perceived realities of youth sexual culture,

according to new research from the University of Surrey.

The research explores how boys are being taught about [consent](#) at school and how they relate to and interpret educational messages about consent.

The study involved classroom observations, individual focus groups with boys, and discussions with teachers. Participating schools included a co-educational academy in a relatively middle-class, monocultural (white British) semi-rural area; a boys' academy in a socioeconomically deprived [urban area](#) serving predominantly black and minority ethnic pupils; and an independent boys' school in an urban area serving a relatively socioeconomically privileged cohort.

Dr. Emily Setty, author of the study and senior lecturer in criminology said, "Abstractly, most of the boys found these lessons helpful and as providing a straightforward set of strictures for them to follow. Yet, it seemed they were often framed as initiators of sex and it was clear that they struggled with some of the tensions and dilemmas that they face, as initiators, to secure consent from a [sexual partner](#)."

"I believe we need to reflect on the premise and objectives of consent [education](#). My discussions with the boys often explored the nature of 'choice' and the constraints on choice that exist."

"Rather than hoping that knowledge will change behavior in a linear and desired fashion, we may need to consider why it doesn't. We can then start to use consent education to enable young people to practice and develop the skills and emotional literacy required to uphold their own and one another's rights to free and informed choice."

"Education must deal with the realities of ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty, rather than trying to smooth this over through rationalized consent education. The road to consensual and affirming sex and

relationships is far from smooth and we need to go further in helping young people navigate the bends and bumps—both anticipated and encountered."

Educating young people about consent in schools in England is required as part of the now-statutory Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum.

School-related sexual violence, abuse, and harassment (SVAH) among young people is recognized as a global problem. In July 2020, the Everyone's Invited website was created, which encouraged young people to share testimonials about their experiences of SVAH in schools. There are now over 55,000 testimonials, with over 3,000 schools named. A rapid response report conducted by UK schools' regulator Ofsted followed this and detailed a worrying normalization of SVAH in state and independent schools and colleges. It was identified that girls and gender non-conforming [young people](#) are disproportionately likely to be victims of SVAH, while boys are more likely to perpetrate SVAH.

Setty continued, "Typically, RSHE about sexual consent in England educates about the law and 'affirmative consent'—which places responsibility on initiators of sex to secure consent through clear and direct agreement."

"However, this presents consent as something to be obtained as a minimal requirement rather than to be 'enthusiastically' established, which often reduces the ability of boys to perceive themselves as having rights to their own sexual consent. Furthermore, it was found that this often creates a sense of responsibility, even burden, that may manifest in resistant and hostile attitudes."

While the boys in the study believed that boys responsible for SVAH may have problems with impulse control and [self-regulation](#), many of

them articulated a personal lack of emotional literacy and [self-knowledge](#). They perceived a lack of space to engage with and explore their feelings and found it difficult to know how they could express emotions during sexual interactions.

The findings are published in the journal *Sex Roles*.

More information: Emily Setty, Educating Teenage Boys About Consent: The Law and Affirmative Consent in Boys' Socio-Sexual Cultures and Subjectivities, *Sex Roles* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-022-01335-9](#)

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