

# CONSENT ... IT STARTS WITH A CONVERSATION.

## SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS MONTH 2023

### CONVERSATION STARTER

Boundaries, communication and mutual respect are all part of the conversation when it comes to consent. Although it may feel awkward or embarrassing to talk about, obtaining consent is not optional ... it's essential. Consent is necessary when you are considering engaging in any form of physical or sexual activity with a partner. While it can feel uncomfortable at first, asking for consent doesn't have to be complicated! This year's Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) poster and conversation starter share how open-ended questions, naming intentions and expressing personal comfort levels can help members start an open, ongoing conversation on consent.

In this document, questions to ask and points to make verbatim are in **bold**. Notes and instructions for facilitators are in *italics*.

### INTRODUCTION

*Share the print version of the educational poster or show a digital copy in a PowerPoint presentation to the chapter.*

*Before starting the conversation, share that you will be facilitating a discussion on consent and consensual sexual activity. Acknowledge that this conversation may be emotionally or mentally triggering for members to engage in. Give each participant permission to step away from the discussion at any time for their personal well-being.*

Let's start by creating a shared understanding of what consent is. **RAINN** (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, defines consent as "an agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity. Consent is an ongoing process of discussing boundaries and [determining] what you're comfortable with."

Consent also extends beyond sexual behavior. It includes asking for permission for non-sexual physical intimacy like hugging, cuddling, holding hands, kissing or simply being in someone else's personal space. Consent is always a prerequisite, especially when it involves sexual activity. Consent is not exclusive to in-person activity – it is also necessary in virtual or digital interactions.

### HOW TO ASK FOR CONSENT

**When should you ask for consent?**

*Allow members to respond.*

Before initiating any form of physical, romantic, sexual or intimate activity, ask your partner for consent. No matter if you are with a new partner for the first time or in a long-term relationship, asking for consent is a critical part of the conversation every time regardless of the type of activity. Asking for consent in a non-sexual situation or setting can give you and your partner equal space to make a decision free from pressure.

## How can you set boundaries with a partner?

### *Allow members to respond.*

Defining personal boundaries is a healthy way to establish what you are comfortable with and what you are unwilling to engage or participate in with a partner. The first step to setting boundaries is to determine your own! Decide your comfort levels with different activities first before starting a conversation on consent. Be prepared to share your limits and expectations to model respect and trust.

When asking your partner to share their boundaries:

- Actively listen.
- Respect their limits.
- Ask clarifying questions to help ensure there is a mutual understanding of one another's comfort levels with different activities.
- Talk openly about wants and needs.
- Understand that boundaries can change over time.

## What are ways you can ask for consent?

### *Allow members to respond.*

Asking for consent begins with open-ended questions. Clearly stating your questions and being specific with your intentions involves transparency in any consensual activity. Consent also requires open, ongoing communication and asking without expectations. Naming and describing what you are interested or willing to engage in with a partner helps to reinforce your boundaries.

Example of ways to ask for consent:

- “Do you want to ...?”
- “How do you feel about ...?”
- “Are you comfortable with ...?”
- “Would you be open to trying ...?”
- “Is it OK if I ...?”
- “What do you need to feel comfortable or safe when we ...?”
- “What boundaries do you have that I need to respect?”

## What can prevent someone from being able to give consent?

### *Allow members to respond.*

Consent is always voluntary and must be given willingly by a partner. Threatening behavior, acts of physical/mental/emotional violence or force do not equate to consensual activity. Consent cannot be given if you or a partner are:

- Under the influence of alcohol, drugs or other illicit or illegal substances
- Asleep, unconscious, non-responsive or incapacitated
- Pressured to consent through fear, intimidation or coercion
- Under the legal age of consent, as defined by the law

If someone has given consent in the past to certain physical or sexual activity, it does not automatically imply permission for future interactions. Never assume consent is being given. It's your responsibility to ask and confirm if they are giving their permission. With every new act, make consent a normal part of the conversation.

## GIVING AND RECEIVING CONSENT

### How can you tell if someone is giving you consent?

#### *Allow members to respond.*

Consent is a choice that each participant gets to independently make in any situation. Once you have asked for someone's consent, actively listen for their response and patiently wait for their reply.

If you and your partner both clearly and enthusiastically say "yes," you can move forward with engaging in the activity that was agreed upon with your boundaries in place. If either person begins to feel uncomfortable or does not want to continue, they have the ability to take their consent back or ask to stop altogether. Also, giving consent to one activity also does not mean consent is given to all activities. Stay within the boundaries you set and respect one another.

Not all communication is verbal. Pay attention to nonverbal cues (e.g., body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc.) that affirm a "yes" response and show that your partner is interested in engaging in the same activities as you. Remember: both verbal and nonverbal communication are needed to ensure that consent is reciprocated. Nonverbal consent may include:

- Head nodding
- Direct eye contact
- Embracing physical touch
- Laughing or smiling
- Actively initiating and/or participating in sexual activity

### What if someone says "no"?

#### *Allow members to respond.*

Accept that "no means no" and be supportive of their decision. While rejection may hurt your feelings in the moment, it's more important to respect someone's answer and not try to pressure them into changing their mind.

Saying "I guess," "maybe" or "I don't know" are not examples of explicit consent. If someone is unsure, treat it the same as someone saying "no" to respect that they are not ready to make a decision. Silence, hesitation or a lack of response should not be assumed to be someone giving their consent either. Refusing to consent can also be expressed through nonverbal communication, which can look like:

- Avoiding eye contact
- Shaking head "no"
- Pulling away from physical touch
- Turning head away
- Crying
- Tense or still body movement

Physiological responses or biological reactions are involuntary and should not be perceived as permission to engage in sexual activity. Consent can only be valid if given freely by a person using verbal and nonverbal communication.

## KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

Consent is more than a one-time talk – it’s an ongoing conversation. Acknowledge that consent can change during a physical interaction, meaning it can be reversed or revoked at any time and for any reason. Checking in with your partner regularly can ensure that you are maintaining open channels of communication. This may sound like:

- “Do you want to keep going?”
- “Is this still comfortable for you?”
- “How do you feel about it? It’s OK if you’re not into this anymore.”
- “Do you want to take a break?”
- “Let me know if you want to stop at any time.”

If someone withdraws their consent, stop engaging in physical or sexual activity immediately. Remember: “no” is a complete sentence. Accept their answer by not pressuring them to change their response or justify their decision.

## CONCLUSION

Consent is a two-way practice. It requires both you and your partner to communicate wants, needs, boundaries and expectations before escalating into physical or sexual activity. By asking for consent, each person can give permission to what they agree to and share what their limits are. It also allows you and your partner to make choices about your sexual health and empower one another to continue to engage in intimacy at your comfort level. Consent can be as simple as inviting a conversation. So start with asking a question!

### Need to connect with a trained support specialist?

- Visit the [National Sexual Assault Hotline Chat](#) or call 800-656-HOPE (4673).

### References:

- [RAINN: “What Consent Looks Like”](#)
- [National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\): “Your Consent Guide”](#)
- [Love is Respect: “What consent does—and doesn’t—look like”](#)

