ACTIVE*
CONSENT

# ACTIVE* CONSENT FOR SCHOOL COMMUNITIES:

## OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOOLS PROGRAMME AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh

# FUNDERS AND PARTNERS

The **Active* Consent** programme is based at **NUI Galway** and works to support young people, communities, and organisations to achieve the knowledge, skills, and practices essential to positive, assertive consent. The programme uses in-person and online strategies to reach participants, informed by extensive research activity and through multiple disciplines such as psychology, drama, and health promotion. Active* Consent focuses on schools, colleges, and sports as key settings to support a culture of positive change.

**Lifes2good Foundation** is the primary funder of the Active* Consent programme. It is a Galway-based registered charity with a primary focus on women and children in situations of vulnerability. It supports preventative as well as remedial strategies. The charity subscribes to a multi-faceted approach and supports projects, programmes, and initiatives that focus on attitudinal and behavioural change. Visit: www.lifes2goodfoundation.ie/

**Rethink Ireland** is a non-profit organisation that provides grants, supports and other development resources to charities and social enterprises that make a difference in Irish society. Active* Consent is an awardee of Rethink Ireland's Arts to Impact fund, which has supported initiatives that use the arts and culture as a means to create positive social impact in Ireland.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge and thank all the young people, teachers, parents, and collaborators who have worked with us since 2019 to reach this point of launching the Active* Consent programme for school communities. These include organisations such as Sexual Health West, the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, and many individual schools or school networks.

While the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was to disrupt the development of this programme, we managed to work in partnership with all stakeholders in the schools that took part in our surveys and workshops. We feel privileged to have been able to do so in the midst of so many other pressures experienced by the schools over this time.

We would like to acknowledge and thank our funders without whom the breadth and depth of our work would not be possible. Lifes2good Foundation have believed in our vison since 2019, as has Rethink Ireland, NUI Galway, and the Galway University Foundation. The programme team are also very grateful for the support we have received from Government agencies and departments. Finally, we want to thank all the members of the Active* Consent team, past and present, who together have worked as a team to deliver this integrated and interdisciplinary programme with the goal of sustaining the momentum of proactive consent awareness raising, education, and training.

# ACTIVE* CONSENT FOR SCHOOLS MEANS BRINGING EVIDENCE-BASED RESOURCES INTO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY TO SUPPORT PUPILS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS OR GUARDIANS WITH AWARENESS, EDUCATION OR TRAINING

# AIMS OF THE ACTIVE* CONSENT SCHOOLS PROGRAMME REPORT

This report describes a new programme to support adolescents to achieve positive, active consent if they are sexually active. It is primarily targeted at the members of school communities, such as young people, parents, and teachers, but is relevant more broadly to other community settings. The programme draws on research carried out by the Active* Consent team to create new resources for a schools population.

The range of research used to devise the schools programme included:

- A survey of over 600 school pupils.
- A range of studies with 4,000 young adults and parents on critical thinking about pornography.
- Surveys and focus groups drawn from over 3,000 young adults who had viewed a live consent drama.
- Youth panels and consultation with the Irish Second-Level Students' Union.
- Piloting and evaluating the schools consent workshop with nearly 1,000 school pupils, 350 parents, and more than 30 teachers who took part in training.

The programme has four integrated components:

- A schools consent workshop designed for school pupils in Transition Year and Fifth Year.
- The 'Sex on Our Screens' sexual media eLearning resource for teenagers.
- The 'How I Learned About Consent' theatrical film.
- Awareness raising and training resources for parents, teachers and other professionals.

The aim of this report is to introduce the programme and describe each of the components. The report also reviews the findings of the Active* Consent survey, which provides the first in-depth exploration of consent communication among Irish teenagers. It also highlights the consent workshop in particular and previews the launch of 'Sex on Our Screens' and 'How I Learned About Consent' later in 2021.

# INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing recognition internationally that adolescent sexual health education should be delivered using a holistic approach. This takes into account both positive rights to sexual development and expression as well as the right to freedom from harassment and violence (UNESCO, 2018). These developments find expression in the Irish educational system through planned initiatives and recently emerging actions:

- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has documented second level student requests for more education on consent, communication, and relationships which will roll out to inform curricular reform (NCCA, 2019).
- In the third level sector, the Consent Framework has highlighted the importance of a socio-ecological model that includes training for staff and culture change alongside direct input to students on consent topics including communication, relationships, alcohol use, and peer support (Department of Education & Skills, 2019).

These positive developments provide opportunities for innovation and systems change, which in turn will support the goals of holistic sexual health education. The opportunity for innovation will be made sustainable by appropriate training of teachers, awareness raising for other stakeholders, and the design of meaningful, research-driven educational resources for young people.

The Active* Consent programme has been at the forefront of the national response to the challenges and opportunities of the Consent Framework in the third level sector (Burke et al., 2020; McIvor et al., 2020; MacNeela et al., 2018). Given the emerging nature of these policies and guidance at school level, a comparable programme of primary research and systematic implementation is required as a basis for action, with the goal of empowering young people and their supporters on the developmental skills that underpin active, positive consent.

The Active* Consent schools programme responds to this need, building on a track record of research and intervention development since 2013 to make the following contributions:

- Developing for the first time a research-based model of adolescent consent communication for Irish teenagers, which explores beliefs about consent and responses to consent scenarios.
- Designing and piloting a sexual consent workshop for teenagers in schools, incorporating a holistic approach through awareness raising for parents and by meeting teachers' training needs.
- Launching an integrated schools programme rolling out during 2021-22, including an eLearning package for teenagers on sexual media and a film theatrical drama on consent, anchored by an Online Learning Hub made available to the public with the support of the Department of Justice and the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science.

This report is based on a schools survey of 613 teenagers, pilot testing of the consent workshop with 993 Transition Year and Fifth Year students, piloting of training with 31 teachers, and parent awareness raising seminars with 353 parents. The sexual media resource for adolescents draws on research with over 4,000 college students on their exposure to pornography as teenagers and a survey with 530 parents. The consent drama 'The Kinds of Sex You *Might* Have at College' has provided a template to design a theatrical film for teenagers, building on the live drama that was viewed by 3,000 young adults.

This gives an indication of the breadth and scale of research and development that the Active* Consent programme brings to designing this schools programme. Working with young people in second level education is a central part of the Active* Consent programme of research and outreach being carried out between 2019-2022 with the support of Lifes2good Foundation, Rethink Ireland, and NUI Galway. The ethos for the programme is evidence-driven and applied, using in-person, online, and multi-media strategies to design resources that meet the needs of target groups and stakeholders.

The development process begins with research and progresses through consultation, piloting, and scaling to result in a set of resources capable of being delivered in a sustainable, monitored approach.

# OUR PROCESS


The Active* Consent schools programme includes four components that are founded on research and that work together as an integrated experience for young people supported by awareness raising for parents and training for teachers and other professionals:

# SCHOOL RESEARCH AND ACTION CYCLE

Research on consent knowledge and responses among young people at school

Consent workshop

Support awareness and training needs for parents and teachers via the Active* Consent Digital Hub

Sexual media eLearning resource

Filmed consent drama resource

The schools programme is founded on the ecological approach that has been endorsed by guideline documents and expert advice on addressing the need for culture change (Willis & Jozkowski, 2018). It does this by reaching out to young people, teachers, and the wider school community through a variety of means that invite personal reflection, peer discussion, and shared group experiences.

Acknowledging that young people's social ecology is digital as well as in person, the Active* Consent sexual media eLearning package encourages critical thinking on pornography. This recognises that teenagers may be affected directly through their own consumption of pornography or as a result of pornography use by their sexual partners and peers.

The schools programme is intended to provide research-based resources and structured learning experiences framed around the achievement of positive, active consent. The method of engagement is practical, interactive and non-judgemental, consistent with findings on the preferences that young people have for sexual health education (Allen, 2005, 2008).

The goals of consent programming for young people are to develop consent preparedness and capacity by:

- Being confident in their personal knowledge of consent as ongoing, mutual and freely given (OMFG), supported by an understanding of how issues such as gender, sexuality, relationship status, and the use of alcohol or drugs impact on consent.
- Possessing consent communication skills, including verbal and non-verbal approaches to consent that are appropriate to the types of intimacy that they are engaged in.
- Challenging negative and/or non-consensual peer attitudes and behaviours, using safe and appropriate strategies to advocate for equality and respect.
- Supporting themselves and their peers to access appropriate supports and services if they have a negative experience.

The programme goals stem from common threads apparent in recent Irish research on adolescents (D'Eath et al., 2020; Walsh, 2021) and young adults (Burke et al., 2020; MacNeela et al., 2017, 2018, McIvor et al., 2020). This research leads the Active* Consent programme to call for initiatives for young people that Support, Encourage, and Challenge: (a) Support for the strengths and resources that young people already possess for positive, active consent; (b) Encouragement for young people who experience embarrassment or social concerns about consent; and (c) Enable young people to challenge misperceptions of peer attitudes and behaviours, in particular those actions that are not consistent with positive values for respect and equality endorsed by young people.

Considerable research attention has been given in recent years to studying experiences of harassment and sexual violence among adolescents (Ofsted, 2021; Walsh, 2021). In turn school-based education and skills development programmes have been designed as a response to the high level of these problems that have been identified, such as the Manuela programme from Tusla and the rape crisis centre movement (D'Eath et al., 2020).

In comparison, although sexual consent has emerged as a highly topical issue in the past decade, there is relatively little research evidence on how adolescents engage in consent communication and respond to complex, real-life consent scenarios. This reflects an international issue whereby the development of consent awareness and education programmes for teenagers is still at an early stage (The Government of the United Kingdom, 2014).

Yet sexual consent education has been advocated as essential, not only in safeguarding young people from harm but also in equipping them with the values and skills needed to ensure that sexual encounters are equitable and mutually pleasurable (The Government of the United Kingdom, 2014; International Planned Parenthood Federation [IPPF], 2010; NCCA, 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2010). In addition, facilitating adolescent learning on respect for one another's boundaries is encouraged to promote shared societal values on sexual autonomy without fear of shame or judgment (IPPF, 2010; UNESCO, 2018). There is a growing body of research which highlights young people's interest in learning more about the positive, relational aspects of sexual health (Bauer et al., 2020; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020; NCCA, 2019; Nolan, 2018; Pound et al., 2017).

The Active* Consent schools programme is designed to complement existing programmes that address sexual health or sexual violence. It takes practical steps to help realise the vision of having high quality consent education resources in place to engage and interest young people, prompting group discussion as well as personal reflection. The programme is founded on ecological principles that see young people, teaching professionals, families and other supporters comprising a community, emphasising culture change to ensure that young people possess relevant knowledge, have the skills they need, and can access supports when required.

# CONSENT COMMUNICATION

The Active* Consent programme works from the definition of consent given by Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999, p. 259), that it is "the freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness to engage in sexual activity." The legal definition is also incorporated in programming, that "a person consents to a sexual act if he or she freely and voluntarily agrees to engage in that act" (Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 2017, s. 48.9.1). The principle of consent in these definitions is founded on the achievement of communication – ideally going beyond giving permission or agreement to the point where communication leads to a shared, mutual understanding. While these principles have been identified in research as being endorsed by young people, the same work shows contradictions in how these principles are applied (Holmström et al., 2020; Javidi et al., 2020).

Young people communicate consent in varied ways (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; MacNeela et al., 2018; D'Eath et al., 2020). Jozkowski and Peterson (2014) included five consent strategies in a self-report measure of consent behaviours for sexual intercourse for young adults. Verbal consent strategies identified by Jozkowski and Peterson (2014) in their work with U.S. college students included: Telling the other person what you want sexually, saying that you want to engage in sex, asking the partner if they want to be intimate, talking about intimacy, giving permission, or saying it is okay to have sexual activity. Three nonverbal strategies were included in the measure, demonstrating the complex differences between behaviours in this category. The first of these, nonverbal consent, includes smiling, moving closer, foreplay, and body language. Passive consent refers to not resisting a partner's advances, not telling the person to stop, and letting the person engage in touching or sex. Initiator behaviours include starting intimacy to see how the other person reacts, to 'make a move', or to keep moving forward until the partner stops them. The final type is 'removal strategies', which vary from asking someone if they want to come back home to going somewhere private with the other person.

While these means of communication may be used interchangeably during intimacy, verbal consent may be perceived as awkward or embarrassing. This results in indirect consent being relied on as the basis for consent communication in many cases (O'Byrne, et al., 2008; Humphreys, 2004). Indirect or tacit consent is problematic since sexual activity without clear consent can contribute to unwanted sexual experiences and sexual violence (Jozkowski & Satinsky, 2013; Silke et al., 2017). Accordingly, the Active* Consent programme supports the achievement of direct, verbal consent, but only in the manner in which young people are comfortable integrating it with their gender and sexual identity, personal experience, and preferences as individuals and sexual partners. The programme works to support young people to feel confident with consent, being empowered as 'sexual citizens' with awareness of their rights and responsibilities (Aggleton et al., 2018). The programme reaches beyond identifying *types* of consent with young people, towards a focus on consent *communication*. This entails a mode of engagement that does not didactically teach young people that 'no means no' and 'yes means yes'. Rather, young people are trusted, as individuals, couples and peer groups, to be capable of identifying and learning how to respond to the complexities and grey areas that can be involved in consent communication and sexual decision-making.

The wider context for a focus on consent communication is the high levels of sexual violence and harassment that have been identified among young adults in Ireland (Burke et al., 2020) and more recently among adolescents (Walsh, 2021). These findings echo research carried out internationally (Bauer et al., 2020; Javidi et al., 2020; Ofsted 2021). Although the Active* Consent programme adopts a sex-positive approach that recognises the importance of conversations about mutual pleasure, the security of those conversations is based on addressing the risks to safety experienced by young people in Ireland.

# CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AFFECTING CONSENT

The impact of contextual features of young people's lives and experiences of intimacy overlap across consent, sexual violence and harassment, underlining the importance of incorporating these factors into the Active* Consent schools programme. Contextual factors were acknowledged in Walsh's (2021) recent report, concluding that the major contributing factors for sexual harassment among Irish adolescents include lack of adequate RSE within educational settings, unsupportive social norms, and gender inequality. Early research by the Active* Consent team, supported by Rape Crisis Network Ireland, identified that young people see consent having "grey areas" (MacNeela et al., 2014). Many of the grey areas arise from the context in which consent and intimacy take place in real life encounters. These influences that arise from society and culture can act

# THE MANUELA PROGRAMME SURVEY SHOWED A POSITIVE BASE OF CONSENT ATTITUDES AND KNOWLEDGE

as constraints on confidence, knowledge, and skills, and may contribute to adoption of passive or tacit consent (Bauer et al., 2020; Fantasia, 2011; Javidi et al., 2020; Jozkowski & Humphreys, 2014; NCCA, 2019, Walsh, 2021). Several contextual factors relevant to consent have been identified and discussed in the literature. These include:

- Traditional gender roles framed by expectations for male sexual initiation and female gatekeeping in heterosexual encounters (Baldwin-White, 2019; Hirsch et al., 2019). Research on LGBTQI+ youth is less developed but now emerging (Beres et al., 2004; Griner et al., 2021).
- The impact of alcohol and drug consumption on capacity alongside false beliefs about the continued ability to give consent and engage in sexual decision-making while under the influence (Drouin et al., 2018; Jozkowski & Satinsky, 2013; Orchowski et al., 2020).
- Sexual scripts that give rise to expectations for how consent is to take place in relationships or in casual encounters (Marcantonio et al., 2018; Groggel et al., 2021).

Gender roles have been repeatedly explored by researchers as a core contextual factor that affects consent. Recent studies have demonstrated how interpretations of consent are influenced by sexual double standards (Jozkowski et al., 2017, 2018). Active* Consent promotes critical reflection on gendered sexual scripts as one highly visible reflection of social and cultural conditions (Gavey et al., 2021; Hills et al 2021; Walsh 2021). Traditional heterosexual sexual scripts identify females as the gatekeepers of sex who either accept or deny the initiator's advances, with males as the initiators of sexual activity (Curtis et al., 2017; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013, 2014). Within a culture where these social roles have connotations of power and control, 'miscommunication' may be used as a way of concealing intentional acts of violence, given that many heterosexual men have a clear awareness of normative refusal mechanisms (Beres, 2014; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; Muehlenhard et al., 2016; O'Byrne, 2008).

Since its initiation nearly ten years ago with in-person peer group discussions, the Active* Consent programme has devised an extensive repertoire of resources for prompting critical reflection, including social media, videos, group experiences of drama, and personal reflection through eLearning resources. This range of in-person and online resources is reflective of the blurring of boundaries taking place between digital intimacy and experiences offline (Scott et al., 2020).

# RESEARCH ON CONSENT ATTITUDES AMONG ADOLESCENTS

The majority of research on sexual consent has emerged in the past decade, and has been carried out in the U.S. with young adult participants. While there are some indications that consent belief and behavioural intention profiles are similar for adolescents as for young adults (D'Eath et al., 2020), there is a pressing need to assess meanings of consent, the role of contextual factors, and consent communication practices among this developmentally distinct group. Recent Irish research identifies that approximately 25% of 15-17-year olds have had sexual intercourse (Kolto et al., 2020), rising to 85% for young people entering college (Byrnes & MacNeela, 2017). While exposed to vicarious learning of sexual scripts through media and social role models, or indirectly through their peers, teenagers are posed the significant challenge of coming to a personal understanding of what consent is to them and how they will act on this understanding.

However, many of the findings arising from research on sexual consent and adolescence is encouraging (Holmström et al., 2020; Javidi et al., 2020; Righi et al., 2021). Most teenagers appear to endorse positive principles of consent, yet complexity arises through the 'grey areas' of consent in applying the principles and due to the impact of social pressures, gender norms, and the prominence of alcohol in sexual scripts (Holmström et al., 2020; Javidi et al., 2020).

Righi et al. (2021) showed a similar range of verbal and nonverbal consent strategies among this group as was described in college students (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014). While the same study showed that adolescents identified with definitions of consent based on a verbal "yes" to intimacy, they assumed that, in practice, nonverbal consent would be used more commonly, there is an expectation that consent communication differs in relationships due to familiarity, and spoke about traditional gender roles such as males initiating intimacy until told to stop. Javidi et al. (2020) supports the idea that teenagers hold supportive attitudes toward affirmative consent, yet that teenage boys and teenagers who hold more traditional gender roles typically have less positive attitudes towards affirmative consent.

The research evaluation of the Manuela Programme on the prevention of sexual violence provides a recent insight on consent beliefs among adolescents in Ireland (D'Eath et al., 2020). The Manuela Programme content is delivered over multiple sessions, addressing issues such as sexual violence, pornography use, and consent. The research evaluation showed that the programme is both effective and a positive resource for schools.

The research evaluation provides a unique insight on attitudes to consent among Irish teenagers, as it included pre- and post-intervention surveys of 707 young people from schools across Ireland (52% male, 47% female, 1% non-binary gender identification; over 90% aged 15-16 years). The pre-intervention survey findings can be taken as a snapshot of young people's feelings of empowerment, knowledge, and social confidence with regard to consent.

Among the survey findings, the majority of young people agreed that they felt well informed about consent (66% of males, 64% of females), that they have all the skills they need for consent (62% of males, 53% of females), and that they would feel confident in talking about consent to a partner (49% of males, 55% of females). Looking in more depth, a relatively small percentage strongly agreed that they possessed knowledge and skills for consent (e.g., 26% of males, 14% of females). Almost one-third of respondents agreed that people their age would think talking about consent is odd (33% of males, 27% of females), and one-fifth agreed that they would find it hard to talk about consent to a partner (22% of males, 20% of females).

These figures support some positive conclusions about adolescents' self-efficacy concerning consent, yet viewed more critically there is substantial work remaining to ensure that all young people feel confident and well-informed. Moreover, the survey documented significant levels of neutrality or acceptance of 'rape myths' – that is, false beliefs concerning the role that victims play in the perpetration of sexual violence against them and excuses that can be provided for perpetrators. Taken together, the Manuela Programme pre-intervention survey findings echo the Active* Consent programme aims of supporting the existing positive attitudes young people hold, to encourage young people who perceive barriers to consent such as being shy or embarrassed, and to challenge negative, misinformed beliefs among their peers.

# THE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORTING CONSENT EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

Despite international expert calls for the integration of consent into holistic sexual health education for adolescents, empirical research on this form of programming continues to be lacking (The Government of the United Kingdom, 2014; IPPF, 2006; Pound et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2018; Willis et al., 2018). Yet it is clear that Irish youth and other stakeholders want to have access to school-based consent education.

The NCCA (2019) review of the Relationships and Sexuality Education programme included a comprehensive programme of research, including 650 online survey responses from youth aged from 12-18 years, focus groups with over 600 children and young people, and a consultation event with Comhairle na nÓg. The report demonstrated dissatisfaction among youth, their families and educators with school sexual health education, especially on topics like relationships, intimacy, and consent (Bauer et al 2020; Fisher et al., 2019; McNamara et al., 2020; NCCA, 2019; Walsh, 2021; MacNeela et al., 2017, 2018). Consent was suggested by youth as additional content for a revised RSE curriculum, along with topics such as LGBTQ+ sexualities and healthy relationships.

The NCCA (2019) report stated that "students feel they need to learn about sexual consent and the associated skills to negotiate consensual relationships that are respectful and enjoyable, not just the legal basis of consent" (p. 16). It recommended that the RSE programme moves beyond a deficit danger/disease approach to sexual health education, which students repeatedly cited as being a limited reflection of their lived experience. Reform of the RSE for Irish Primary and Post-Primary schools is underway, supported by research on the topic in Ireland (Keating et al., 2018; Nolan, 2018; NCCA, 2019). Drawing on all stakeholders' perspectives, the NCCA (2019) recommended moving to a sex-positive approach to sexual health education, underpinned by the following core principles:

The Active* Consent programme aims are consistent with these principles. For example, this report will demonstrate that the schools programme uses youth participation in resource development, contains inclusive content that supports all young people, takes an ecological approach to including teacher training and parental involvement as critical to sustainability, and carefully judges age-appropriate content and messaging. One of the important learnings from the experience of working with colleges has been the importance of engaging staff members through awareness raising and training. Given the practical requirement to involve secondary school teachers at all levels in implementing consent education, there will be an ongoing need for several tiers of training and professional preparation.

# ACTIVE* CONSENT SCHOOLS SURVEY: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

A survey of consent attitudes, perceptions of peer attitudes, and responses to consent stories was carried out with 613 teenagers in Transition Year and Fifth Year in Autumn 2019 in five schools across Ireland. The survey content drew on the research team's experience over the past decade conducting quantitative and qualitative research with young people (Byrnes & MacNeela, 2017; D'eath et al., 2020; MacNeela et al., 2014, 2017, 2018).

The goals of the survey were to:

- Provide an evidence base of consent attitudes and consent communication among Irish teenagers.
- Support the development of the Active* Consent schools programme, in particular the consent workshop.

Survey content was informed by young people who advised on the wording and inclusion of questions and stories. The age range of survey participants was from 14-18 years-old, with 52% aged 16. Just over half of the respondents were male (51%), 47% were female, and 2% had a different gender identity or chose not to state their gender. Given the limited number of non-binary identifying students in the survey, it is not appropriate to generalise findings to this group. A majority of the pupils (57%) attended a mixed gender school, while 19% were in an all-boys' school and 24% in an all-girls' school.

Positive findings emerged regarding the school pupils' views on the importance of having consent for a sexual activity – including touching a breast or genitals, oral sex or sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, there was a gender gap, with more females (93%) than males (79%) agreeing that consent is always needed for all of these activities.

Views as to whether there should be verbal consent for all these activities were more mixed. There was a smaller gender gap but overall just over 60% felt that consent should be verbal. In addition, 60% of the group agreed that non-verbal consent for any of these activities is sometimes OK.

# CONSENT ATTITUDES AND PERSONAL COMFORT WITH INTIMACY

**THE QUANTITATIVE SECTION OF THE SURVEY ASKED YOUNG PEOPLE TO RESPOND TO STATEMENTS ON CONSENT-RELATED ATTITUDES AND PERSONAL COMFORT LEVELS WITH DIFFERENT FORMS OF INTIMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF MEETING SOMEONE ON A NIGHT OUT.**

**THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS RATED THE SAME ITEMS PERSONALLY AND FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THEIR PEERS, INDICATING THEIR BELIEFS ABOUT HOW SUPPORTIVE PEERS ARE OF POSITIVE CONSENT AND THEIR COMFORT LEVELS ENGAGING IN INTIMACY BEHAVIOURS.**

**THE COMPARISON OF AGREEMENT LEVELS BY GENDER ENABLED GENDER-BASED EXPECTATIONS FOR CONSENT AND INTIMACY TO BE EXPLORED. THE COMPARISON OF PERSONAL VIEWS WITH PERCEPTIONS OF PEERS ALLOWED FOR EXAMINATION OF THE 'SOCIAL NORMS GAP' THAT HELPS TO EXPLAIN INTERNALISED SOCIAL NORMS AND PEER PRESSURE.**

*Table 1. Percentage of survey respondents who agreed with statements about the need for consent.*

| | All participants | Males | Females | Other gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **You always need to get consent before the start of a sexual activity like touching a breast, genitals (penis or vulva), oral sex, or sexual intercourse.** | 86 | 79 | 93 | 82 |
| **There should be verbal consent for any of those sexual activities.** | 62 | 58 | 67 | 55 |
| **Non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes OK.** | 60 | 59 | 61 | 40 |

There was evidence of a large social norms gap in responses to two of the items. Many survey respondents believed that other teenagers were less supportive than they were themselves of consent for sexual activity and for verbal consent in particular. This was particularly the case for females. While 93% personally agreed that consent is needed for all sexual activities, only 54% agreed that other teenagers felt this way.

The gap between personal and social beliefs is an important finding as it may explain how young people internalise social pressure to engage in actions that they may not actually want to do. There was no difference between personal beliefs and views of other teenagers on the item concerning non-verbal consent.

*Table 2. Percentage of survey respondents who agreed with statements about what 'most other teenagers' believe about the need for consent.*

| | All participants | Males | Females | Other gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Most other teenagers think you always need to get consent before the start of a sexual activity like touching a breast, genitals (penis or vulva), oral sex, or sexual intercourse.** | 51 | 50 | 54 | 27 |
| **Most other teenagers think there should be verbal consent for any of those sexual activities.** | 37 | 42 | 32 | 27 |
| **Most other teenagers think non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes OK.** | 61 | 57 | 67 | 46 |

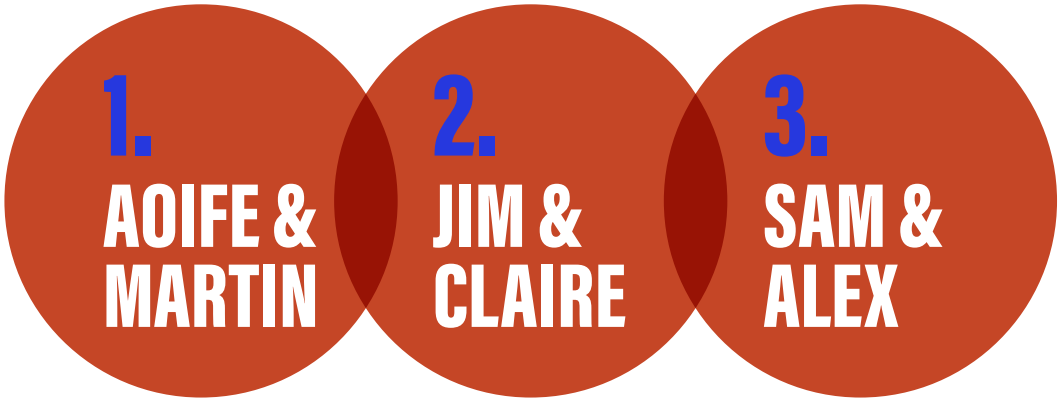
Gender differences in consent attitudes among survey respondents extended to comfort levels with taking part in intimacy with someone that they just met. Comfort with these forms of intimacy help to explore attitudes to 'hook-ups' or casual encounters that may take place at a party or social gathering. Four types of intimacy were explored, from kissing to sexual intercourse.

A majority of males and females were personally comfortable with kissing, with a relatively small gender gap in personal comfort levels (86% of males comfortable with this, compared with 72% of females). The gap grew to over 30% on the next item. Three-quarters of males reported that they were comfortable touching the other person over their clothes (75%), while a minority of females said they were comfortable with this (41%).

The gender gap was larger again in response to the next form of intimacy. Half of the males (51%) said they were comfortable touching the other person's genitals (e.g., fingering, hand job) compared with 7% of females. Finally, the gap between male and female comfort levels remained substantial on the final type of intimacy. Just over one-third of males (35%) reported that they would be comfortable with sexual intercourse in this context, compared with 5% of females.

There was a relatively small 'social norms gap' when males' personal comfort levels were compared with their perceptions of what other teenagers were comfortable with. There was a difference of 5% at most across the four types of intimacy. There was stronger evidence of a social norms gap among female survey respondents. Depending on the type of intimacy, there was a gap of between 17-38% in the percentages of females who said they were personally comfortable with a particular activity and how many thought that other teenagers were comfortable with it. For instance, while 7% said they were personally comfortable with genital touching such as fingering or masturbation, 42% felt that their peers were comfortable with this activity.

The contrasting findings on personal comfort with sexual activity and perceptions of peers' comfort levels underline the potential for female school pupils to have a strong internalised image of what is expected of them when they are asked to engage in sexual activity. Such expectations may also inform young people's actions when they are initiating or asking for intimacy.




## CONSENT COMMUNICATION STORIES

Each story presented a person initiating or seeking sexual intimacy and described how the other person reacted. The stories presented a distinct scenario in which consent communication was a critical issue:

1. 'Aoife and Martin': Oral sex in a hook-up between two cisgendered adolescents on a night out where the male initiates intimacy. Three versions of this story were used to assess the impact of varying consent-related actions.
2. 'Jim and Claire': Sexual intercourse between two young adults not in a relationship where intimacy was initiated by the female.
3. 'Sam and Alex': Turning down a partner looking for sex in a relationship context featuring two non-gendered adolescents.

Each story had at least one quantitative rating item and qualitative response box that the students could use to write in their views and provide any relevant information about their reactions to the stories. The stories included references to contextual factors previously identified as relevant to consent communication, including:

- Alcohol use.
- Verbal or physical pressure.
- Peer expectations.
- Consent to other forms of intimacy earlier in the evening.
- Gendered roles within sexual scripts.
- Relationship status.

### Quantitative Ratings of the Stories

The quantitative rating questions that followed the consent stories provided insights on how the pupils interpreted the stories from a consent communications perspective. The story characters 'Aoife' and 'Martin' were distinct in that the pupils read one of three versions of the same story. The different versions were included to explore potential differences in the importance attributed to Aoife smiling or not smiling and to the degree of force Martin used to get oral sex.

- Three-quarters (75%) of the pupils agreed that Aoife gave her consent following Story 1, where Aoife smiled when Martin pushed her head down to give him oral sex.
- A total of 62% of pupils agreed that she gave her consent following Story 2, where she smiled when Martin pushed her head down 'firmly'.
- One-fifth of pupils (21%) agreed that she gave consent following Story 3, when Martin pushed her head down and Aoife's response was not indicated.

There was a gender difference in ratings, with more male students agreeing that Aoife gave consent. Besides those students who agreed that Aoife gave her consent, up to one-quarter of students gave a 'neutral' rating as to whether she consented.

A larger number of quantitative rating questions were presented following the story about 'Jim' and 'Claire'. In this story Claire was the initiator of intimacy and was persistent in trying to have sex with Jim.

The positive finding following this story was that a majority of the pupils (61%) felt that Jim did not give his consent when he and Claire had sex. An even greater majority disagreed that he wanted to have sex (68%). Two-thirds of the pupils said that Claire's behaviour was unacceptable (65%).

However, 71% of the pupils said that Jim's friends might not have understood if he did not want to have sex, indicating a negative social norm about men lacking the freedom to walk away from a situation they are uncomfortable with. More than four in ten (43%) said that Jim was willing to have sex. This highlights a grey area regarding how men's behaviour is understood by these students, and reflects broader societal understandings that men will always be 'up for it'. In addition, up to 25% of students gave a neutral rating on the 'Jim and

Claire' statements. There was also evidence of a gender gap, with more male survey respondents in agreement that Jim gave consent (19%) and fewer males who said that Claire's behaviour was unacceptable (50%).

A number of positive findings emerged from ratings of the story about Sam and Alex, which explores Sam's negative reaction to Alex who did not want to have sex. They had sex for the first time a week previously.

Nearly all the survey respondents (98%) agreed that it was OK for Alex to say "No, I don't want to" in response to Sam wanting sex. There was also nearly complete agreement (92%) that people need to talk about consent even when in a relationship. However there was less agreement about Sam assuming that Alex would be into sex just because they had done it before – while 83% of females agreed that this assumption of ongoing sex was 'not OK', fewer males (57%) agreed that it was not OK to assume and 31% were neutral on this point. Nearly half of the male students (47%) agreed that 'Sam is right to be worried' about why Alex did not want to have sex again given that they did it before, while the comparable figure for females was considerably lower (25%).

### Key Trends and Observations in the Qualitative Analysis of Responses to Stories

The school pupils' written responses to the stories were analysed to identify the key points that arose in reaction to each story. These are described in detail in a later section of the report. The findings below represent key trends and observations from the qualitative content analysis of story responses. These boxes show common trends identified across many of the survey respondents as well as more specific findings that were limited to smaller numbers of responses. They are highlighted to present an overall landscape of consent communication across teenagers in Ireland.

The key trends and observations refer to:

- What helps and what stops consent communication.
- Capabilities and challenges for teenagers.
- Threats to positive and mutual consent.
- Gender differences and expectations.
- Context of consent: Relationships and alcohol.

NEARLY ALL THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS (98%) AGREED THAT IT WAS OK FOR ALEX TO SAY "NO, I DON'T WANT TO"

# WHAT OUR FINDINGS SAY ABOUT YOUTH CAPABILITIES AND CHALLENGES WHEN NEGOTIATING CONSENT

| Capabilities and Challenges for Teenagers | |
|---|---|
| **Capabilities** | **Challenges** |
| Strong support for the principle of getting consent. | Verbal consent not being seen as required in all cases. |
| The ability to recognise non-consenting behaviour, including the capacity to take into account multiple information cues. | Less support for the principle of consent in the real-life stories than in the general rating questions. |
| Clear refusal to accept initiator behaviour when there is considerable aggression. | Lacking a standard perspective on consent, reflected in varied interpretations made of the same story by different students. |
| Referencing clear standards for consent such as legal requirements (e.g., definition of rape, age of consent). | High levels of neutral and non-committal comments. |
| Acknowledging the negative impact of social pressure on consent. | Consent explanations that focus on the motives and intentions of the person affected rather than the initiator. |
| It is ok to say 'no' to sex or other forms of intimacy. | If someone engages in intimacy then this behaviour is taken as visible agreement or passive consent. |
| Talking about consent is the main strategy for managing consent in a relationship. | Consent not seen as ongoing at all time - If intimacy is agreed to earlier it is thought to carry forward later. |

# WHAT OUR FINDINGS SAY ABOUT FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO NEGOTIATING CONSENT

| What Helps and What Stops Consent Communication | |
|---|---|
| **Facilitators** | **Barriers** |
| • Good relationship (e.g., openness, knowing the person, feeling comfortable)<br>• Confidence<br>• Communication<br>• Awareness and education<br>• Talking<br>• Talking to others | • Being uncomfortable (e.g., awkwardness, embarrassment)<br>• Afraid (e.g., of being judged, ruining the mood, rejection)<br>• Being insecure, shy or nervous<br>• Lack of knowledge or skills<br>• Pressure<br>• Getting caught up in the moment<br>• Social norms |

# WHAT OUR FINDINGS SAY ABOUT THREATS TO POSITIVE AND MUTUAL CONSENT

| Gender Differences and Expectations |
| --- |
| Non-verbal behaviour was emphasised as a key signal of consent. |
| 'Should', 'could' or 'would have' – This explanation was extensively applied to the person whose consent is in doubt, but not to the initiator. |
| Negative standards – If someone does not stop something from happening, this could mean they wanted to do it or were passively accepting. |
| Willingness as a grey area of consent – If someone does not want to have sex but is willing to do so this scenario may not be seen as overly serious. |
| Saying no indirectly (e.g., saying they want to leave) may not be registered as verbal non-consent. |
| Acceptance of initiator behaviour so that the initiator's behaviour could be viewed as wrong without identifying the scenario as non-consenting or assault. |
| Informal descriptions of the initiator's behaviour that can minimise their impact, for example using general everyday language or hesitant language (e.g., he 'kind of' forced her). |
| Clarity in definitions of sexual violence – Describing some acts as rape when they are assault, seeing other actions as acceptable when they are assault. |
| Lack of sensitivity to initiator behaviour (e.g., acceptance of someone pushing or even firmly pushing someone's head down for oral sex). |
| Acceptance of behaviour if it fits with a social expectation or sexual script – For example, sexual behaviour is seen as consenting if someone had agreed to go into a bedroom. |

| Context of Consent: Alcohol and Relationships |
| --- |
| Alcohol is looked to as an explanation for incidences of non-consent. However, it is sometimes used as an excuse – For example, "it is not assault if both people were drunk". |
| The belief that it is OK to have sex in a relationship, but not for one partner to assume sex is available in a relationship. |

# WHAT OUR FINDINGS SAY ABOUT GENDER AND CONSENT

| Gender Differences and Expectations |
| --- |
| Gender differences in how consent stories are interpreted and responded to, with males less likely to endorse positive, active consent. |
| Gendered expectations applied to making sense of consent stories. For example, a man should be able to assert themselves if he does not want sex. |
| Traditional gender expectations feeding into social pressure to perform. For example, male peers assumed to expect their friends to have sex if possible and 'slag' friends who do not do so. |

# ACTIVE* CONSENT SEXUAL CONSENT WORKSHOP FOR SCHOOLS

THE WORKSHOP LASTS FOR ONE HOUR. IT WAS DEVELOPED USING THE TEMPLATE OF THE ACTIVE* CONSENT COLLEGE CONSENT WORKSHOP, AND ADAPTED WITH THE HELP OF YOUTH PANELS INCLUDING MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE OF THE IRISH SECOND-LEVEL STUDENTS UNION. IT WAS PILOTED WITH 993 SCHOOL PUPILS IN 10 SCHOOLS DURING 2020 AND 2021. A RESEARCH EVALUATION FOUND IT TO BE EFFECTIVE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND WELL SUPPORTED BY TEACHERS AND PARENTS OR GUARDIANS.

The consent workshop is based on theories of sexual scripts, social norms, and the consent research literature. It draws on sexual health promotion principles in engaging young people as participants with valued existing knowledge and skills. The workshop is research-driven, drawing on the Active* Consent schools survey with 613 Transition Year and Fifth Year pupils.

### Learning Outcomes

The workshop learning outcomes are for participants to:

- Be knowledgeable and confident about consent.
- Be able to describe consent as ongoing, mutual, and freely given (OMFG), and recognise when these are present.
- Understand that consent applies in all relationships, for all sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Discriminate consent from non-consent.
- Have the language to convey consent and non-consent.
- Recognise the impact of factors such as gender norms, alcohol and drug use on consent.
- Understand the legal meaning of consent.
- Be well informed about peer social norms.

The workshop is grounded in an ecological perspective that links to the wider school community. It can be delivered by teachers and other professionals using a standardised manual and workshop resources. Teachers are offered training that includes: Learning about school pupils' sexual behaviour and the influences on their sexual decision-making, how to respond to disclosures, as well as training to deliver the school consent workshop. Delivery of the workshop is supported by a manual and PowerPoint presentation.

# CONSENT IS OMFG - ONGOING, MUTUAL AND FREELY GIVEN - ACROSS ALL RELATIONSHIPS AND SITUATIONS

| Workshop activity | Brief description |
|---|---|
| **Group contract** | Creates a safe space to explore a sensitive topic. |
| **Pre- and post-workshop survey** | A pre- and post-workshop survey measures the impact of the workshop and pupil feedback after the workshop. |
| **Exploring the meaning of consent** | Pupils share their ideas on what consent is, what stops or helps communication about consent. |
| **Definitions and legal basis for consent** | Legal definitions and how these apply to their age group. Introducing the idea that consent is OMFG - ongoing, mutual, and freely given. |
| **Defining gender, sex, and orientation** | The components of human sexuality are discussed, including gender, sex, and orientation. |
| **Applying consent knowledge to stories** | Three consent stories with different forms of intimacy, relationship status, and sexual orientation. Used to explore perceptions of consent in realistic scenarios, including how the situation could be improved. |
| **Language of consent** | An animation on consent in everyday situations. |
| **Social norms and gaps** | Peer norm misperceptions are described to enhance understanding of internalised peer pressure. |
| **The grey area of consent** | Information on how contextual factors such as gender roles or alcohol use affects capacity and choice about intimacy. |
| **Key take home message** | A short video to review the consent is OMFG message. |

*Table 3. Overview of the Active* Consent schools consent workshop.*

# EVALUATION OF THE SCHOOL CONSENT WORKSHOP

**THE WORKSHOP WAS PILOTED WITH 993 SCHOOL PUPILS IN 10 SCHOOLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY DURING 2020-21, WITH AN INTERRUPTION DUE TO COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH RESTRICTIONS. A TOTAL OF 31 TEACHERS TOOK PART IN TRAINING ON WORKSHOP DELIVERY AND 353 PARENTS ENGAGED IN ZOOM-BASED SEMINARS.**

Comparing pre- and post-workshop survey responses, there was a statistically significant increase in pupils agreeing that consent needs to be agreed before the start of any sexual activity and the belief that this consent should be verbal. In addition, there was a significant positive change in self-ratings of being well prepared with knowledge, skills and in views of peer support for consent. For example, the percentage of students who agreed with the item 'I have all the skills I need to deal with sexual consent' went from 61% to 92%. The findings also included a significant change in beliefs about how alcohol affects capacity to consent.

Almost all the pupils agreed that the workshop was relevant to them (99% of females, 95% of males, and 100% of non-binary pupils) and would recommend it to their peers (97% of females, 86% of males, 84% of non-binary pupils).

"PILOTED WITH 993 SCHOOL PUPILS IN 10 SCHOOLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY"

In their written feedback, the pupils expressed satisfaction that their schools provided the Active* Consent workshop. They stated that the content was excellent, including the research statistics such as peer norms and the use of consent stories. The workshop delivery was described as open and inclusive, both of sexual and gender minorities and males.

Focus groups and interviews with teachers following the consent workshop showed that it was appraised to be a high quality resource. The content was described as realistic and relatable. The workshop gave the structure needed to address a topic recognised to be important. It was viewed as effective and was credible given its grounding in research.

The teachers were committed to incorporating the workshop into the school programme on Relationship and Sexuality Education. Several teachers remarked that the parent seminar was important for gaining support for the workshop and that there were no issues with parents subsequently approving their child's participation in the workshop.

Parent seminars took place in all of the schools. The seminar was designed to introduce the Active* Consent programme, to address any uncertainty or concerns, and to raise awareness about consent and strategies for talking to their children about intimacy.

Nearly all of the parents who took in the seminar rated it positively. Written feedback showed that it provided relevant information in an accessible manner. Parents emphasised the research and knowledge base of the programme as a key strength. Talking openly about consent was remarked on as an important responsibility for parents to engage with. A number of parents said they planned to use their learning to support conversations with their teenagers.

"THE CONTENT WAS EXCELLENT, INCLUDING THE RESEARCH STATISTICS SUCH AS PEER NORMS AND THE USE OF CONSENT STORIES"

# 'HOW I LEARNED ABOUT CONSENT': THE ACTIVE* CONSENT THEATRICAL FILM FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Drawing on experiences across all genders, all relationships and different sexualities, the theatrical film *How I Learned About Consent* combines drama, humour and satire to share these diverse experiences in a way that speaks to all young people. It contributes to the messaging in the Active* Consent schools programme through sketches that dramatise assumptions young people may have about consent, how we learn about consent, and what can change for ourselves and our partners when we practice active, positive consent. The theatrical film also encourages audience members to take mutual responsibility for shared culture around consent using active bystander principles – whether or not they are sexually active themselves. The film will be available to schools from Autumn 2021 to incorporate in consent programming.

Tackling both light and dark dimensions of consent, *How I Learned About Consent* addresses issues that impact on consent, shape how we communicate about it, and can arise from our experiences of consent and non-consent, such as:

- Sex education.
- Gender norms.
- Differences in sexual experiences for straight and LGBTIQ+ young people.
- Sexual violence and harassment.
- Nudes and image-based sexual abuse.
- The role of active bystanders in confronting and intervening in problematic situations if it is safe to do so.
- Healing from trauma.

# LEARNING OUTCOMES

After watching this theatrical film adaptation, students will be able to:

- Define and describe consent as ongoing, mutual and freely given (OMFG).
- Identify the role of peer pressure and sex education in shaping individual and group norms regarding consent.
- Analyse how equality and inclusion can contribute to our understanding of gender, sexual orientation and consent.
- Discuss how to define and identify sexual violence and harassment in everyday life.
- Exchange views on how individuals or groups might positively intervene in calling out sexual violence or harassment or assisting those affected by it in their peer groups.
- Describe and recognise skills associated with practicing active, positive consent, including but not limited to verbal communication.
- Reflect on what they want for themselves from their own sexual journey in their individual preferences, sexual orientation, and readiness to be sexually active.

| Content | Brief description |
|---|---|
| **Principles of consent** | Exploring consent as a dynamic process that we use to ensure that agreement is ongoing, mutual and freely given (OMFG). |
| **How consent is shown** | The skills of active, positive consent, including but not limited to verbal communication. |
| **When consent is not given** | The meaning, experience and impact of sexual violence and harassment. |
| **Individuals and groups as active bystanders** | How individuals or groups can be active bystanders who intervene in calling out sexual violence or harassment in their peer groups or assisting those affected by these issues. |
| **Consent and cultural norms** | The impact of norms for gender and sexual orientation that shape how consent is understood and experienced. |
| **How other people influence consent** | The role of peer pressure and sex education on individuals and groups. |

*Table 4. Overview of the Active* Consent filmed theatrical drama.*

# RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The theatrical film is adapted from a play for college audiences delivered as part of the Active* Consent programme, *The Kinds of Sex You Might Have in College*, which toured Irish colleges in 2019-2020. In turn, that play was rooted in evidence from Active* Consent programme research, created using devised and applied theatre techniques from 2014 onwards with students and researchers. The premise of the use of drama in this context is that cultural engagement provides 'rehearsal type' opportunities where moral responses can be explored (Kaszynska & Crossick, 2016). *How I Learned About Consent* gives audience members the chance to work through a nuanced and thought-provoking discussion about sex and consent, without the anxiety or personal exposure that may arise from actively participating in it themselves.

The use of theatre in sex education can increase knowledge and skills among young people, enabling them to exercise greater self-efficacy in sexual decision-making (Munro et al., 2007). More than 3,000 third level students watched *The Kinds of Sex You Might Have at College* in 12 colleges in Ireland during 2019-20. In *How I Learned About Consent*, the aim is to engage adolescents with the same impact as college students, for example, one college student commented that: "Using a medium like a play or performance about a taboo subject was very effective as the taboos fly out the window. From start to finish the performance had a perfect balance between entertaining and informative".

Students who attended the college version of drama agreed that it provided relevant and useful learning: 96% agreed that the drama performance represented the sexual issues/ situations college students might encounter, 93% agreed that the performance showed ways for good mutual communication, 87% agreed that the drama performance increased their knowledge and understanding of sexual assault, 89% agreed that the performance will inform how they deal with sexual consent, and 88% agreed that the performance would help them be a positive influence on peers.

# 'SEX ON OUR SCREENS': THE ACTIVE* CONSENT ELEARNING SEXUAL MEDIA RESOURCE FOR SCHOOLS

Based on extensive research with young people and parents in Ireland by the Active* Consent research team, *Sex on Our Screens* is a resource to support critical thinking and decision-making on the use of sexual media such as pornography and how sexual media can affect consent and body image. The impact of sexual media on body image and on sexual script expectations is explored in detail from a consent perspective. Sexual scripts are common ways of representing and talking about sex and intimacy that draw on stereotypes and fixed expectations. *Sex on Our Screens* addresses how sexual media have come to be a major influence on how young people learn about sexual scripts.

A non-judgemental and inclusive approach is taken in the resource materials so that all young people who engage with it can feel supported and encouraged to explore how sexual media may impact them. The resource consists of a 1-hour learning package delivered through an interactive eLearning platform and related in-class activities that teachers can use with their students. The eLearning package is designed to facilitate engagement through interactive activities and quizzes. The resource contains three main sections:

- What is 'sexual media'.
- Sexual media and body image.
- Sexual media and consent.

# LEARNING OUTCOMES

After engaging with the sexual media resource, students will be able to:

- Understand what is meant by 'sexual media' and have a critical understanding of how and why it is produced.
- Identify that consent is ongoing, mutual, and freely given (OMFG).
- Discuss what is meant by sexual scripts and how they shape our expectations and behaviour.
- Describe the laws, rights and responsibilities that relate to sexual media.
- Be able to navigate sexual media from an informed perspective on how media developers create a false representation of sex.
- Apply critical thinking to how sexual media can impact on body image and expectations for sexual behaviour.
- Critically reflect on how sexual media can impact on beliefs about consent that are shared with peers.

| Workshop activity | Brief description |
|---|---|
| **Introductory video, content warning and supports** | Short video introducing young people to the resource and how it intends to help you develop critical and questioning media engagement skills. Content warning on the topics covered in the resource and information on support services. |
| **What is sexual media** | Video that introduces sexual media and how these media can shape our understanding of what is normal and acceptable when it comes to sex. |
| **Sexual media and the law** | Information on Irish laws around sexual media production, use, and image sharing. |
| **Consent and communication** | Animation and interactive activities are used to describe the OMFG components of consent and the importance of consent communication. The consent process used to ensure the safety of performers in the pornography industry is described. An intimacy coordinator talks about how safety is ensured in film and TV. |
| **Sexual violence in the media** | Examples of common media scenarios that can glamourise sexual violence. |
| **Sexual scripts in peer conversations and media** | Animation is used to provide a critical perspective on how traditional sexual scripts can negatively inform advice from friends on sexual relationships, and how consent is depicted in sexual media. |
| **Research findings and quiz on pornography** | Research findings used to explore pornography attitudes and use among young people in Ireland, including research on the use of pornography to learn about how bodies should look and function during sexual encounters. |
| **Is my body normal?** | Animation characters illustrate body-related concerns about first time sex and expectations that arise from friends or the media. |
| **Genital image expectations and quiz** | Idealised genital norms are pervasive, not only in pornography but in scientific and medical textbooks, omitting the diversity of real genitals. A quiz is used to provide facts about male, female, transgender, and intersex genitals. |
| **How does porn influence our body image?** | Video on how pornography is manufactured and marketed, including selection and hiring biases that shape pornography content and impact on viewer body image. |
| **Photoshop** | Editing processes illustrate how genitals and naked bodies are altered in popular media and pornography. An interactive activity enables young people to assess the impact of editing techniques. |
| **Conclusion** | Presenting a summary of the learning and take home messages along with information on support services. |

*Table 5. Overview of the Active* Consent sexual media eLearning resource.*

# RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Apart from drawing on international research, the research base for development of *Sex on Our Screens* was created by the Active* Consent research team with a combined sample of over 4,000 students and 530 parents. Participatory groups, individual interviews, large scale surveys, and input from adolescent and sexual health experts were used to generate findings to shape the content included in the eLearning resource (Dawson et al., 2019a, b; Dawson et al., 2020; Dawson et al., 2021, a, b).

The research findings provide a unique insight on how sexual media are used in Ireland. The findings demonstrate that young people in Ireland see pornography at an early age and report that pornography is commonly used to learn about sex. Most young people believe that pornography does not provide reliable information about sex but also report not having access to the types of information that they need. Both young adults and parents of teenagers recommend that critical pornography literacy education is needed to support teenagers to navigate the sexual media that they may be exposed to or affected by indirectly in their sexual relationships.

*SEX ON OUR SCREENS* WAS CREATED BY THE ACTIVE* CONSENT RESEARCH TEAM WITH THE INPUT OF OVER 4,000 STUDENTS AND 530 PARENTS

# ACTIVE* CONSENT SCHOOLS WORKSHOP: PILOTING AND EVALUATION

**GUIDED BY THE ACTIVE* CONSENT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS, A PRACTICAL CONSENT WORKSHOP FOR SCHOOL PUPILS IN TRANSITION YEAR, FIFTH YEAR OR SIXTH YEAR WAS DESIGNED TO ADDRESS THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES THAT AROSE FROM THE SURVEY OF SCHOOL PUPILS. WORKSHOP IMPLEMENTATION INCLUDES ALL MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY AS STAKEHOLDERS, INCLUDING TEACHERS AND PARENTS OR GUARDIANS. BOTH TEACHER TRAINING SUPPORTS AND AWARENESS RAISING WITH PARENTS ARE CORE TO THE DELIVERY OF THE WORKSHOPS ON A SUSTAINABLE BASIS. DELIVERY OF THE WORKSHOP BY TEACHERS, OTHER PROFESSIONALS OR THE ACTIVE* CONSENT TEAM IS GUIDED BY A TRAINING SESSION, A WORKSHOP MANUAL AND POWERPOINT PRESENTATION. A WEBINAR FOR PARENTS IS MADE AVAILABLE THROUGH THE SCHOOL.**

The template of how to engage effectively with young people on consent was taken from the Active* Consent college consent workshop, which has been taken by over 30,000 students since 2015 (MacNeela et al., 2017, 2018). Teenagers helped the development team to adapt and extend this approach to schools. Two youth panels were convened for this purpose and took part in day-long participatory sessions. The involvement and advice of panel members was key to ensure that the language, tone and learning outcomes were relevant, engaging and effective. Panelists enjoyed their role in the workshop development, giving comments afterwards such as: *"You treated us with respect and didn't shy away from talking about sexual activity and gave us an opportunity to learn and ask questions and opened a discussion"*. The workshop was first piloted in March 2020 with 133 pupils in one school in collaboration with Sexual Health West outreach team members.

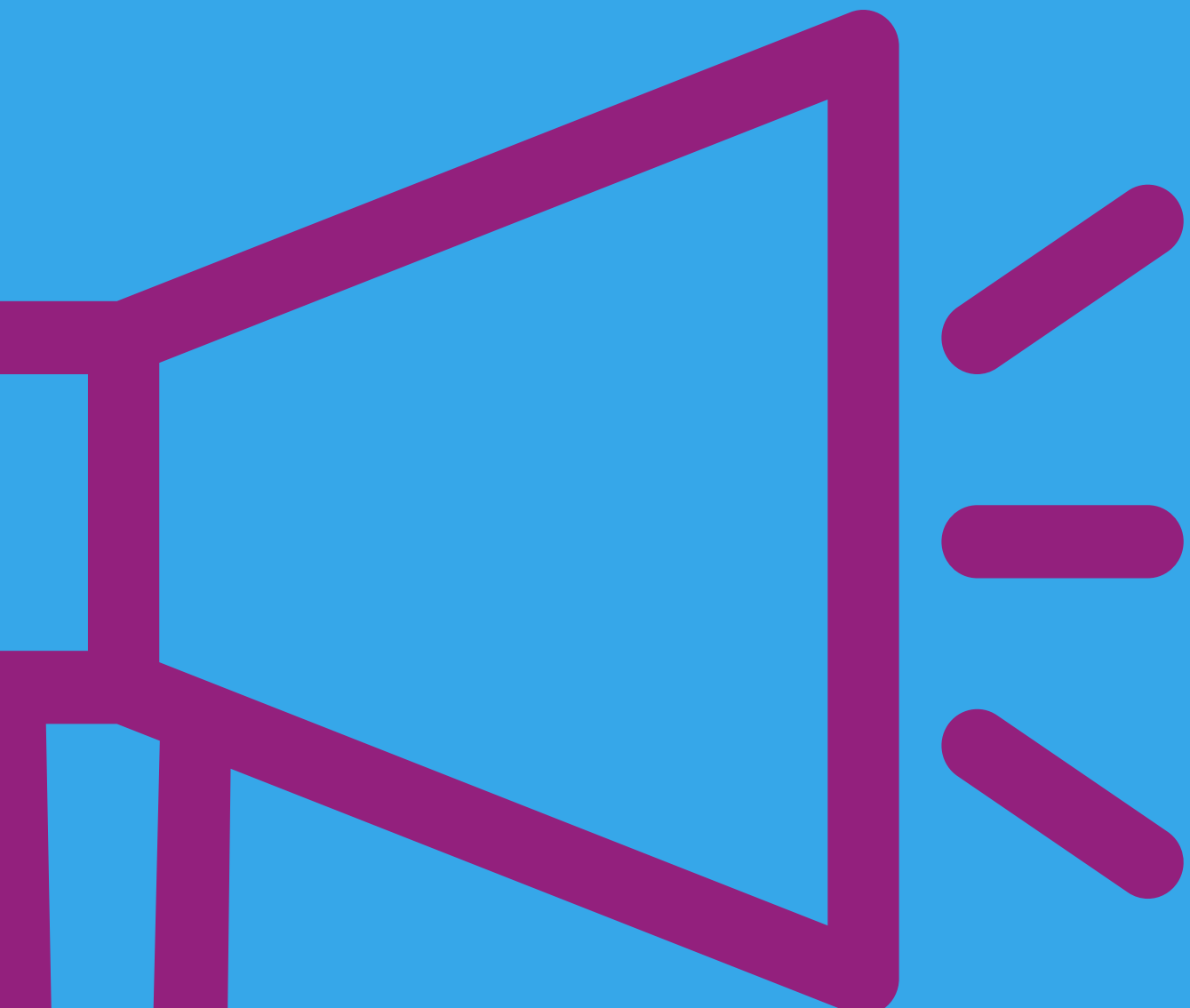


**Figure 1**

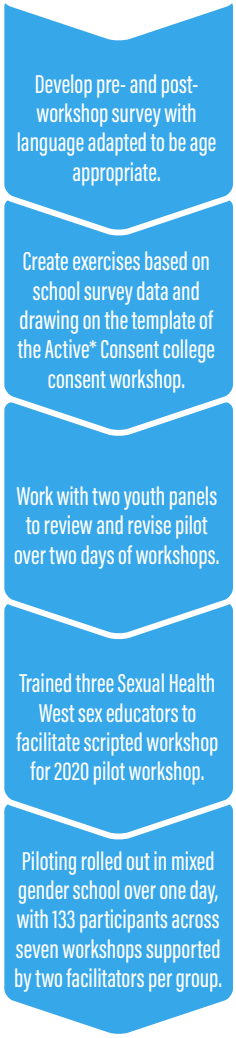



**Figure 2**


Covid-19 public health restrictions led to the postponement of further piloting until Spring 2021, when 860 students took part across nine schools nationally. The flexibility required to provide the workshop in the changing context of the pandemic resulted in the consent workshop being designed for in-person delivery in the class or online in real time.

In 2021, the development team worked with the Union of School Students in Ireland (USSI) through two new youth panels to adapt the workshop to be suitable for remote delivery. The workshop was also revised to be compliant with Covid-19 guidelines during in-class facilitation. Both in-class and remotely delivered workshops use an online opinion and voting system (Slido.com) to engage pupils in real time voting. In addition, participants are asked to complete an anonymous and confidential pre- and post-workshop survey and feedback questionnaire.

## WORKSHOP OVERVIEW AND DELIVERY

The workshop is delivered over one hour. The learning outcomes are for participants to:

- Be knowledgeable and confident about consent.
- Be able to describe consent as ongoing, mutual, and freely given (OMFG), and recognise when these are present.
- Understand that consent applies in all relationships, for all sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Discriminate consent from non-consent.
- Have the language to convey consent and non-consent.
- Recognise the impact of factors such as gender norms, alcohol and drug use on consent.
- Understand the legal meaning of consent.
- Be well informed about peer social norms.

*Figure 1. Initial workshop development carried out in 2020.*

*Figure 2. Process of workshop adaptation to Covid-19 public health restrictions.*

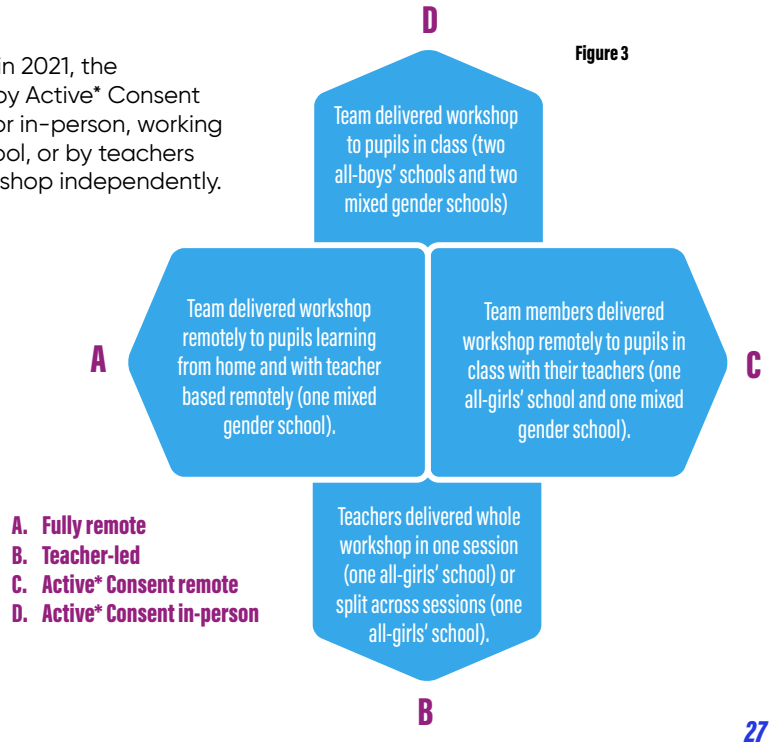
*Table 6. Active* Consent sexual consent workshop overview.*

| Workshop activity | Brief description |
|---|---|
| **Group contract** | Used to agree a safe space to explore a sensitive topic and clarify that no one shares personal experiences in the workshop. The principles are to respect the opinion of others and listen to each other so everyone feels comfortable, and that each person can choose their own level of engagement. Time keeping and the use of mobile phones are discussed. |
| **Pre- and post-workshop survey** | A pre- and post-workshop survey measures the impact of the workshop and is administered via Slido.com or on hard copy.<br><br>The survey includes items adapted from the consent preparedness measure used in previous Active* Consent research, the positive attitudes to sexual consent sub-scale from Humphreys and Brousseau's (2010) attitudes measure, and one item from Ward et al.'s (2021) alcohol and sexual consent scale.<br><br>Participants are also asked for their views on the workshop itself. |
| **Exploring the meaning of consent** | Three questions are used to explore pupils' perceptions about what consent is, what it might look like, and what stops or helps communication about consent. |
| **Definitions and legal basis for consent** | Definitions are introduced that build on pupils' responses. These include research and legal definitions grounded in practical examples, and include the legal age of consent and reference to image-based sexual abuse (IBSA). Consent is introduced as OMFG – ongoing, mutual, and freely given. |
| **Defining gender, sex, and orientation** | The components of human sexuality are discussed, including gender, sex, and sexual orientation. |
| **Applying consent knowledge to stories** | Three consent stories are used to explore different ways in which people act as initiators and the responses that people give to someone who initiates intimacy or attempts to keep moving forward.<br><br>The stories allow forms of consent to be discussed (e.g., active and passive consent, verbal and nonverbal consent). Contextual factors embedded in the stories allow for relationships, alcohol use, and gendered scripts to be explored.<br><br>The stories enable consent to be distinguished from sexual assault and rape. Practical strategies are introduced (e.g., how to ask and say 'yes,' 'maybe,' and 'no'). |
| **Language of consent** | An animation is used to illustrate consent and agreement in everyday situations, including examples of language to use in intimate contexts regardless of relationship status, gender, or sexual orientation. |
| **Social norms and gaps** | Social norms are described and explored through practical examples. The difference between what young people feel or think on a personal level is distinguished from expectations for what their peers think or feel. Peer norm misperceptions are used to describe internalised social pressure. |
| **The grey area of consent** | Moving to the conclusion phase, a summary is provided of factors that affect people's capacity and consent communication. |
| **Reviewing OMFG key home message** | A short video is presented to review the message that consent is OMFG. |

During the piloting phase in 2021, the workshop was facilitated by Active* Consent team members via Zoom or in-person, working with teachers in each school, or by teachers trained to deliver the workshop independently.

*Figure 3. Mode of consent workshop delivery.*

**Figure 3**



# EVALUATION OF THE ACTIVE* CONSENT SCHOOLS WORKSHOP

A total of 993 school students took part in piloting of the Active* Consent schools workshop. The first phase of piloting took place in 2020 with 133 Fifth Year students in 7 workshops delivered in one school, facilitated by a team from Active* Consent and Sexual Health West. Nine secondary schools participated in the 2021 pilot of the Active* Consent schools workshop, with 860 young people taking part across 29 workshops. A total of 717 of these students completed the post-workshop evaluation survey. The survey form for the 2020 workshop was later amended, and the evaluation presented here focuses on the piloting carried out as Covid-19 restrictions eased in 2021. A broadly similar pattern of findings emerged from the original pilot workshops held in 2020.

The impact of the Active* Consent secondary school workshop was assessed by comparing pre- and post-workshop survey responses on measures of attitudes and intentions concerning consent, using: (a) The consent preparedness scale (MacNeela et al., 2018), (b) the positive attitudes to consent sub-scale (Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010), and (c) one item from the alcohol and sexual consent scale (Ward et al., 2012). The suitability of the workshop was assessed through quantitative and qualitative evaluation questions presented on the post-workshop survey form. The data were inputted into SPSS and analysed, using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26.0. (IBM Corp, 2019).

## Demographics

The majority of students who reported their age were 16 years old (64%; n=465), followed by 17-year-old students (14%; 104) and 18-year-old students (12.4%; n=90). One 14-year-old and 5 19-year-old students responded.

| | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Male** | 295 | 37.1 |
| **Female** | 479 | 60.2 |
| **Transgender female** | 1 | 0.1 |
| **Transgender male** | 4 | 0.5 |
| **Gender variant / Non-conforming** | 13 | 1.6 |
| **Gender not listed** | 1 | 0.1 |
| **Prefer not to say** | 3 | 0.4 |

*Table 7. Percentage of students in each gender category.*

The majority of participants were female (60.2%; n=479), 37% (n=295) were male, and the remaining 2.7% of participants did not use a binary gender identification. Most students were not in a relationship (82%, n=47) and 18% were in a relationship. Over three-quarters were in Transition Year (77.1%), with 2.9% in Fifth Year and 20% in Sixth Year.

Students were asked to rate the Relationship, Sexuality Education (RSE) they received so far in school. The findings showed a mean rating of 5.16 out of 10 (SD = 2.1), with a range of 1-10. One-fifth of the students (21.6%) gave a rating between 1-3 indicating a high level of dissatisfaction. Half of the students (51.3%) rated their RSE as between 4-6 suggesting a neutral evaluation. The remaining 27.1% of students gave a rating between 7-10, indicating satisfaction with their RSE experience to date.

## Consent Preparedness

Consent preparedness was measured using six questions scored on a 1-5 scale pre- and post-workshop. When compiled, the items have a minimum score 6 and maximum score of 30. Two items evaluate personal feelings of self-efficacy, two items refer to confidence in talking about consent with peers, and two items describe talking about consent with a partner. Statements included 'I have all the skills I need to deal with sexual consent' and 'I feel well informed about sexual consent'. Reverse coding was applied to the statement 'People my age would think that talking about sexual consent with a partner is odd' and to 'I'd find it difficult to talk about sexual consent with a romantic partner'. As a result, all items are scored in the same direction, with higher numbers indicating more positive attitudes.

A paired samples t-test showed a significant positive change ($p<.001$) in mean total scores on consent preparedness. Mean scores went from 22.24 (pre-workshop) to 24.68 (post-workshop). A significant change at the p.05 level from pre- to post-workshop is indicated by one asterisk, significant changes at the p.01 level by two asterisks, and significant change at the p.001 level is identified with three asterisks.

*Table 8. Consent preparedness mean total scores, pre- and post-workshop.*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Male Mean | Female Mean | Other Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-workshop** | 22.24 | 647 | 3.20 | 22.50 | 22.05 | 22.37 |
| **Post-workshop** | 24.68*** | 647 | 3.08 | 23.88*** | 25.26*** | 25.11*** |

There was a significant positive change in consent preparedness scores for males, females, and non-binary participants. The size of the change was larger on average for females than for males. The next two Tables illustrate responses to two consent preparedness items. For the item 'I have all the skills I need to deal with sexual consent', the percentage of participants that 'strongly agreed' went from 15.3% pre-workshop to 43.2% post-workshop. There was also a large increase in the percentage of participants 'strongly agreeing' with 'My peers think that sexual consent is an important issue', increasing from 32.5% pre-workshop to 44.4% post-workshop. There was a decrease in the percentage of respondents who selected the 'neutral' response option for both items at post-workshop evaluation.

*Table 9. Percentage of students who selected each response option to the statement 'I have all the skills I need to deal with sexual consent.'*

| | Pre-Workshop | Post-Workshop |
|---|---|---|
| **Strongly Disagree** | 1.0 | 0.4 |
| **Disagree** | 7.8 | 1.0 |
| **Neutral** | 30.3 | 6.3 |
| **Agree** | 45.6 | 49.2 |
| **Strongly Agree** | 15.3 | 43.2 |

*Table 10. Percentage of students who selected each response option to the statement 'My peers think that sexual consent is an important issue.'*

| | Pre-Workshop | Post-Workshop |
|---|---|---|
| **Strongly Disagree** | 1.3 | 0.8 |
| **Disagree** | 3.6 | 0.8 |
| **Neutral** | 19.2 | 6.4 |
| **Agree** | 43.3 | 47.5 |
| **Strongly Agree** | 32.5 | 44.4 |

### Positive Attitudes to Consent

Students answered two items from the positive attitudes to sexual consent sub-scale on Humphreys and Brousseau's (2010) sexual consent scale. The items refer to attitudes towards verbalising sexual consent ('You always need to talk about consent before the start of sexual activity') and obtaining consent before any sexual activity or intimacy ('Getting consent is important before any kind of sexual behaviour happens, including kissing/ petting, etc.'). A 1-5 scale of agreement was used from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'. The items are phrased so agreement indicates a positive attitude.

A paired samples t-test on the responses to each item found that the mean score for 'You always need to talk about consent before the start of sexual activity' item improved significantly from pre-workshop (4.10) to post-workshop (4.31, $p < 0.001$). The mean score for 'Getting consent is important before any kind of sexual behaviour happens, including kissing/petting, etc.' increased from pre-workshop (4.00) to post-workshop (4.17), which was also a significant change ($p < 0.001$).

**CONSENT EMPOWERMENT INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY FOLLOWING THE WORKSHOP**

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females | Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-workshop** | 4.10 | 646 | .951 | 3.86 | 4.27 | 3.95 |
| **Post-workshop** | 4.31*** | 646 | .892 | 4.05** | 4.49*** | 4.37 |

*Table 11. Mean scores for the statement 'You always need to talk about consent before the start of sexual activity,' pre- and post-workshop.*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females | Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-workshop** | 4.00 | 645 | .945 | 3.85 | 4.11 | 4.05 |
| **Post-workshop** | 4.17*** | 645 | .990 | 3.98* | 4.32*** | 4.00 |

*Table 12. Mean scores for the statement 'Getting consent is important before any kind of sexual behaviour happens, including kissing/petting, etc,' pre- and post-workshop.*

A breakdown of the response options chosen by participants for each item is presented below. The percentage of participants that 'strongly agreed' with 'Getting consent is important before any kind of sexual behaviour happens, including kissing/petting, etc.' went from 31.2% pre-workshop to 41.6% post-workshop. The percentage who strongly agreed with 'You always need to talk about consent before the start of sexual activity' went from 40.1% to 51.7%. Furthermore, there was a decrease in the percentage of respondents selecting the 'neutral' response option for items at post-workshop evaluation.

| | Pre-Workshop | Post-Workshop |
|---|---|---|
| **Strongly Disagree** | 1.7 | 1.0 |
| **Disagree** | 5.8 | 4.0 |
| **Neutral** | 15.7 | 9.0 |
| **Agree** | 36.7 | 34.3 |
| **Strongly Agree** | 40.1 | 51.7 |

*Table 13. Percentage of students who selected each response option to the statement 'You always need to talk about consent before the start of sexual activity.'*

| | Pre-Workshop | Post-Workshop |
|---|---|---|
| **Strongly Disagree** | 1.3 | 1.4 |
| **Disagree** | 6.2 | 4.7 |
| **Neutral** | 18.0 | 10.7 |
| **Agree** | 43.2 | 41.6 |
| **Strongly Agree** | 31.2 | 41.6 |

*Table 14. Percentage of students who selected each response option to the statement 'Getting consent is important before any kind of sexual behaviour happens, including kissing/petting, etc.'*

## Alcohol and Sexual Consent

Students responded to one item from Ward et al.'s (2012) alcohol and sexual consent scale. This item refers to perceptions of capacity to consent when under the influence of alcohol (i.e., 'A person who is drinking heavily can still give legal consent to sexual activity'). For consistency with the other scales, a 1-5 scale of agreement was used for this item (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'). For this item, a lower score indicates a more positive attitude (i.e., rejecting the idea that someone drinking heavily can give consent). Using a paired samples t-test it was found that the mean score for the alcohol and sexual consent item decreased from pre-workshop (1.98) to post-workshop (1.80). This decrease was significant ($p < 0.001$).

Examining the distribution of responses across the five categories of agreement, the percentage of participants who strongly disagreed that a person who is drinking heavily can still give legal consent to sexual activity increased from 43.4% (pre-workshop) to 49.4% (post-workshop).

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females | Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-workshop** | 1.98 | 646 | 1.08 | 2.22 | 1.78 | 2.40 |
| **Post-workshop** | 1.80*** | 646 | 1.04 | 2.13 | 1.59*** | 1.40* |

*Table 15. Mean scores for the statement 'A person who is drinking heavily can still give legal consent to sexual activity,' pre- and post-workshop,' pre- and post-workshop.*

*Table 16. Percentage of students who selected each response option to the statement 'A person who is drinking heavily can still give legal consent to sexual activity,' pre- and post-workshop.'*

| | Pre-Workshop | Post-Workshop |
|---|---|---|
| **Strongly Disagree** | 43.4 | 49.4 |
| **Disagree** | 29.2 | 31.0 |
| **Neutral** | 16.5 | 10.2 |
| **Agree** | 8.1 | 6.0 |
| **Strongly Agree** | 2.7 | 3.5 |

# STUDENT FEEDBACK ON THE WORKSHOP: RELEVANCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The vast majority of students found the workshop relevant, including 99.0% (n=380) of females, 94.7% (n=265) of males, and 100% of non-binary identifying students. Nearly all females reported that they would recommend the workshop to a friend (96.6%, n=358), alongside 86.2% (n=260) of males, and 84.2% of non-binary students.

Similar ratings of relevance and recommendation to a friend were noted among young people in a relationship and those not in a relationship. There was little difference in ratings by year of school, although Transition Year students were more likely to report the workshop was relevant to them (97.8%, n=551), compared with Sixth Year students (93.7%, n=142), and were more likely to say they would recommend the workshop to a friend (92.8%, n=505) compared with Sixth Year students (86.3%, n=139).

# SCHOOL TYPE: MIXED GENDER AND SINGLE GENDER SCHOOLS

Follow-up analysis was carried out to assess whether perceptions of the workshop or its impact varied by the type of school where it was delivered. There is some caution in drawing inferences of this kind across four sub-sets of the workshop participants. The number of female pupils in each type of school ranged from 126 (females in mixed gender schools) to 328 (females in all-girls' schools), while the number of males ranged from 133 (males in mixed gender schools) to 159 (males in all-boys' schools).

Reviewing baseline pre-workshop attitudes, there is some evidence that positive attitudes to consent varied across the school types. For instance, the mean score on the item 'You always need to talk about consent before the start of sexual activity' was 3.62 out of 5.00 among pupils in all-boys' schools, lower than the mean score for the other school types (boys in mixed gender schools: 4.18; girls in all-girls' schools: 4.20; girls in mixed gender schools: 4.42).

On the alcohol and sexual consent item, 'A person who is drinking heavily can still give legal consent to sexual activity', the mean agreement score among pupils in all-boys' schools was 2.35, which was higher than the equivalent score among boys in mixed gender schools (2.12), all-girls' schools (1.82), and girls in mixed gender schools (1.66). However, the baseline consent preparedness mean total score was lowest among girls in mixed gender schools (21.70), followed by all-girls' schools (22.22), all-boys' schools (22.36), and boys in mixed gender schools (22.68).

In terms of the scale of change from pre- to post-workshop scores on attitude ratings, there was evidence to suggest that females reported the greatest change – for instance a change of approximately 3.00 points in the mean consent preparedness score among girls in single gender and mixed gender schools compared with a change of approximately 1.00 in all-boys' schools and 2.00 among boys in mixed gender schools. The largest difference in mean scores for the item on alcohol and consent from pre- to post-workshop was in all-girls' schools and lowest in all-boys' schools. Changes in positive attitude to consent scores were comparable across school type.

There was little difference by school type as to whether the workshop was viewed as relevant, but the percentage of boys in all-boys' schools who would recommend it to a friend (83.4%) was lower than the comparable figure from boys in mixed gender schools (89.9%). Females in all-girls' schools (96.2%) and in mixed gender schools (97.4%) were most likely to recommend the workshop to a friend.

## DELIVERY TYPE: REMOTE AND IN-PERSON DELIVERY, TEACHER AND ACTIVE* CONSENT TEAM DELIVERY

A total of 545 young people took part in workshops that were delivered in-person by teachers or Active* Consent team members, while 319 took part in workshops delivered remotely. The baseline attitude scores were comparable across the two modes of delivery. There was no evidence of a different level of change in the pre- and post-workshop ratings linked to the mode of delivery of the workshop. Changes in scores on consent preparedness, positive attitudes to consent, and beliefs about alcohol and consent did not differ according to whether the workshop was in-person or delivered remotely. Nor was there any evidence of differences in the percentage of students who rated the workshop as relevant to themselves or who would recommend the workshop to a friend.

Two schools delivered the Active* Consent schools workshop through trained secondary school teachers (without any Active* Consent team member present). This comprised 24.7% of the young people (n=213). The Active* Consent team delivered the workshop to seven secondary schools (in-person and remotely) and reached 651 students (75.3% of the students). Given that not all of the students provided feedback, 129 students reported on workshops delivered by teachers only and 588 students on workshops delivered by Active* Consent team members. These figures were compared to assess whether the facilitator type had an impact on satisfaction with the workshop and changes in pre- and post-workshop attitude scores.

There was no difference by facilitator type in the percentage of students who rated the workshop as relevant or who would recommend it to a friend. Teachers were able to get the same results when delivering the workshop as Active* Consent facilitators. The same trend applied when scores on attitude items were reviewed, with similar levels of changes in scores identified pre- and post-workshop irrespective of whether teachers or Active* Consent team members had delivered the workshop.

## QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK FROM SCHOOL STUDENTS

Students responded to three open-ended questions after participating in an Active* Consent workshop:

- What did you respond to in this workshop?
- Did anything surprise you in the workshop?
- Was there anything you wish you had covered in the workshop?

"I'M REALLY HAPPY THAT SCHOOLS ARE TEACHING THIS TO STUDENTS ... IT'S AN EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITY AND PROGRAMME TO TEACH"

(GENDER NON-CONFORMING, 16)

The written replies from students are summarised below to explore reactions to the content of the workshop, levels of engagement, comments on the workshop process, and relevance to the students' concerns and daily lives.

### Workshop Content

Some students remarked that the workshop was welcome because they typically did not receive consent education and yet wanted to know more about the topic ("how educational it was because, many young people nowadays don't get the required education", Male, 16). The workshop was seen as highly informative and useful ("all exercises were very useful and explanatory", Female, 18), and "should definitely be done everywhere" (Female, 18).

Students were very positive about their school's decision to provide the workshop, given that consent was an important issue that had to be addressed:

- This is a very important subject that should be taught in depth in both the home and an educational setting so I was grateful (Female, 16).
- I loved it, I'm really happy that schools are teaching this to students and young people because this is so important to learn about. It's an excellent opportunity and programme to teach (Gender non-conforming, 16).

The Active* Consent workshop was described as empowering the students to communicate about consent and to feel more confident in doing so. Comments included feedback that all aspects of the workshop were beneficial:

- I thought this workshop was very beneficial and useful. Everything covered in this consent workshop is very relevant to teenager's lives, making it helpful (Female, 15).
- I honestly think it covers consent good so I can't think of something to add about that" (Male, 16).

The workshop was described as having a positive effect in educating students on what constitutes a consensual experience and also helped students learn about what their peers thought. The workshop surprised some students as it reassured them about other people's experiences:

- I thought maybe I was just behind everyone else's level of what they like doing but I guess I'm not (Female, 16).
- I was surprised to see the opinions or views of my peers and how similar they were to my own (Male, 16).

The Active* Consent research statistics from other Irish secondary school students surprised the students, particularly the social norms gap: "All the graphs and research results especially the one where what we think other people are comfortable with vs what we personally comfortable with" (Female, 17). Students appreciated the use of information such as statistics on peer attitudes ("[they] helped put things into perspective", Female, 18). The interactive questions used in the workshop were "useful + interesting" (Female, 17) and the use of Slido was beneficial "to give our own opinion anonymously" (Female, 16).

Students remarked that the use of consent stories "enhanced the effectiveness of the workshop and made it easier to relate to" (Female, 16). Some students discussed the stories in groups in class and enjoyed exploring these scenarios with their peers:

- I enjoyed talking in the small groups and discussing the stories. It was really informative and useful (Female, 16).
- I enjoyed analysing different situations and discussing them to understand consent better (Male, 17).

The use of realistic stories in the workshop was a positive feature as it furthered the understanding of consent in realistic situations:

- The example stories really helped me to understand consent in normal day to day life (Male, 15).
- There were different ages/genders. It was realistic because people will say they're fine with the whole consent thing but wouldn't actually know how/ when to ask for sex (Female, 16).

The stories also illustrated that consent can be nuanced and complex in some situations, requiring attention and reflection. Som e students were surprised that it was difficult to assess the behaviour described in the workshop stories ("how difficult it is determine if a situation truly is consensual or not", Male, 16).

The workshop provided new information to students in a number of areas. Students commented that the workshop's coverage of LGBTQ+ identity and gender roles was important: "That they talked about sexual orientation and gender, that's highly important for people to understand. And the difference in ideas of how males and female views on sex" (Gender non-conforming, 16). Students appreciated that the workshop did not just focus on males being perpetrators and felt inclusive ("There wasn't a focus of male to female sexual misconduct, which is good because sometimes as a man that can be alienating", No gender or age stated).

Some girls were surprised that boys in their class were "on the same page in regard to

consent" (Female, 18). One female (No age stated) wrote that "[the boys] all seemed to think it was a really important thing and they knew more than I expected. The workshop also challenged the gender script that boys are always up for sex", while another noted "that boys feel pressure too" (Female, 18).

Some of the new information on consent surprised the students (e.g., "that getting guilted into it isn't giving consent", Female, 16). Prior to participating in the workshop some students did not know about having the capacity to consent: "I did not know that someone under the influence could not give consent" (Female, 17).

Information on Irish laws surrounding sexual consent and rape was novel for some of the students:

- The legality of consent when both people are drunk. The legal definition of rape, the law of someone having sex with someone under 17 if they're two years older than them (Male, 16).

Some students commented on the point that consent is needed in all relationships and that body language is not synonymous with consent:

- That consent had to mean you wanted to do it I thought as long as you agreed it was consent even if you didn't want to" (Male, 16).
- Small signs of body language isn't consent and consent still is needed in relationships (Female, no age stated).

"GETTING GUILTED INTO IT ISN'T GIVING CONSENT"

(FEMALE, 16)

# WORKSHOP DELIVERY

Students appreciated that the workshop was not too serious. It included humour and informal language ("how relaxed it was, not too serious but it was serious enough to understand consent", Female, 18; "the use of informal language really resonated with me as a young person", Female, 17).
This approach appeared to balance well with coverage of sensitive topics in other parts of the workshop:

- How nothing was brushed over just because it's an uncomfortable topic (Male, 16).
- I liked that it was casual and lighthearted while still keeping it serious. It gave perspective (Female, 16).

Some students had a preconceived idea that a consent workshop would be formal or boring, and were surprised with the experience they had:

- That it was relevant. A lot of other workshops are so unrealistic but this one was really helpful (Female, 16).
- I thought it would be very boring, it wasn't (Male, 16).
- I was surprised on how interested I was (Male, 16).

Students found the open and informal tone surprising but useful as it helped create an open discussion on consent:

- Very open and blunt which was good. Help me feel comfortable (Male, 18 years).
- How easy and chill it was to talk about this topic (Female, 16).

### Recommendations for Additional Topics

References were made to the workshop covering "everything that was important to know" (Female, 15). However, there were also suggestions made about other topics that the students wanted to know about. These suggestions ranged across positive sexual health, sexual violence, and harassment. Some students wanted to know more about what to do if an assault or rape happens. Students would have liked to understand the "effect of sexual assault/rape on the victim" (Male, 17) and who else they can go to for support: "Possibly how to handle a bad situation or the impact afterwards or options when you're in trouble and don't want to talk to a parent" (Female, 15). More stories were also suggested by students so they "can understand the grey areas" (Female, 16), and to learn about how to respond to assault or harassment:

- Situations that are more confusing and difficult regarding sexual assault/harassment/rape and what to do if you are ever in that situation or position (Female, 16).

# "VERY OPEN AND BLUNT WHICH WAS GOOD"

(MALE, 18)

References were also made to wider sexual health information, with some students requesting information like "handouts with names of crisis centres, health clinics, abortion clinics" (Female, 18). Students wanted the workshop to include on other aspects of RSE including STIs, contraception, and "how to put on a condom" (Male, 16 years). Furthermore, some students wanted "more LGBTQ content" to be covered in the workshop, for example:

- Possible talk more about sex between same sex couples, LGBTQI+ couples, transgender people. But regardless good job :) (Gender non-conforming, 16).

## TEACHER PREPARATION AND SUPPORT

Given the goal of providing the Active* Consent schools workshop as part of a wider programme of engagement, it is critical to prepare teachers directly involved as supporters or facilitators. The long-term aim is to ensure that all stakeholders in the school community have access to awareness raising, education, and training, so that culture change and a whole of school approach can receive comprehensive and practical support. These ambitions will be challenging to achieve, and so a teacher support initiative was devised and piloted in 2021 alongside the piloting of the consent workshop for teenagers in schools.

While it is challenging to work towards the objective of sustainable culture change in how schools address consent education, it is clear that the second-level educational system is becoming more receptive to supporting work of this kind. As part of the strategic approach taken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Nolan's (2018) report highlighted the potential for teachers to have a central role in the delivery of effective RSE in Irish schools. In that report, school pupils expressed support for their teachers having specialist knowledge and training to perform this role, placing particular value on teacher openness, non-judgmental attitudes, and confidence in the role. A background report of current RSE standards conducted by Keating et al. (2018) identified teacher confidence and competence as central challenges in the existing provision of quality RSE.

These challenges are understandable given the traditional lack of emphasis on system-wide resourcing and support for sexual health education, for example in offering a specialised focus on RSE and sexual health education in teaching training and ongoing professional development. Variations in the quality and delivery of RSE have been noted in earlier reports (Department of Education & Skills, 2009, 2013). These have been attributed to the flexibility of the RSE curriculum and an associated tendency for teachers to avoid highly sensitive subject areas. Teachers of RSE and SPHE are not required to have a specialist knowledge of the subject matter and there is currently no standard route to a professional qualification in sexuality education for teachers (Duffy, 2020). A systematic review concluded that school-based RSE is best supported by teachers having access to training, a school culture that prioritises the subject and promotes the importance of RSE in schools and in society (Walker et al., 2020).

This was the background for teachers who took part in training to deliver the schools workshop and to support the Active* Consent research team to engage directly with their pupils. A teachers' manual was created as the script for the workshop, to be used in conjunction with a PowerPoint presentation. A training session for teachers was designed alongside an awareness-raising webinar for parents. Preparation for teachers was intended to enable them to acquire the knowledge, skills and confidence to facilitate the Active* Consent workshop and to identify how to integrate the workshop within the RSE curriculum. Training for teachers delivering the workshop is also relevant to other teachers, administrative staff, school leadership and management.

The training used in the pilot research on the schools workshop provided participants with:

- Information on the aims, ethos, and actions of the Active* Consent programme.
- An understanding of the context within which school pupils explore their sexuality and the influences that inform their sexual decision-making.

- Knowledge on how to respond appropriately to disclosures, as well as help-seeking options and supports.
- The opportunity to participate in the school consent workshop to gain insights into the content and process underpinning the student experience.
- The confidence to facilitate the school Active* Consent workshop using the teachers' manual and PowerPoint presentation.

# FEEDBACK FROM TEACHERS

A total of 31 teachers took part in the piloting of the schools consent workshop, supporting workshop implementation or being directly involved in workshop delivery. Nine teachers took part in interviews and focus groups on the pilot workshops. Two teachers were interviewed individually, and seven teachers took part in one of two focus groups. The participants included a school principal, a deputy principal, and two Transition Year coordinators, which contributed a management and coordination perspective.

The teachers spoke about having decided to pilot the workshop because of previous positive engagement with the Active* Consent team and due to the need they saw for students to receive appropriate education on consent. In this example, the requirement for consent education arose because of issues of non-consent and a realisation that the topic was "rearing its head":

- We had too many stories of students who have found themselves in situations whereby they retrospectively realised that they partook in something that didn't involve their consent … we are always asking ourselves what we can do differently. Being an all-girls school, I suppose we are particularly attuned to what needs are changing over time and it just seems over time that this area is rearing its head (S3).

Teachers were concerned about pupils being exposed to misinformation, and looked to the Active* Consent workshop to empower the young people through knowledge and information:

- I really just wanted to get involved in giving them the correct, positive information (S3).
- I think they need to know but they might not understand what they need to know. There's like a gap in their mind, … [they] might hear the word consent, but the gap is there, what does that really mean. It's kind of like filling in the blanks (S1).

The teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the content of the workshop. They saw it as having comprehensive content ("all the teachers that came back … they found it really profound and, you know, so relevant to what's going on," S1). The consent stories were highlighted as particularly effective ("they got them really thinking," S2), and credible to the student demographic:

- It's the first RSE based resource that I have, that I haven't had to change the stories for, you know to make them more realistic, to make them more appropriate to their age level (S3).

The inclusivity of the consent stories was identified as a strength as it meant that all student interests were referred to and engaged with:

- You touched on the LGBTQ+ community with one of the scenarios [Sam and Alex], you had the gender issue in another scenario where you were flipping it a little bit [Jim and Claire], and then you, we had the younger group where alcohol was involved [Aoife and Martin]. … they all could relate to, something every type of student that you'd come across. … I thought that all types of student were being catered for (S4).

One focus group described how the workshop gave them access to high quality resources that they would struggle to find on their own:

- It takes time to find videos online and find stuff that's free to have. The videos, they found them really engaging. And for us to go and try to find, we have our own exam subjects as well, so we just don't have time to give to SPHE and find all those videos, trawling through the Internet. So, it's brilliant to have ones that work. And they were really good, and they really engaged them (S4).

Teachers felt very supported by the workshop manual. They were reassured that they were covering all of the material properly and that there was a standardised approach to preparation and delivery:

- Having the script was really good … it's nice to have a script to go by that you're making sure that you are hitting everything … you knew that you weren't missing out on anything, you're covering absolutely everything (S4).

The teachers were impressed with the feedback from the pupils:

- Trying to get feedback out of young fellas is like pulling teeth. But in fairness, they kind of commented on it saying it was a good workshop (S2).
- What the students said was all very positive. They were like 'that was great', I don't know what your role is in life, but this is my second-year teaching boys so if there's any sort of response, I'll absolutely grab it and go. So, they said 'thank you very much, that was really great, I'm glad I was part of that' (S1).

The realism of the consent stories and the relatability of the language used in the workshops contributed to pupil engagement. The material was seen as authentic and impactful, enabling it to 'hit home' with the students:

- Well, we had a wonderful reaction throughout, but particularly when it came into the scenarios. I think they themselves were taken aback by how realistic they found each of the scenarios and even the really intense discussion that was taking place afterwards … I thought that that was where they really gain something from it. I think they were surprised by how these were hitting home (S3).

All the teachers were highly positive about their experience of piloting the Active* Consent school workshop. They were committed to incorporating it into their school Relationship and Sexuality Education programme. Teacher feedback on awareness raising for parents indicated how important they felt the parent seminar had been to support workshop implementation in their schools.

The seminar was an opportunity for parents to learn about the consent programme so they can make an informed choice:

- You can't assume that they're ok, you know. [The seminar] will give them time and space to think about 'well, do I want my son hearing this, at this point?' They are the guardians of the students that we teach and we're not there to make that decision on their behalf (S1).

The Active* Consent programme was viewed as being based on a solid foundation. Coming from a university base of research the team was seen as credible, well informed, and on top of current developments:

- It's really important that all of this comes from research, and I think the parents were very interested in being involved in something that is evolving to very immediate and contemporary needs. I guess so much of the school curriculum gets outdated quite quickly and quite stale and I mean of all areas, this needs to be really personal and up to date, so there was a real sense that this was fresh off the press and still evolving (S3).

The experience of the seminar was positive, and despite the sensitive nature of the topic, the mode of engagement and care taken to work with the parents was successful in securing their support:

- I was shocked and surprised [that there was no negative feedback from the parents' evening] … we would have a certain element of conservative tradition and certainly in the past we would have had queries to do with content, be it to do with RSE or areas like that. And I was actually really surprised that it was entirely positive which was fantastic (S3).

"YOU KNEW THAT YOU WEREN'T MISSING OUT ON ANYTHING, YOU'RE COVERING ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING"

(TEACHER)

# PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Parents, guardians, and other caregivers are an important influence on the sexuality education of their children. Yet many parents underestimate their impact on their adolescents' decisions about sex, especially as their children start to become more independent and involved with their peers (Ashcroft & Murray, 2017).

For many parents and children, the prospect of talking about topics related to sexuality is daunting. It can be challenging to discuss issues when parents feel that they lack information or skills for communication and dialogue. Research on parents' perspectives has revealed barriers to communication including the wish to protect "childhood innocence", suitable timing and age appropriateness of explanations, personal discomfort, and fear of criticism or judgement (Stone & Ingham, 2012).

A community process can contribute to a sexual citizenship approach to promoting sexual decision-making and awareness raising on ethical intimate relationships (Robinson, Smith, & Davis, 2017).

Accordingly, an information session for parents was developed as part of the Active* Consent schools workshop implementation plan to address parental anxieties about consent, to inform them about the workshop, and to promote conversations at home.

The seminar was delivered via Zoom using a webinar format. Invitations to attend were made through the school. The aims of the webinar were to support parents and guardians to:

- Gain an understanding of the aims, ethos, and actions of the Active* Consent programme.
- Be aware of the language and tone used in the consent workshop, so as to gain their support for its roll out within the school.
- Better understand the context in which school pupils may be starting to explore their sexuality and the influences informing their decisions to do so.
- Share resources supportive of conversations to enable their children to safely navigate and explore sexual experiences.

PARENTS WERE INCLUDED AS A KEY PART OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY THROUGH A WEBINAR DELIVERED AT EACH SCHOOL

# "I FOUND IT VERY INTERESTING AND AM FULLY BEHIND KIDS HAVING THESE DISCUSSIONS"

(MALE PARENT, AGED 51-60)

## FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS

Parents' seminars took place with each school prior to the delivery of the Active* Consent workshops. A total of 353 parents attended an Active* Consent parents' seminar, with 181 parents providing feedback using Slido.com and 147 completing an online feedback survey.

The parents ranged in age from 31-60 years old. The majority (55%) were between 41-50 years old, with 37% aged 51-60. The majority (87%) were female. Their children ranged in age from 3 to 25 years old. The majority had children aged 16 years.

The parents shared their view of the seminar through responses to quantitative items:

- 97% of parents found the seminar to be informative.
- 88% agreed that their confidence to communicate with their child about sexual consent had increased.
- 90% stated their confidence had increased in terms of communicating about sexual media, in particular pornography.
- 99% of parents felt that the Active* Consent workshop would provide children aged 15-17 years with important learning.
- 100% felt that Active* Consent sexual media resource would provide children aged 15-17 years old with important learning.
- 100% of the respondents would recommend the seminar to other parents.

Qualitative feedback made through the feedback survey and Zoom chat provided additional insight on how the parents experienced the seminar, the context in which they approach the topic of consent, the aspects of the Active* Consent programme that resonated most with them, and their support for the workshop to take place in their children's school.

Several parents commented on having minimal information to begin with through their own education or preparation for communicating about sex with their teenagers:

- We never received anything (Female, aged 51-60).
- How little I was equipped! (Female, 41-50).
- I felt like the only parent I knew that wanted this kind of resource for my kids (Female, 41-50).
- It's the information and seminar I would've hoped for when I was young and at school (Female, 31-40).

In that context, the seminar was very helpful for parents to provide them with relevant information in an accessible manner:

- Informative and easy to understand (Female, 51-60).
- I've benefited from listening to you and look forward to my daughter participating in your workshop. Invaluable stuff (Zoom chat).
- Thank you very much for providing support on these absolutely vital topics for our teenagers (Female, 41-50).

This positive evaluation carried forward into support for the workshop to take place in the schools:

- Delighted to know our girls will be participating in this programme. A really informative session. Many thanks (Zoom chat).
- An excellent programme, to discuss everything before sexual experiences begin (Female, 51-60).
- I found it very interesting and am fully behind kids having these discussions (Male, 51-60).
- Very enjoyable and very happy my child will have access to this workshop. Well done (Female, 51-60).

There was praise for the school's decision to take part in the programme:

- Good to hear (school) is still piloting programmes that benefit their students and will do so for generations to come. Well done (Zoom chat).

Parents commented on the positive and proactive approach taken to consent in the Active* Consent programme:

- I love the way you show sex in such a positive way to young people, when it occurs in a loving consensual manner (Female, 41-50).
- Very pleased with the language used and the no nonsense attitude towards such an important but often 'skirted' around topic (Female, 41-50).
- Really found this useful. The non-judgemental, realistic attitude towards teenagers is exactly what is needed (Zoom chat).
- They are being treated like adults as this is an adult matter and that's important so well done (Female, 41-50).

The research and knowledge base of the programme was emphasised by parents as a strength that was distinctive and impressive. It was important that the programme was based on "actual research from young people" (Female, 41-50). It was clear that the programme was based on considerable primary research and reflection:

- The great extent of your research and enlightenment on the boys' attitudes to sex and consent (Female, 51-60).

The research findings on social norms and perceptions of peers were remarked on in particular:

- What children thought about what their peers were thinking (Female, 51-60).
- Information about communication … the gender norms … the surveys were very interesting (Female, 51-60).
- The research results and statistics – especially about what people are comfortable doing. Really informative and makes me feel supportive. I wish I had known this when I was younger (Female, 41-50).

This topic registered with parents as they could visualise its importance in how their children make decisions:

- Great information, thank you. The more knowledge the children get the better. The internalised peer pressure can be so dangerous, so it's very beneficial to let them know the true situation. Thanks again (Zoom chat).
- Teenagers realising that their perception of what everyone else is doing is not correct. I think that will be so helpful to them (Female, 41-50).

A number of comments were made about the take home messages parents were taking from the seminar, and how they planned to use them in conversations with their teenagers. In relation to points that resonated, parents referred to:

- Understanding sexual competence and OMFG (Female, 41-50).
- Very happy to have complete clarity on definition of consent - very good to have (Female, 51-60).
- Importance of communication. Insight to how young people's understand consent (Male, 51-60).

References were made to the relevance of attending a seminar of this kind in order to inform how parents approach talking about consent with their children ("great information to support conversations at home", Zoom chat). Of particular note was the reference to 'my child', showing a strong personal resonance among the parents and a commitment to supporting their children after the seminar. These parents used phrases such as "acutely aware" and "owe it to my son" when describing the importance they attributed to talking openly about consent:

- This talk really made me more acutely aware of the issue of consent and my son (Female, 51-60).
- Knowing that I owe it to my son (for his safety and happiness) to have this conversation with him (Female, 41-50).

In these examples, parents refer to being more comfortable and confident following the seminar. This response from parents highlights the priority of breaking down barriers that parents themselves experience when approaching consent communication with their children:

- What I learned about framing the conversation to make myself less uncomfortable about having the discussions with my daughters (Female, 41-50).
- It's given me more confidence to approach this topic with my son! (Female, 31-40).

Finally, these parents refer to the importance of the seminar in prompting discussions about consent to be ongoing and a continuing dialogue between parents and children:

- The fact that I had forgotten this should be an ongoing conversation with my daughter not a once off imparting of facts (Female, 41-50).
- Reminding me to keep in contact with my children about sex/sexual activity/sexual consent etc. Can be easy to forget to stay in communication because they are getting older (Female, 41-50).

# "VERY PLEASED WITH THE LANGUAGE USED AND THE NO NONSENSE ATTITUDE TOWARDS SUCH AN IMPORTANT BUT OFTEN 'SKIRTED' AROUND TOPIC"

(FEMALE PARENT, AGED 41-50)

# ACTIVE* CONSENT SCHOOLS SURVEY: QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

**THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS USED IN THE ACTIVE* CONSENT PROGRAMME BEGINS WITH PRIMARY RESEARCH TO IDENTIFY RELEVANT ISSUES AND TRENDS WITHIN THE KEY GROUP BEING TARGETED. THIS INFORMATION IS THEN USED TO INFORM THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICAL AWARENESS RAISING, EDUCATION AND TRAINING INITIATIVES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS.**

In the case of the schools programme, the knowledge generation for the consent workshop took the form of a survey of 613 teenagers in five schools across Ireland. The survey was designed to assess attitudes to consent and consent communication, including how beliefs of consent communication are applied in realistic scenarios. The goals of the survey were to:

- Provide an evidence base of consent attitudes and consent communication among Irish teenagers.
- Support the development of the schools programme, in particular the consent workshop.

During the summer of 2019, seven Transition Year (TY) pupils (6 female, one male) worked with the research team to design an age-appropriate pen and paper survey on consent. The students provided feedback on consent attitude and peer perception questions taken from the academic literature and previous Active* Consent surveys. They also gave their views on three stories that featured consent communication to ensure the stories were realistic. The stories were designed to elicit Transition Year and Fifth Year school pupils' views on consent communication, foregrounding verbal and non-verbal consent, gender and relationship status, and communication of non-consent.

# SURVEY CONTENT

### Consent Attitudes

Three items were adapted from the positive attitudes toward consent subscale of the sexual consent scale – revised (Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010):

- You always need to get consent before the start of a sexual activity like touching breasts, genitals (penis or vulva), oral sex, or sexual intercourse.
- There should be verbal consent for any of those sexual activities.
- Non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes OK.

Respondents give their level of agreement to each item on a 5-point Likert scale from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree', with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward affirmative sexual consent ($\alpha$ = .579). The item 'Non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes OK' was reversed coded (1 = 'Strongly Agree', 5 = 'Strongly Disagree').

### Consent Attitudes: Social Norms

The same three items from positive attitudes toward consent subscale of the sexual consent scale – revised (Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010) were used to assess perceptions of peer social norms about consent. Each of the items was prefaced with the statement 'Most other teenagers think …'. The participants registered their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'Strongly Disagree' to 5 = 'Strongly Agree'), with higher scores indicating that they considered their peers to have a positive attitude toward affirmative sexual consent ($\alpha$ = .572). The item 'Most other teenagers think non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes OK' was reverse coded.

### Comfort with Intimacy

Pupils were asked how comfortable they were personally with engaging in four types of intimacy with someone they met at a disco or house party ($\alpha$ = .882). Pupils responded to items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'Strongly Disagree', 5 = 'Strongly Agree'), with higher scores indicating more personal comfort with the activities.

### Perceptions of Peer Comfort with Social Norms

The students were presented with the same four items and asked how comfortable they thought other teenagers would be with the same activities. Pupils responded to items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'Strongly Disagree' to 5 = 'Strongly Agree'), with higher scores indicating agreement that peers would be comfortable engaging in sexual activities with someone they met a disco or house party ($\alpha$ = .643).

### Consent Communication Stories

Three stories presented a person initiating or seeking sexual intimacy and described how the other person reacted. Each story presented a distinct scenario in which consent communication was a critical issue.

1. 'Aoife and Martin': Oral sex in a hook-up between two cisgendered adolescents on a night out when the male initiates intimacy. Three versions of this story were used to assess the impact of varying consent-related actions.
2. 'Jim and Claire': Sexual intercourse between two young adults not in a relationship where intimacy was initiated by the female.
3. 'Sam and Alex': Turning down a partner looking for sex in a relationship context featuring two non-gendered adolescents.

The stories included references to contextual factors previously identified as relevant to consent communication, including:

- Alcohol use.
- Verbal or physical pressure.
- Peer expectations.
- Consent to other forms of intimacy earlier in the evening.
- Gendered roles within sexual scripts.
- Relationship status.

Each story was adapted from stories that have been used in surveys or workshops with college students by the Active* Consent programme. Each story had at least one quantitative rating item and qualitative response box that the students could use to write in their views and provide any relevant information about their reactions to the stories. The language and tone of the quantitative items and the stories used in the schools survey were checked for acceptability and comprehension by young people of the same age as the potential participants.

*Table 17. Demographics of participants who took part in the Active* Consent schools survey.*

| | Number of participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | | |
| Female | 287 | 46.8 |
| Male | 312 | 50.9 |
| Other | 11 | 1.8 |
| No gender specified | 3 | 0.5 |
| **Age** | | |
| 14 years | 1 | 0.2 |
| 15 years | 149 | 24.3 |
| 16 years | 319 | 52.0 |
| 17 years | 141 | 23.0 |
| Missing | 3 | 0.5 |
| **Relationship Status** | | |
| Single | 479 | 78.2 |
| In a relationship - Less than 1 month | 29 | 4.7 |
| In a relationship - More than 1 month | 100 | 16.3 |
| Missing | 5 | 0.8 |
| **Type of School** | | |
| Mixed gender | 352 | 57.4 |
| All-boys | 115 | 18.8 |
| All-girls | 146 | 23.8 |

# SURVEY ROLL OUT

The survey was piloted in one school and then administered in four more schools across the country in the Autumn term of 2019 (two mixed gender schools, one all-girls' school, two all-boys' schools). Research ethics approval was given by the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee. School principals were provided with information on the background of the Active* Consent programme, the survey and what involvement with the pilot would entail. With agreement of the principal and teachers, members of the Active* Consent team visited each class group to:

- Invite pupils to participate in the survey.
- Tell them what involvement would entail.
- Provide an information sheet and parental consent form to be returned prior to the survey.

The consent rate of parents ranged from 75% and 98% across the five schools. Prior to survey completion, the research team spoke to pupils about the importance of their views and how the data would be used. The students were advised that they could fill in as much or as little of the survey as they chose and could stop at any time. Pupils indicated their assent to participate by ticking a box on the first page of the survey. A team member read the survey aloud ensuring that all pupils finished at about the same time. The participants were encouraged to write as much as they wished in order to explain their answer choices.

## Participants

Across the five schools, 613 pupils participated in the survey. The participants were evenly split across males and females. Eleven participants said that they did not identify with male or female gender. Just over half were aged 16 years. Almost 60% of the pupils attended mixed schools and most identified their relationship status as single.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS: CONSENT ATTITUDES AND COMFORT WITH INTIMACY

Statistical comparisons were made between genders using paired sample t-tests corrected for multiple comparisons using a post-hoc Bonferroni corrected alpha level (p = .0.004). Eleven of the school pupils who identified as non-binary gender were not included in the gender-based statistical analyses but were included in other analyses.

## Consent Attitudes: Personal Beliefs and Peer Perceptions

The vast majority of survey respondents (86%) agreed or strongly agreed that you always need to get consent before the start of a sexual activity (touching someone's breast or genitals, oral sex or sexual intercourse). However there was a gender difference in agreement (93% of females, 79% of males, and 82% of other students agreed that consent is always needed).

Six out of ten (62%) of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there should be verbal consent for any of these activities, with a smaller gender difference compared with responses to the previous item (67% of females, 58% of males, 55% of other students).

A similar percentage of students (60%) agreed that there should be non-verbal consent for any of the activities, with no gender difference (61% of females, 59% of males, and 40% of students). Significant numbers of the survey respondents chose the neutral option on these items, ranging from 12-28% across the three statements.

Fewer survey respondents agreed that 'most other teenagers' believed that consent was always needed. Just half (51%) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that other people their age believed that consent was always needed before the start of a sexual activity. There was little evidence of a gender difference in responses to this statement (54% of females, 50% of males, and 27% of other students agreed). While the percentage of non-binary students who agreed was lower, the size of this group of students was small.

The suggestion of a 'social norms gap' between personal agreement and beliefs about peers continued in responses to the statement that most other students think that there should always be verbal consent for sexual activities. Only 37% of the survey respondents agreed with this statement, with some evidence of a gender difference in responses as well (32% of females, 42% of males, and 27% of other students agreed). These ratings reflect a relatively low level of confidence that verbal consent is supported by peers.

Finally, 61% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that most other teenagers think that non-verbal consent is sometimes ok for any of the sexual activities that were described. There was no social norms gap on responses to this statement and the equivalent statement on personal beliefs. There was some evidence of a minor gender difference in beliefs about peers (67% of females, 57% of males, and 46% of other students agreed that most other teenagers think non-verbal consent is sometimes ok). A relatively large percentage of the survey respondents gave a neutral responses to the three social norms statements, ranging from 26% to 37%.

**Figure 5**

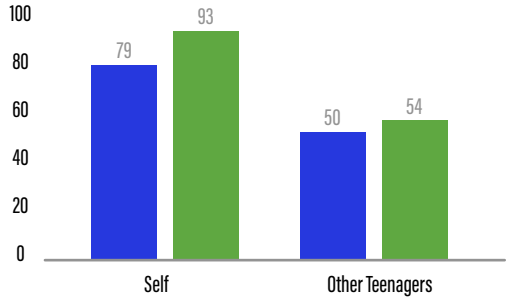



*Figure 5. Percentage of male and female students who responded 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' to the item 'You always need to get consent before the start of a sexual activity like touching breast, genitals (penis or vulva), oral sex, or sexual intercourse.'*

**Figure 6**

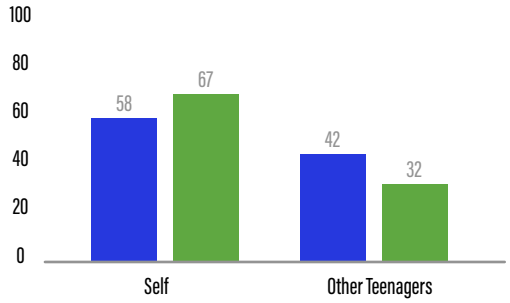



*Figure 6. Percentage of male and female students who responded 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' to the item 'There should be verbal consent for any of those sexual activities.'*

**Figure 7**

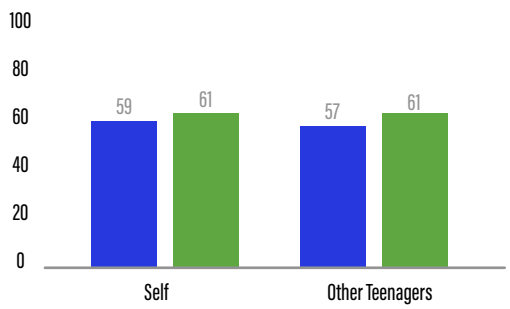



*Figure 7. Percentage of male and female students who responded 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' to the item 'Non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes OK.'*

The mean agreement scores for the personal beliefs and peer perception versions of the three consent attitudes statements were compared by gender using independent t tests. There was a significant gender difference on agreement levels for the personal beliefs versions of the first two items (that consent is always required, p.005; that verbal consent is always required, p.001). There was one gender difference on perceptions of peers, with males having a higher mean score than females on the statement that most other teenagers think that verbal consent is always required (p.001).

*Table 18. Mean agreement scores for personal attitude and social norm versions of the statement that 'You always need to get consent before the start of a sexual activity,' t test by gender.*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **You always need to get consent before the start of a sexual activity.** | 4.41 | 613 | 0.82 | 4.26 | 4.60** |
| **Most other teenagers think you always need to get consent before the start of a sexual activity.** | 3.37 | 611 | 1.02 | 3.40 | 3.37 |

*Table 19. Mean agreement scores for personal attitude and social norm versions of the statement 'There should be verbal consent for any of those sexual activities,' t test by gender.*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **There should be verbal consent for any of those sexual activities.** | 3.76 | 613 | 0.98 | 3.70 | 3.84** |
| **Most other teenagers think there should be verbal consent for any of those sexual activities.** | 3.15 | 610 | 0.94 | 3.27 | 3.02 |

*Table 20. Mean agreement scores for personal attitude and social norm versions of the statement 'Non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes ok,' t test by gender.*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes OK.** | 2.43 | 610 | 0.93 | 2.36 | 2.49 |
| **Most other teenagers think non-verbal consent for any of those sexual activities is sometimes OK.** | 2.35 | 611 | 0.87 | 2.38 | 2.29 |

## Personal Comfort with Intimacy and Social Norms Perceptions of Comfort Levels

Consent applies across all forms of intimacy, but different expectations for verbal and non-verbal consent may be held depending on the type of intimacy involved. It is important to know whether personal comfort levels with different types of intimacy are consistent with expectations for what peers may expect. The survey participants were asked to indicate their level of comfort with four types of intimacy with someone they met at a house party (kissing, touching over clothes, touching under clothes, oral sex / sexual intercourse). This was intended to equate to a 'hook up' or casual encounter.

A large majority of the survey respondents indicate that they would be comfortable with kissing someone they met at a house party and expected other teenagers to feel the same way. Three of the four figures presented in Figure 8 are approximately 90%. The lowest figure in response to this item was in females' personal comfort levels, with 72% of females saying they were comfortable with kissing.

86% AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED THAT YOU ALWAYS NEED TO GET CONSENT BEFORE THE START OF A SEXUAL ACTIVITY

**Figure 8**

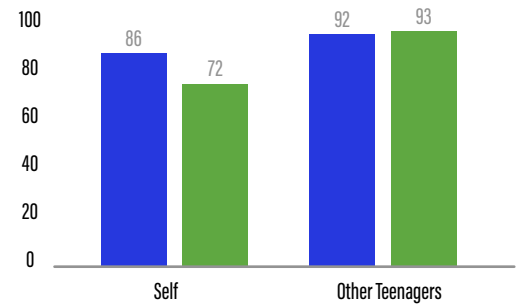



*Figure 8. Percentage of males and females personally comfortable with kissing someone they had met at a house party, and who believed other teenagers were comfortable with it.*

Male
Female

Relatively high comfort levels were maintained in response to the next intimacy behaviour of touching over clothes. Agreement levels were at approximately 75% for this item. The exception was for females' personal comfort levels. Less than half (41%) of female survey respondents responded that they were personally comfortable with touching over clothes.

This trend continued in response to the item that referred to touching someone's genitals at a house party (e.g., fingering or masturbating). Three of the four figures in Figure 10 are between 42-55%. By comparison, 7% of female survey respondents said they were personally comfortable with this behaviour.

**Figure 9**

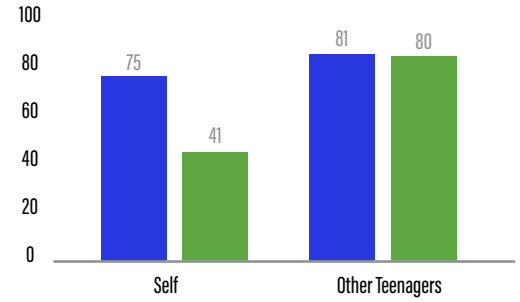



*Figure 9. Percentage of males and females personally comfortable with touching over clothes someone they had met at a house party, and who believed other teenagers were comfortable with it.*

Male
Female

The final item refers to engaging in oral sex or sexual intercourse at a house party. Comfort levels were lower again in response to this item. A third of males were comfortable with this level of intimacy whereas the comparable percentage of females was 5%.

There was a disparity or social norm gap evident in females' responses to each form of intimacy, with personal comfort percentages up to 39% lower than perceived peer comfort. There was little evidence of a social norms gap among responses made by males across the four items. The final set of Tables displays the mean agreement level on each item across the survey respondents as a whole and by gender. There was a significant gender difference in personal comfort across each type of intimacy and a significant gender difference in ratings of peer comfort on two of the behaviours (touching genitals, oral sex / sexual intercourse). In each case the mean agreement level was higher for males than for females.

**Figure 10**

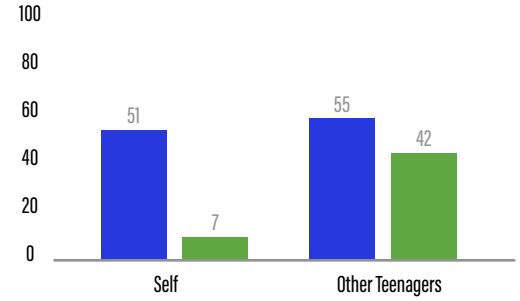



*Figure 10. Percentage of males and females personally comfortable with touching or masturbating genitals of someone they had met at a house party, and who believed other teenagers were comfortable with it.*

Male
Female

**Figure 11**

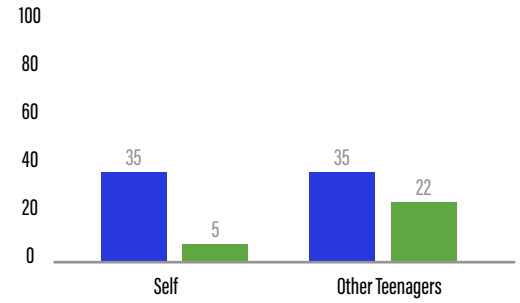



*Figure 11. Percentage of males and females personally comfortable with oral sex or sexual intercourse with someone they had met at a house party, and who believed other teenagers were comfortable with it.*

Male
Female

*Table 21. Mean agreement scores for personal attitude and social norm versions of the statement that 'I would be comfortable kissing them,' t test by gender.*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I would be comfortable kissing them.** | 4.14 | 611 | 1.07 | 4.39 | 3.88*** |
| **Most other teenagers would be comfortable kissing them.** | 4.52 | 613 | 0.71 | 4.51 | 4.54 |

*Table 22. Mean agreement scores for personal attitude and social norm versions of the statement that 'I would be comfortable touching or feeling over their clothes,' t test by gender.*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I would be comfortable touching or feeling over their clothes.** | 3.56 | 612 | 1.31 | 4.06 | 3.02*** |
| **Most other teenagers would be comfortable touching or feeling over their clothes.** | 4.14 | 613 | 0.88 | 4.29 | 4.09 |

*Table 23. Mean agreement scores for personal attitude and social norm versions of the statement that 'I would be comfortable touching or feeling under their clothes,' t test by gender.*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I would be comfortable touching or feeling under their clothes.** | 2.73 | 612 | 1.37 | 3.45 | 1.92*** |
| **Most other teenagers would be comfortable touching or feeling under their clothes.** | 3.46 | 613 | 1.01 | 3.64 | 3.28*** |

*Table 24. Mean agreement scores for personal attitude and social norm versions of the statement that 'I would be comfortable with further intimacy like oral/sexual intercourse,' t test by gender*

| | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Males | Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I would be comfortable with further intimacy like oral/sexual intercourse.** | 2.30 | 612 | 1.39 | 3.02 | 1.48*** |
| **Most other teenagers would be comfortable further intimacy like oral/sexual intercourse.** | 2.97 | 613 | 1.12 | 3.20 | 2.71*** |

# RESEARCH FINDINGS: RESPONSES TO CONSENT STORIES AND OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

The survey respondents responded to two open-ended questions that were explicitly about consent communication as well as rating statements connected to consent stories and giving written responses to the stories. The ratings and comments provide the first comprehensive insight on how Irish teenagers think about consent communication and link consent principles to applied consent scenarios that feature communication issues. The findings are first presented as a model of the facilitators and barriers associated with consent communication, followed by a qualitative analysis of responses to the three stories included in the survey.

# MODEL OF CONSENT COMMUNICATION FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS

The secondary school student survey asked the pupils to identify barriers and facilitators related to consent. The participants responded to two questions on consent communication (i.e., "What do you think stops people communicating about consent?"; "What do you think helps people communicating about consent"). A total of 582 students (female n=281, male n=297, non-binary n=4) completed the question on consent barriers, and 548 students completed the question regarding consent facilitators (female n=268, male n=269, non-binary n=9, gender not given n=2). The answers were typically not framed in directly personal terms, the respondents tapped into their understanding of what they saw as norms and shared beliefs about communication.

A qualitative content analysis was carried out on the responses to group the main facilitators and barriers to consent communication. The barriers and facilitators are described below, with a full description of the themes and sub-themes presented at the end of this section.

# BARRIERS TO CONSENT COMMUNICATION

Six main barriers were identified that might prevent people from communicating about consent, described in Table 25 and Figure 1. Being uncomfortable and being afraid were the two themes most frequently cited by students. Being uncomfortable was made up of smaller sub-categories that referred to feeling awkward (n=152), embarrassed (n=113), or experiencing discomfort (n=31).

| Theme | Percentage of students |
|---|---|
| **Uncomfortable** | 47.1 |
| **Afraid** | 46.6 |
| **Knowledge and skills** | 20.3 |
| **Pressure** | 11.7 |
| **Getting caught up in the moment** | 8.9 |
| **Social norms** | 4.8 |

*Table 25. Percentage of students coded for the main barriers to consent communication.*

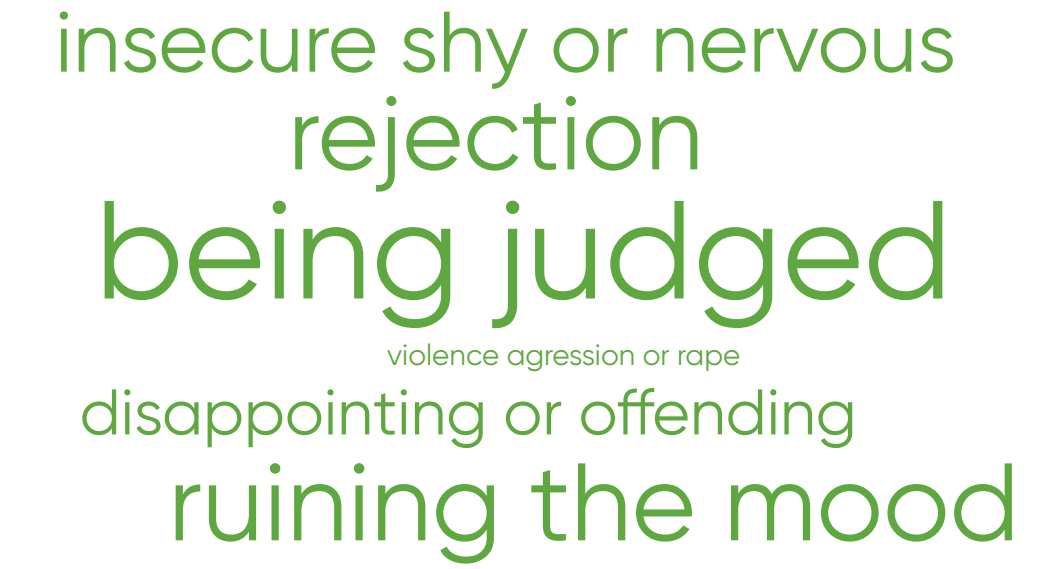

*Figure 12. Word cloud of barriers identified in response to the question "What do you think stops people communicating about consent".*

These unpleasant feelings of being 'uncomfortable' were matched by being afraid, which encompassed negative beliefs associated with consent communication. The comments associated with being afraid reflected an insecurity in communicating about consent. The students described negative consequences of open consent communication that could be anticipated, such as ruining the mood, disappointing, upsetting or offending the partner, being rejected or judged by their partner or peers. A small number of students noted fears about violence, anger, or rape as communication barriers. The breakdown of number of students who referred to different aspects of being afraid is referred to below.

| Theme | Percentage of students |
|---|---|
| **Being judged** | 33.9 |
| **Ruining the mood** | 24.4 |
| **Rejection** | 20.7 |
| **Insecure, shy or nervous** | 18.1 |
| **Disappointing or offending** | 12.9 |
| **Violence, aggression or rape** | 3.3 |

*Table 26. Percentage of students coded for 'Afraid' who were coded for sub-themes..*

*Figure 13. Word cloud of factors associated with the category of 'Afraid' as a barrier to communicating about consent.*




Fear of disappointing the partner was often linked to wanting to say no but being concerned about the consequences. More females than males referred to this as a barrier to consent communication, while similar numbers of males and females identified concerns about rejection as a barrier. Female students' comments often referred to people being afraid of the impact on the relationship if the partner is turned down, including the concern that the partner might not want to be with the person anymore or would like them if they were told no. Although comments from male students reflected fears about losing a partner as well, they also stated that people might not ask for consent explicitly and would rather rely on nonverbal cues due to the fear of being turned down and awkwardness with talking.

Students commented on the fear of being judged. For example, people might be afraid of a partner's reaction if they did not want to do something or wanted to do something the other person is not comfortable with. Students also mentioned there could be a concern with being judged or getting slagged by peers for not wanting to have sex or for wanting to do it. This related to a perceived peer pressure to engage in intimacy, consisting of a pressure to be sexually active because of the perception that their peers are sexually active. This could be a barrier to open communication about personal preferences.

Many students remarked that communicating about consent could be awkward or lead to an uncomfortable situation. Students commented that people are easily embarrassed because they are unsure about what to say or do. Furthermore, consent and sex were identified by some students as a taboo topic in society. This could contribute to awkwardness about the topic, preventing people asking for consent but also limiting discussion of consent in non-sexual situations. Additionally, people might not know enough about consent or know how to approach consent communication with a partner.

Some students remarked that consent is not talked about enough in school RSE and that the societal constraints on talking about consent could contribute to discomfort and awkwardness in communicating. In this context, they recognised the need to further promote awareness, knowledge, and confidence to communicate consent. This was reflected in comments that people might not see it as important or relevant to communicate about consent.

People might assume that consent is ongoing because the partner agreed to something else or because sexual intimacy is perceived as the norm, if someone is in a relationship, or because the other person does not speak up themselves. Other comments referred to forgetting about consent because people get caught up in the moment. Furthermore, the students recognised that alcohol and drugs are barriers to consent and that being under the influence could interfere with judgment and clear communication of boundaries.

# FACILITATORS

Six key facilitators of consent communication were identified, with the number of pupils who referred to each one summarised below. Students reported that knowing the person or being in a relationship helps consent communication. It was widely acknowledged that trusting and being comfortable with the other person helps openness and honesty about what one is comfortable doing and discussing consent with the partner.

| Theme | Percentage of students |
|---|---|
| **Good relationship** | 40.0 |
| **Confidence** | 26.1 |
| **Communication** | 25.0 |
| **Awareness and education** | 20.8 |
| **Talking** | 17.3 |
| **Talking to others** | 5.8 |

*Table 27. Percentage of students coded for the main facilitators to consent communication.*


*Figure 14. Word cloud of key facilitators identified in response to the question "What do you think helps people communicating about consent".*

Students stated that it would help to be on the same page with their partner, to take things slowly and to discuss consent and boundaries before engaging in any sexual activity. Furthermore, students referred to mutual respect as being important for good consent communication. Some students stated that talking to a partner about consent would be more likely if they knew the person would not talk to their friends about what was said or done, again underlining students' concern about their peers' opinions and reactions. The number of students who referred to each component of the 'Good relationship' is displayed in Table 28 and Figure 4.

| Sub-Theme | Percentage of students |
|---|---|
| **Openness** | 73.5 |
| **Knowing the person** | 36.1 |
| **Feeling comfortable** | 31.5 |
| **Confidence in partner** | 16.4 |
| **Honesty** | 8.7 |
| **Taking things slow** | 7.8 |
| **Respect** | 3.7 |
| **Privacy** | 2.7 |

*Table 28. Percentage of students coded for 'Good relationship' theme who were coded for sub-themes.*


*Figure 15. Word cloud of factors associated with the category of 'good relationship' as a barrier to communicating about consent.*

**PUPILS DESCRIBED SCHOOL AS A SAFE PLACE WHERE CONSENT EDUCATION ACTIVITIES WOULD BE BENEFICIAL**

Moreover, students recognised that having knowledge, understanding and skills would facilitate communication, making consent more approachable and easier to address themselves. They stressed the importance of knowing more about what consent is, how to communicate consent with their partner, and the consequences that could follow if it is not obtained.

Students highlighted the unique role of schools. They stated, for example, that school is perceived as a safe place and that workshops, surveys, and classes on consent would be beneficial. They also referred to the importance of having the capacity to consent. For example, a number of students stated that not being impaired by alcohol would make it more likely that clear consent is obtained before engaging in sexual activity. Students also recognised the importance of confidence in using both active and passive consent communication.

Apart from the benefit of immediate consent communication, students identified environmental factors that could help young people to engage in discussions about consent. Students stated that consent needs to be normalised in society and openly addressed, a process that should commence from early adolescence. Students highlighted that learning about consent in school could help reduce the social taboo around consent and prompt students to think more about the topic. They also referred to media and stated that active, positive consent should be shown in media as the norm. Representation in the media would prompt conversations on consent. Some students also stated that it would be helpful to have someone to ask and talk about consent, such as friends, a sibling, or parents.

Taken together, the categories and themes developed as a result of the qualitative analysis provide a unique model of consent communication. This model is set out below, grounded in relevant examples from the students.

*Table 29. Description of the consent facilitator themes 'Good relationship, 'Communication' and 'Confidence,' including sub-themes and examples.*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Good relationship: Knowing the other person, being in a relationship, having a good relationship** | |
| **Openness**<br>Being open about consent, feelings, concerns helps with consent communication | "Open, non-judgemental conversations" (SE64F)<br>"If one person in the relationship opened up about it or asked the person they are with" (SB18M) |
| **Knowing the person**<br>Having a good quality relationship with the other person helps, being in a relationship, being close, being friends, or knowing the other person | "Having a healthy relationship" (SC161F)<br>"Knowing each other well. Talking about it" (SC126M)<br>"If they know each other better, it would be easier to talk about consent. It would be more difficult with somebody you just met" (SB2M) |
| **Feeling comfortable**<br>Being comfortable in the situation or with the person would help communicating consent | "Feeling comfortable with the person you're being intimate with is important so that you don't feel pressured to do anything you don't want to" (SE68F)<br>"Feeling comfortable and accepted by the person they're with" (SB32M) |
| **Confidence in partner**<br>Trust as foundation of communicating consent | "Trust with each other, if both people are going slow and no pressuring the other and going too fast" (SE29F) |
| **Honesty**<br>Honesty helps with consent | "Being straight up" (SB36M)<br>"Being open and honest with your partner" (SC12F) |
| **Taking things slow**<br>Slowing things down as an aid to consent, taking a break after kissing | "To move slower and don't just rush into everything" (SE42M) |
| **Respect**<br>Respecting the other person / mutual respect is helpful for consent | "Mutual respect and concern for them" (SE132M)<br>"Thinking about how you would feel as the other person, and respect their choice" (SA84F) |
| **Privacy**<br>If the partner would not tell their friends about what they did, the importance of privacy and confidentiality | "Keeping your personal life private from others to avoid pressure from friends" (SA68F)<br>"If the other person keeps what happens private, they don't disclose anything to their friends" (SA81F)<br>"Talking about it privately" (SB23M) |
| **Confidence: Consent communication are supported by confidence and capacity** | |
| **Confidence**<br>Having the confidence or not being afraid to talk about consent would help | "If they're comfortable with the person. Confidence" (SA80F)<br>"Confidence and being comfortable in the relationship" (SDB11M) |
| **Capacity to consent by being sober**<br>Being sober contributes to consent communication | "Obviously if you are both sober, it helps" (SA143F)<br>"Being sober, calm and just talk and make sure about everything" (SDB9M) |
| **Communication: Being on the same page with the partner, communication with the partner in general or about rules / boundaries** | |
| Communication<br>Talking about consent / boundaries with partner helps, talking to your partner, being vocal, expressing concerns to your partner | "Having a more open relationship, expressing your concerns with your partner" (SE2M)<br>"Being patient, understanding, having a talk with your partner about what your boundaries are" (SA126F) |
| Being on the same page, agree on rules / boundaries<br>It is easier to communicate if both people are on the same page either about sex or consent | "If they feel the same way" (SDA9M)<br>"Starting off a thing or relationship explaining boundaries" (SA139F) |

*Table 30. Description of the consent facilitator themes 'Awareness and education,' 'Talking,' and 'Talking to others,' including sub-themes and examples.*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Awareness and education: Consent communication are supported by awareness and education** | |
| **Awareness**<br>The need to achieve awareness and understanding about consent | "People need to be made more aware of how consent applies in different situations and make it an approachable topic. People need to know when consent is/isn't given + UNDERSTAND" (SC67F)<br>"Raising awareness about consent helps people communicate" (SA106F) |
| **Education**<br>Using the school setting or consent education to promote awareness, through RSE, classes, surveys like this, or learning about consent | "Surveys like this, Laws on it, Asking Consent, Education on it" (SA1F)<br>"Teaching students in secondary schools might make it a more approachable topic in conversations with partners" (SB41M) |
| **Talking: Normalising consent and open discussion in relationships or society** | |
| **Normalise**<br>Talking about / asking for consent should be normal | "If you say it like it's not a big deal instead of just whispering it or something it makes the topic a lot less daunting. You can make it a casual conversation to make people more comfortable" (SE41F)<br>"If it was a topic that was made more normal and talked about more frequently then it would come up in conversation and be discussed" (SB20M) |
| **Someone / something that starts the conversation**<br>It would help if someone / something else prompts the topic | "If someone starts the conversation first people find it easier to talk about it as people don't want to bring that topic up first" (SA12F)<br>"Like someone isn't afraid to talk about Start the conversation" (SC140M) |
| **Media**<br>Media as facilitator of talking about consent (e.g., YouTube, TV, porn) | "If people were to see ads around the place to make it more normalised it would be easier to talk about" (SE181M)<br>"Social media can talk about it" (SC109M) |
| **Awareness**<br>People talking about the topic of consent or the importance of consent | "Raising awareness about consent helps people communicate" (SA106F)<br>"Greater awareness for issues surrounding consent. More conservations involving young people" (SB38M) |
| **Talking to others: Having a support network and someone you trust to talk to** | |
| **Talking to others**<br>Someone trustworthy to talk to, such as friends or family | "School, having someone in your life that can communicate, such as a parent or brother/ sister" (SE65M)<br>"Talking to someone who will understand and not slag you" (SC13M) |

*Table 31. Description of the consent barrier themes 'Uncomfortable' and 'Afraid,' including sub-themes and examples.*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Uncomfortable: Perception of awkwardness or embarrassing feelings with the topic or situations, which can result in discomfort** | |
| **Awkwardness**<br>References to consent as awkward, concerns about awkwardness after saying no | "They don't want to make things awkward between the two people if someone says no" (SE7M)<br>"They might think that the other may not want to talk about it or they might think it would be awkward to talk about or it might be awkward after" (SA56F) |
| **Embarrassment**<br>References to embarrassment of not wanting to do something, in wanting to do something, or in asking | "Embarrassment. Fear of being considered a prude or a slut. Fear of retribution or eager of the other party. Self-image" (SA145F)<br>"Embarrassment, Nervous, Don't want to ruin the moment. They just go with it" (SB43M) |
| **Lack of trust/ comfort (not knowing the person)**<br>Lack of trust or closeness in a relationship as barrier to consent | "They don't think they need to. Not knowing the other person well" (SB12M)<br>"Don't know the person well enough to say no" (SA29F) |
| **Relying on non-verbal consent as a consequence**<br>References to nonverbal consent as a barrier that people rely on nonverbal consent to avoid uncomfortable situations | "People like giving hints more than telling directly or saying the obvious, sometimes it can be embarrassing to say it directly or it might feel awkward" (SB1M)<br>"In case it gets awkward when asking, they'll just show signals instead" (SA137F) |
| **Discomfort**<br>People being uncomfortable asking for consent or afraid of an uncomfortable situation | "People may become uncomfortable about talking about it. It depends on who you are communicating to"(SA89F) |
| **Afraid: Concerns and fears about consequences perceived to be related to asking for consent or speaking up** | |
| **Being judged**<br>The fear of being judged or slagged by the partner or peers stops people communicating about consent | "You don't want to look stupid" (SB40M)<br>"They feel like people may slag/talk about it if they say no. It is generally "accepted" that if you're in a relationship you want to have sex with the person, which isn't right" (SC99F)<br>"What their friends will think if they don't have sex. They might be embarrassed if it's with a person you just met" (SC25F) |
| **Ruin the mood**<br>People might be afraid of the consequences of talking about consent, for ruining the moment, ruining or killing the mood, or changing the atmosphere | "Some people don't want to interrupt or ruin the moment" (SDB5M)<br>"It may make a situation awkward and take away from the atmosphere" (SA93F) |
| **Rejection**<br>People being afraid to be told no if they ask for consent or afraid to say no if they are asked for consent | "People don't talk about consent because they ... are afraid of being told no" (SE112F)<br>"People don't want to ruin the relationship, hurt their feelings or look uncool" (SA61F)<br>"I think the atmosphere might change with asking for consent. ... causing second thoughts about things like the outcomes which were not thought of before" (SB44M) |
| **Insecure, shy or nervous**<br>Insecurity in general about consent communication or that a person might be scared, nervous or shy | "They are too shy to ask" (SC36M)<br>"Because sometimes they are afraid to be talking about all these type of things to their friends and families" (SE151F) |
| **Disappointing or offending**<br>People might be afraid of the other person's reaction to consent communication, such as disappointment, offending or upsetting the other person | "They are afraid of how the other person will react" (SE31M)<br>"Fear of upsetting the other person" (SA75F)<br>"If one person wants to do it and the other doesn't want to disappoint them/anger them" (SA126F) |
| **Afraid of violence or aggression**<br>References to concerns about violence, anger or rape as a barrier to say no | "Being embarrassed, nervous or pressured or people being too sexually aggressive and not caring- not a good buzz" (SB32M)<br>"People are afraid that the situation they are in may get worse than it already is, physical or aggressive" (SA131F)<br>"Fear of bullying/threats/danger from the other person/friends" (SA68F) |

*Table 32. Description of the consent barrier themes 'Knowledge and skills,' 'Pressure,' 'Getting caught up in the moment,' and 'Social norms,' including sub-themes, and examples.*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Knowledge and skills: Concern about the ability to communicate about consent due to knowledge, skills, recognition, or capacity** | |
| **Lack of knowledge**<br>Lack of knowledge or education as a reason that stops consent communication | "Uneducated about consent" (SA112F)<br>"Unawareness of the fact that they can say no and that is ok. People being embarrassed to see them interested in having a sex being intimate" (SA68F) |
| **Lack of skills**<br>Now knowing how, when, or how often to talk about consent impedes communication about it | "Not sure what to ask and how to say no. Not sure when / how often to ask" (SE62F)<br>"Teenaged boys tend to think it's not necessary, ... Some of my friends wouldn't know how to communicate with sexual partners regarding consent" (SA13F)<br>"It can be an awkward question. Unsure of what you need to ask and how you ask for it" (SDA3M) |
| **Not seeing the need**<br>A person might not see the need for consent communication, that they do not need to ask, that the other person feels the same, or consent carries forward | "When they know the person they don't think they have to ask for consent" (SA108F)<br>"The other person assumes that they already have their consent" (SB61M) |
| **Alcohol / drugs**<br>References to drugs or alcohol as barriers to consent | "Being drunk" (SC150F)<br>"Alcohol, peer pressure" (SC34F) |
| **Pressure: Feeling some kind of pressure to engage in intimacy and negative influences on open consent communication** | |
| **Peer pressure**<br>Peer pressure or peer norms influence the decision to ask for consent or saying no / yes | "Inexperience. Some people get slagged off by their friends for not being sexually active so therefore they give consent just to do what other teenagers do (sex)" (SE13M)<br>"If people are doing it in order to keep up to impress their friends" (SC11F) |
| **Feeling pressured**<br>References to pressure in general or pressure on a person, that someone feels that they have to do something or that they cannot say no | "Feelings or how you feel towards a person can sometimes pressure you into being intimate" (SA110F)<br>"You could be slightly intimidated by the person you're with. You might be seen as stuck up. you may still like someone but not want to go as far as they do" (SA136F) |
| **Getting caught up in the moment: The impact of the situation, eagerness or desire** | |
| **Caught up in the moment**<br>Emotions and desire having an impact on decision-making | "They might be caught up in the moment or just trying to impress their partner" (SA60F)<br>"Being horny. Loosing focus" (SE158M) |
| **Social norms: Beliefs about other people's or societal perceptions of consent communication** | |
| **Taboo topic**<br>Consent is a difficult, taboo topic which it makes it difficult to communicate about it | "It's a taboo and triggering for certain people" (SA130F)<br>"Social taboo, embarrassment" (SDB2M) |
| **Social norms**<br>References to societal or social norms | "They mightn't be comfortable doing so. Old views and opinions" (SDB10M)<br>"Pressure, social norms and expectations. People push themselves to be intimate because they felt that their partners want to or that they should have sex by a certain age. They can put pressure on themselves to do something they aren't necessarily ready for" (SC30F) |

## CONSENT COMMUNICATION STORIES: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Little attention has been given to date on understanding the process that underlies judgements of consent. This analysis of responses to consent stories explores how young people make judgements of consent and non-consent in the context of communication issues and dilemmas. It uses quantitative and qualitative analysis to explore the frequency of use and salience of the information cues presented across three stories. It also examines how information cues contained in the stories were combined and integrated.

The analysis gives us an insight into the distinctive narratives that emerged when young people were asked to make sense of consent issues. Both positive and negative implications arose from the findings, illustrating the strengths and capacity of young people to identify and critically analyse consent while raising concerns about the continued acceptance of scenarios where consent is not ongoing, mutual or freely given. These findings help to direct our future priorities and campaigns on awareness raising and education.

# THIS IS THE FIRST IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF CONSENT COMMUNICATION AMONG IRISH TEENAGERS

# AOIFE AND MARTIN: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE DESCRIBE A SMILE AND A PUSH

Participants read one of three variations on a story about Aoife and Martin who had oral sex. The variations were presented to assess differences in how students responded to cues related to each of the story characters. In each version Martin was the initiator of oral sex. The first version is the baseline story (Story 1), in which Martin pushed Aoife's head down to give him oral sex and she smiled. Story 2 further emphasises Martin's behaviour. He gave Aoife's head a "firm push" and she smiled. Story 3 stated that Martin pushed Aoife's head down and she is not described as smiling.

Participants responded by giving a Likert agreement rating in response to the item "Aoife was consenting when she gave Martin oral sex" (five-point scale from "'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'"). They were then invited to write a response to the statement 'Aoife was consenting when she gave Martin oral sex'.

Each story version was presented to students in particular schools. One consequence of this was an imbalance in the number of male and female students who responded to the stories. A majority of respondents to Story 1 and 3 were male. A majority of those who responded to Story 2 were female. Mean quantitative ratings of Aoife's consent were consistently higher among males across all three of the story versions, with a t test yielding a significant mean difference by gender for Story 1 and 3.

## SHARED STORY CONTENT

Aoife (aged 15) and Martin (aged 16) were both invited to Aoife's friend's house. The parents were away for the weekend with an older sister left in charge. Martin and Aoife had not met before. He was there with one of Aoife's friends. There was a group of friends altogether and each had almost a naggin of vodka during the evening.

Aoife and Martin started messing around, flirting and chatting. They went outside to be together and Martin started kissing Aoife. Then Martin started to touch Aoife under her top. Martin asked Aoife to go back inside with him to find a private space to be alone. She said OK.

She began to kiss him on the couch. Martin moved his hands onto Aoife's lower body. Then Martin took her by the hand and brought her to one of the bedrooms. Martin began to touch her intimately.

| Alternative story endings | Number of participants, by gender |
|---|---|
| **STORY 1: Martin pushed Aoife's head, she smiled**<br>He undid her jeans and began to finger Aoife, then undid his trousers and showed that he wanted Aoife to give him oral sex by pushing her head down a bit.<br><br>Aoife looked up, smiled at Martin and then gave him a blow job. | 189 people read Story 1:<br>38.7% female<br>57.5% male<br>3.8% non-binary<br>1.6% did not specify |
| **STORY 2: Martin pushed Aoife's head firmly, she smiled**<br>He undid her jeans and began to finger Aoife. Then undid his trousers and showed that he wanted Aoife to give him oral sex by pushing her head down firmly.<br><br>Aoife looked up, smiled at Martin and then gave him a blow job. | 208 people read Story 2:<br>69.7% female<br>29.3% male<br>1.0% non-binary |
| **STORY 3: Martin pushed Aoife's head, she did not smile**<br>Martin began to touch her intimately; he undid her jeans and began to finger Aoife, then undid his trousers and pushed her head down.<br><br>Then Aoife gave Martin a blowjob. | 216 people read Story 3:<br>32.4% female<br>66.7% male<br>1.0% non-binary |

*Table 33. Alternative story endings for Aoife and Martin Story 1-3.*

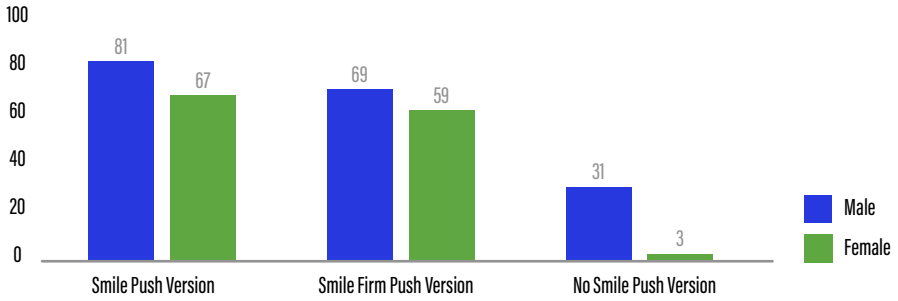
The young people were responsive to the different story versions, indicating an ability and sensitivity to recognise consent cues and form judgements relevant to a hook up scenario in a party environment. This was reflected in differences in the percentage of participants who agreed that Aoife gave consent. The percentage of young people who disagreed, were neutral, and who agreed that Aoife gave consent is presented below ('Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree' are compiled into one category, as is 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree').

Taking Story 1 as a baseline, the majority of participants who read this story agreed that Aoife consented to oral sex (75%) and a minority disagreed (7%). This indicates a general acceptance that this story was acceptable as a consent scenario. While there was a lower rate of agreement (62%) and higher rate of disagreement (15%) in the ratings given on Story 2, this scenario too had majority support. The biggest difference was in ratings of Story 3, which was generally unacceptable as a consent scenario; 21% of participants who read this version agreed that Aoife gave consent and 58% disagreed.

*Table 34. Summary of quantitative rating responses to the statement 'Aoife was consenting when she gave Martin oral sex,' for all participants and by gender.*

| | | Story 1 | Story 2 | Story 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **All participants** | Agree | 74.6 | 61.5 | 21.4 |
| | Neutral | 18.5 | 23.6 | 20.5 |
| | Disagree | 6.9 | 14.9 | 58.1 |
| **Female participants** | Agree | 66.7 | 58.6 | 2.9 |
| | Neutral | 23.6 | 24.1 | 17.1 |
| | Disagree | 9.7 | 17.2 | 80.0 |
| **Male participants** | Agree | 81.3 | 68.9 | 30.8 |
| | Neutral | 14.0 | 23.0 | 22.4 |
| | Disagree | 4.7 | 8.2 | 46.9 |

*Figure 16. Percentage of survey respondents who agreed that Aoife consented to giving Martin oral sex, by gender.*




The pattern of responses across story types highlights the importance attributed to Aoife smiling or not smiling. Most participants who read Story 1 or Story 2 were satisfied that Aoife's smile indicated her consent to giving Martin oral sex after he pushed her head down, taking into account the other cues available in the story. Although Aoife's smile could be interpreted differently – that she was in agreement, that she felt committed to intimacy, or felt coercion – it seemed to be taken by a majority to indicate that she was consenting. One-fifth of participants were prepared to make the same rating when Aoife was not smiling in Story 3.

There was comparatively little sensitivity to differences in Martin's behaviour from the baseline story (i.e., comparing Story 1 and 2). A majority of participants agreed that Aoife consented despite him 'pushing' or 'firmly pushing' Aoife's head. This suggests lack of awareness that Martin might have physically coerced or pressured Aoife to give him oral sex.

Compared with the physical pressure exercised by Martin, Aoife's smile appears to have been more salient to the young people formulating consent judgements. This places the focus of judgement on Aoife having the responsibility to stop Martin rather than requiring him not to exert pressure or on the decision being mutual.

A gender pattern was apparent in the quantitative ratings of Aoife's consent, and is particularly relevant given that there was some imbalance in the gender of participants who read each story. Across all three stories, a greater percentage of male participants rated Aoife as consenting, with a gender gap in the percentage of those who agreed of 15% for Story 1, 10% for story 2, and 28% for Story 3. This suggests a greater tolerance among male participants overall for Martin pushing Aoife's head, and less responsiveness to whether Aoife gave any verbal or non-verbal response to Martin's push. Four-fifths of males who read Story 1 rated Aoife as consenting compared with two-thirds of females. A quarter of males who read Story 3 rated Aoife as consenting, compared with 3% of females.

Nonetheless there were similarities in ratings by gender as well. In response to Story 1, relatively few males (5%) or females (10%) disagreed that Aoife gave her consent to giving oral sex. In addition, significant numbers of male and female students gave a neutral rating of Aoife's consent in response to each story. It was relatively common for young people to be unsure or conflicted as to whether the story reflected a consent scenario.

# AOIFE AND MARTIN QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Six content categories were devised for a content analysis coding scheme of the written responses following a review of the content. The categories were reviewed by comparing inter-rater reliability across a sample of 20% of the responses. There was a concordance of 80% in coding. The categories were refined and the data set was coded by two of the researchers.

A majority of participants were either not coded to any category (e.g., if no written response was made or if the response could not be interpreted to refer to any category) or to one category. Approximately one-third of the participants were coded to two categories. The percentage of participants coded to three or more categories differed according to the story version that was read, with Story 1 attracting fewer complex written responses than Story 2 or 3. This suggests a greater level of processing arising from making sense of Martin's firm push and Aoife not giving any signal that could be interpreted as non-verbal consent.

The focus on Aoife as the main agent of responsibility in the story is apparent in the coding of written participant responses. Over 80% of participants referred to Aoife in discussing Story 1 and 2, and nearly two-thirds referred to Aoife in response to Story 3. Martin's role in Story 1 was referenced by only one-fifth of respondents to Story 1, growing to one-third and nearly one-half of participants who responded to Story 2 and 3, respectively.

This difference indicates a higher level of interest in Martin's behaviour when the baseline story was complicated through higher levels of force and an absence of Aoife's response to being pushed. Similarly, compared with Story 1, higher percentages of participants responding to Story 2 and 3 were coded to the remaining categories (alcohol, verbal consent, age).

| Content categories | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Aoife** | Aoife is attributed causality in relation to oral sex. |
| **Martin** | Martin is attributed causality in relation to oral sex. |
| **Alcohol** | Alcohol is referred to as an important factor in relation to consent. |
| **Age** | Age is referenced as a factor in whether there was consent. |
| **Verbal** | The need for verbal consent is described as being important to consent. |
| **Multiple responses** | The number of consent categories that are coded for each participant's qualitative response (range 1-5). |

*Table 35. Qualitative content analysis categories for the Aoife and Martin story.*

*Table 36. Percentage of participants coded to each content analysis category.*

| Content categories | Participants coded to the content category (%) | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Story 1 | Story 2 | Story 3 |
| **Aoife** | 85.7 | 82.7 | 63.4 |
| **Martin** | 22.8 | 34.1 | 45.8 |
| **Alcohol** | 21.2 | 28.4 | 30.1 |
| **Verbal consent** | 6.9 | 15.9 | 12.5 |
| **Age** | 1.6 | 3.4 | 8.8 |
| **Multiple categories** | 0-1 categories: 63.0<br>2 categories: 31.7<br>3+ categories: 5.3 | 0-1 categories: 49.0<br>2 categories: 33.2<br>3+ categories: 17.8 | 0-1 categories: 52.3<br>2 categories: 29.2<br>3+ categories: 18.5 |
| **Aoife's consent** | Non-consensual: 9.0<br>Neutral: 13.2<br>Consensual: 52.4<br>Undeterminable: 25.4 | Non-consensual: 16.8<br>Neutral: 23.6<br>Consensual: 45.2<br>Undeterminable: 14.4 | Non-consensual: 52.3<br>Neutral: 11.1<br>Consensual: 17.6<br>Undeterminable: 19.0 |

# THE WRITTEN RESPONSES TENDED TO PORTRAY AOIFE AS THE MAIN PERSON WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR ENSURING THAT CONSENT IS PRESENT

The qualitative content analysis describes and analyses the written material that was coded to the content categories. This enables exploration of the meaning and focus of each category. The primary theme throughout the analysis is one of agency; how the dominant view among the young people in their descriptions and interpretations was that, particularly when she smiled, Aoife exercised independent decision-making and choice despite the circumstances in which she was portrayed – with her head pushed down or pushed firmly by Martin, having consumed alcohol, and being underage with regard to legal autonomy.

There was a relatively high level of acceptance and tolerance of these conditions before descriptions of non-consent were consistently made. The story variations enable us to assess how reductions in her autonomy were dealt with – against a baseline in which she smiled in response to having her head pushed down (Story 1), when the degree of force applied was increased (her head pushed down firmly in Story 2), and when her internal state was even less clearly discernible as she does not smile after her head is pushed down in Story 3. It was only in Story 3 that a clear majority of young people rated Aoife as non-consenting, and even at that, over 40% of the respondents agreed that she had consented or were neutral in their rating.

# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT CATEGORIES

## AOIFE

### Aoife Did Not Consent

#### No consent

Explicit statements that Aoife did not consent were concentrated among young people who read Story 3 in which Aoife did not smile before performing oral sex. These statements were reflected in disagreement ratings on the rating task ("Aoife never verbally or non-verbally gave any sort of consent", SBB2M, Story 3, Rating: 2). Without Aoife's smile, Martin's actions were more likely to appear forceful, linked to unequivocal language, that she "had no option" (SBA17B, Story 3, Rating: 1) and "every time something is happening there should be a yes or no" (SC90M, Story 3, Rating: 2).

Consent to earlier forms of intimacy, such as kissing, did not mean she consented to oral sex, with Aoife positioned as having no autonomy: "He 'pushed her head down' -> she didn't do it willingly i.e. non-consensual" (SC67F, Story 3, Rating: 2). This participant highlights ongoing consent, contrasting Aoife's agreement to go to a bedroom with later loss of agency: "Just because Aoife said that it was ok to go to one of the bedrooms with Martin doesn't really mean she gave permission to take off her trousers or push her head down to give her a blowjob" (SC153F, Story 3, Rating: 1).

Statements identifying Aoife not consenting to oral sex were occasionally given by participants who read story versions where she smiled, but these tended to use more equivocal or uncertain language around agency. This is seen here in "may not have been" and the use of "comfortable" rather than 'consent': "Even though Aoife smiled and gave him a blowjob she may not have been very comfortable" (SA34F, Story 2, Rating: 2).

#### Pressure

Young people used "pressure" to explain Aoife's reason for acting in response to Martin's direction. She was seen as wanting to please Martin, not wanting to disappoint him, or that she was scared. Aoife was making a choice to pleasure Martin, but with reduced agency because his needs or demands were predominant. References to pressure were associated with quantitative ratings of disagreement or neutrality that Aoife was consenting. These examples show pressure arising from the anticipation of an unpleasant outcome if she did not engage in oral sex; Martin is feared or Aoife may want to avoid harsh judgements:

- She could be scared and felt obliged to because he is a year older (SC151F, Story 3, Rating: 2)
- If she were to say no, then he could have called her a distasteful name and or have gotten more pushy about it (SC161F, Story 3, Rating: 2)

Other connotations to pressure involved Aoife lacking agency due to the situation ("no time to think", SB1M, Story 2, Rating: 2) or having a personality that made it hard for her to assert her preferences generally ("a shy person and doesn't say no to anyone", SA109F, Story 2, Rating: 1; "Aoife seemed to have been easily led", SA54F, Story 2, Rating: 2).

Not all instances of describing Aoife under pressure were associated with negative quantitative ratings. Neutral ratings were given in these examples despite there being to make Martin feel good or avoid displeasing him:

- Aoife may have just been trying to please Martin (SE47O, Story 1, Rating: 3)
- Aoife thought if she didn't give him a blowjob he would have been disappointed so she felt somewhat pressured to (SE48F, Story 1, Rating: 3)

#### Ongoing consent: She consented to a different action than oral sex

Some participants referred to Aoife's non-consent indirectly, writing that she had agreed to a different action but not to oral sex. They referenced the ongoing nature of sexual consent by identifying what she did agree to do and that this did not extend to oral sex ("Aoife didn't give consent to have oral sex, she only agreed to go to a private place", SC31F, Story 3, Rating: 2).

### Aoife Did Consent

#### Aoife gave permission or explicitly agreed to oral sex

Explicit reference to Aoife consenting to oral sex was conveyed through the use of terms like 'permission', 'agreement', or 'made the choice'. For these participants, Aoife had exercised free will ("Aoife gave him permission", SE104M, Story 1, Rating: 4; "She very clearly agreed", SE36M, Story 1, Rating: 4; "Aoife consented, she was flirty and touchy from the beginning", SA131M, Story 2, Rating: 5; "she was feeling him kissing him being intimate and made the choice to blowjob", SC138M, Story 3, Rating: 4).

# YOUNG PEOPLE USED "PRESSURE" TO EXPLAIN AOIFE'S REASON FOR ACTING IN RESPONSE TO MARTIN'S DIRECTION

### Non-verbal consent: Aoife's smile

The smile emerged as a key non-verbal signal of consent to many of the young people who read Story 1 or 2. For some, the smile was a concrete, unequivocal sign of consent, that she was "happy to do it" (SE95F, Story 1, Rating: 4) or was "enjoying it" (SE29M, Story 1, Rating: 5): "She didn't have a problem with Martin's fingers up her. She's just returning the favour like, she gave him a smile that's free reign like" (SE177M, Story 1, Rating: 4).

Other references were more equivocal about Aoife's motivation, with references here to her being 'comfortable' or 'consenting' when Martin pushed her head down firmly:

- "She smiled at him which shows she was comfortable with doing so" (SA84F, Story 2, Rating: 4)
- "She smiled up at him before giving him the blowjob, meaning she gave consent" (SB4M, Story 2, Rating: 5)

A further extension to reservations about her smiling was demonstrated by qualifiers such as 'but' to show a hesitation with clarity of interpretation. The presence of a smile may have been sufficient to demonstrate non-verbal consent, but Martin's firm push and no verbal consent raised doubt about Aoife's willingness: "He pushed her head down but she did smile and not raise an issue with it leading me to believe it was agreed to but maybe not strongly" (SB42M, Story 2, Rating: 4).

### Going to the bedroom

Aoife entering the bedroom with Martin could be cited as a signal of her willingness and intentionality by students who rated her as giving consent. These examples highlight Aoife choosing to go to a private place, going there "with him" (SE63F, Story 1, Rating: 4) or "for him": "She agreed to getting to a private space for him", SE155M, Story 1, Rating: 4). These comments link closely to a script in which going into a bedroom is an intentional signal of commitment to be intimate, that she would be "knowing what would happen" (SE148F, Story 1, Rating: 4) or "because what else happens in a bedroom" (SDC14M, Story 3, Rating: 4): "So she obviously knew she was going to have sex or suck his chop" (SB33M, Story 2, Rating: 5).

### She did not say no or stop him

Moving on from interpreting Aoife's overt actions to drawing inferences from what she did not do, Aoife not saying no or not stopping Martin could signal that she willingly gave him oral sex. Attribution of responsibility to Aoife was conveyed through sentence forms based around 'did not'. This student who read the 'no

smile' story saw Aoife not resisting along with Martin not forcing her, helping to account for rating Aoife as giving consent: "She doesn't ever try to pull away or stop" (SC71M, Story 3, Rating: 4). The use of 'did not' as a rationale for consent positions Aoife as passively consenting to oral sex. If she did not choose to stop then she agreed to it. 'Not' was paired with particular strategies, like not resisting, not saying no, not refusing, not struggling, not trying to stop him or pull away. For example:

- She did not refuse to do so and did not make a struggle (SE61M, Story 1, Rating: 4)
- She did not say no or try to stop Martin (SB50M, Story 2, Rating: 4)
- Aoife never indicated she wanted to stop (SDA13M, Story 3, Rating: 4)
- She let him do things to her and she never stopped him (SA71F, Story 2, Rating: 5).

### Counterfactual thinking

Young people used several strategies to present counterfactuals of what Aoife could or should have done if she did not consent to oral sex ("Aoife wouldn't have gone inside with Martin if she didn't want to have oral sex with him. She also would have said 'stop' if she didn't want to", SB7M, Story 2, Rating: 3). From this perspective, her willingness could be inferred from Aoife not following one of these alternatives. Aoife is therefore in a position of responsibility for what happened, and this was associated with ratings of neutrality or that she consented.

'Could' was used to frame alternatives such as refusal, leaving, stopping, or saying no, as in these examples:

- She could have gotten up and walked away (SE37M, Story 1, Rating: 3)
- She could have said no (SE163M, Story 1, Rating: 4)
- She could of refused to do it (SC126M, Story 3, Rating: 3)
- She could have reacted differently to a subtle head push (SC12F, Story 3, Rating: 4)
- She could have stopped sucking his dong (SDB7M, Story 3, Rating: 5)

An alternative to 'could' was to describe Aoife as having had opportunities or chances to stop, suggesting that she must have consented because she did not take them ("Aoife had more than one chance to deny Martin's advances", SB46M, Story 2, Rating: 4; "She had many chances to stop him if she didn't want to do anything", SE172M, Story 1, Rating: 4).

An even stronger position was adopted through the use of 'should' terminology, presenting a prescription of behaviour against which Aoife's choice was compared. This was communicated in an 'if / should' or 'if / should not' sentence construction. If Aoife was not willing then she should have acted differently. This was employed in a general sense ("If she didn't want to do this she should have indicated so", SE131M, Story 1, Rating: 5), or attached to a particular episode:

- If she did not want to get intimate she should have not have gone onto the couch and started kissing (SE69F, Story 1, Rating: 4)
- If she didn't want to she would have stopped him before he took off her jeans (SDA14M, Story 3, Rating: 4)
- If she didn't want to suck his dick she should have just said no and the fella would have left it, should have spoke up if she wasn't up for it (SE91M, Story 3, Rating: 4)

## MARTIN

### Martin was proactive

Martin was described as expressing agency. This was reflected in how his actions were portrayed. In this example strong language is used to show how Martin acts on Aoife, with no mutuality or sense of her intentions ("Martin went straight in and started to kiss her then touch her under her top. He then started to finger her", SE173M, Story 1, Rating: 4). Yet seeing him as active was not synonymous with Martin being controlling. These examples were given in response to Story 2, with varied interpretations offered from 'making her', to 'showing her' and 'suggesting to her'. These were reflected in the associated quantitative ratings of Aoife's consent:

- "Martin pushed [Aoife's] head down to make her give him a blowjob" (SA68F, Story 2, Rating: 2)
- "He just pushed her head down and showed her that he wanted oral sex" (SA83F, Story 2, Rating: 3)
- "Martin is just non-verballing suggesting he wants a blowjob" (SB2M, Story 2, Rating: 4)

### Martin did not force Aoife

Martin's behaviour was most likely to be interpreted as benign among participants who read Story 1. Explicit references to Martin's push being acceptable was associated with quantitative ratings of 4 or 5. From this perspective, Martin's push did not mean that he had forced her at all: "Martin didn't seem to be forcing anything, all decisions were mutually approved. When Martin pushes Aoife's head down, Aoife gives him a smile, if she wanted she could have denied it. Martin did not force" (SE60M, Story 1, Rating: 5).

### Martin was controlling

Identifying Martin as active to the point of being controlling was mostly associated with quantitative ratings of non-consent (e.g., "Martin was instigating the whole thing", SC25F, Story 3, Rating: 1; "He forced her to

give oral sex", SDB1M, Story 3, Rating: 2). The narrative of Martin in control prioritised his interests, expressing his agency over hers, "influencing her and possibly pressuring her" (SC3F, Story 3, Rating: 1). He "seemed to lead Aoife into sexual activity without properly communicating with her" (SC22M, Story 3, Rating: 2), "doing things to her without asking for consent" (SDA4M, Story 3, Rating: 3). The impact on Aoife was to remove her ability to freely choose ("she didn't get a chance to say no", SDA16M, Story 3, Rating: 1). Despite the negative implication for Aoife's autonomy, some participants who critiqued Martin rated Aoife's consent neutrally or with ratings of 4 or 5.

### Martin should not have pushed or forced Aoife down on him

The description of Martin 'pushing' Aoife's head down elicited negative evaluation, with comparisons to an act of force or that it should not have happened ("Martin shouldn't have pushed her head down", SB45M, Story 1, Rating: 2). One variation was to soften the idea of 'force' through qualifiers such as "slightly" or "a bit". Such judgements were in response to the stories where Aoife smiled after having her head pushed down, and in these examples are linked to rating Aoife as non-consenting:

- Martin was a bit pushy towards the end (SA13F, Story 2, Rating: 2)
- I feel that Martin slightly forced her (SE103M, Story 1, Rating: 2)

Martin was identified as forcing Aoife across different quantitative ratings. The examples of rating Aoife as consenting while acknowledging that Martin 'should not' have pushed her head down implies a separation between his behaviour and whether she nonetheless somehow consented to it. The language of these examples shows a recognition that Aoife's capacity to choose was removed, despite ratings that Aoife did consent:

- Martin should not have pushed her head down, he should have just let her do what she wanted (SB35M, Story 2, Rating: 4)
- The boy shouldn't of pushed her head down firmly as she should be able to control her speed etc and not forced to do more than she could do or want (SA24F, Story 2, Rating: 5)

The construction of 'slight force' was also used in connection with a rating of 4 or 5, with these examples offering justifications associated with Aoife (she did not say no) or Martin himself (he was drunk and horny):

- Martin did slightly force Aoife to give him a blow job by pushing her head down but Aoife never said no (SE182F, Story 1, Rating: 4)
- Martin was a bit forceful though. Most likely the drink and the horniness came over (SA104F, Story 2, Rating: 5)

### Martin should have got verbal consent

Critiques of Martin's behaviour focused on how he did not ask Aoife whether she wanted to give him oral sex, or that he 'could' or 'should' have done so. References to verbal consent ranged across quantitative ratings from agreement to disagreement that Aoife had consented, and across the story types:

- It should be done more appropriately and more like a gentleman, he should have asked and let her go down with her own free will (SDC18M, Story 3, Rating: 2)
- Didn't ask Aoife about wanting to finger her or asking about Aoife wanted to him a blowjob (SC106M, Story 3, Rating: 2)
- Martin should also check in and ask if it's ok (SDA3M, Story 3, Rating: 3)
- Martin didn't ask her would she be ok with it but she went along with it (SA128F, Story 2, Rating: 4)

## ALCOHOL

### Contrasting views on drunkenness and consent

Aoife was stated to be 'under the influence' by many participants. Some young people who rated her as not giving consent made general statements about the impact of alcohol (e.g., "you'd be absolutely hammered after all the vodka", SDB10M, Story 3, Rating: 1). Others said specifically that Aoife could not give consent when under the influence ("she couldn't have given proper consent to Martin", SE35M, Story 1, Rating: 2). From this perspective she was not aware of her actions or what was going on (e.g., "Aoife … probably had no idea what was happening", SB22M, Story 2, Rating: 1).

Recognition of the impact of alcohol extended to young people who nonetheless gave neutral ratings of Aoife's consent (e.g., "she wasn't thinking clearly", SA12F, Story 2, Rating: 3). By contrast, references to Aoife's drinking by participants who rated her as consenting depicted her as 'under the influence' but not impaired ("she can still make decisions and decide if she wants to do it or not", SB13M, Story 2, Rating: 4). This acceptance of drinking was particularly evident in responses to the story where she smiled and her head was not firmly pushed down ("even if your drunk you can simply say no if she didn't want to do it", SE45F, Story 1, Rating: 5).

### Martin should have done things differently because Aoife was drunk

A particular reference to Martin was made in relation to Aoife's drinking. He should

have behaved differently because Aoife's decision-making was compromised. He may have exploited her because he went ahead with oral sex ("he took advantage of her because she had drink on her", SE27F, Story 3, Rating: 1). For this participant, that situation could have been alleviated by the use of verbal consent ("Martin should of asked her if she wanted to give him a blowjob", SA82F, Story 2, Rating: 4), but in the next example Aoife could not verbally consent: "Aoife was drunk so even if she said yes, Martin shouldn't have let her because she was drunk" (SC68F, Story 3, Rating: 2).

Alcohol impacted both Aoife and Martin and may have been impaired them
The use of 'they' and both 'Martin and Aoife' highlighted alcohol intoxication as a shared explanation of their behaviour. Rather than one being in control and the other lacking control, intimacy may have taken place because they were 'under the influence' and 'not in the right state of mind'.

Participants who spoke about Martin and Aoife having taken alcohol tended to see drinking as impacting both of them. For some participants this was a moderate impact ("If alcohol wasn't involved the pair would have been more vocal with consent", SC10M, Story 3, Rating: 1; "the fact that they were both drunk made them have less control", SA134F, Story 2, Rating: 4). In other instances it had a significant shared impact, that they could not give consent, an interpretation associated with disagreement that Aoife gave consent ("even though she smile that doesn't count as consent", SE179O, Story 1, Rating: 2) or neutral Ratings ("they were both probably drunk so it wasn't proper consent", SB48M, Story 2, Rating: 3).

Alcohol could also be associated with uncertainty about the capacity for autonomous decisions – seen here in terms like 'may not' and 'less able' ("[they] are both 'less able' to consent", SC69M, Story 3, Rating: 2; "[they] may not have been in the right state of mind", SE73M, Story 1, Rating: 4). For some who saw Aoife as consenting, this suggested a question mark over whether alcohol impeded their judgement ("do they really know what's happening or are they pissed drunk?", SA139F, Story 2, Rating: 4; "it is a grey area", SE170M, Story 1, Rating: 4).

## AGE

Age was typically referred to in one of two ways in relation to consent – either as a clear legal principle of competence to consent or as a contextual factor that impacted the dynamic of giving or receiving consent. It was straightforward for most of those who saw Aoife (or less commonly Martin) as below the legal age of consent ("Aoife was under the age of consent so couldn't give consent", SC3M, Story 3, Rating: 1; "Aoife is under the legal age for sex (17) and therefore can't legally consent", SA68F, Story 2, Rating: 2).

For some participants the link between age and legal capacity was not clear. This could be linked to a neutral rating ("I'm not sure it is consent because they're both young and under the influence. They are also both under the age of consent", SE57F, Story 1, Rating: 3), or even to a rating that Aoife did give her consent ("age is a problem, even though it seems like she was giving consent. She is 15 years old", SB53M, Story 2, Rating: 4).

Using age as a contextual factor brought up other issues. Aoife may feel pressure as Martin was older ("she might feel pressure just because he's older", SA8F, Story 2, Rating: 2) or they may both be too young to make a decision about oral sex ("they were too young for this kind of intimacy", SDA10M, Story 3, Rating: 2).

## VERBAL CONSENT

References to verbal consent were typically restricted to Story Types 2 and 3, highlighted when Martin pushed Aoife firmly or where she did not smile ("In future Martin should just go with verbal consent", SA7F, Story 2, Rating: 3; "[Aoife] never gave verbal consent", SDB1M, Story 3, Rating: 2). Lack of verbal consent in the story was usually referred to by young people who rated her as not giving consent, although it was occasionally linked to quantitative ratings that Aoife did consent.

A number of participants mentioned verbal consent to oral sex in particular, in terms of never saying 'yes', giving verbal consent or agreeing to oral sex. Nevertheless, explicit reference to verbal consent for oral sex could also be linked to ratings of Aoife as consenting. In this example a rating was given of consent, despite the value attributed to verbal consent as a guide to Aoife's intentionality:
The act of looking up and smiling gives the impression to Martin that Aoife is consenting, but it was not verbal. We do not know what Aoife could have been thinking. Some people don't know how to say no verbal would have been better as she could be really clear about her feelings towards doing the act (SA42F, Story 2, Rating: 4).

Descriptions of Martin not seeking verbal consent (e.g., "he did not verbally ask her for consent", SC1F, Story 3, Rating: 1) extended to statements identifying that he did not achieve consent ("Martin did not get verbal consent from Aoife to continue", SC70F, Story 3, Rating: 2), and on to normative statements

("Martin should have asked Aoife", SB62M, Story 2, Rating: 3). Such sentiments were not always linked to quantitative ratings that Aoife was non-consenting ("Martin was doing things to her without asking for consent", SDA4M, Story 3, Rating: 3).

## COMBINING CUES INTO RATINGS OF CONSENT

A rating reflects a summary or integration of the cues that captured the participant's attention and interpretive work. Non-consenting judgements (i.e., a rating of 1-2 indicating disagreement that Aoife gave her consent), neutral judgements (i.e., a rating of 3), and consenting judgements (i.e., a rating of 4-5) were associated with the use of multiple cues in distinctive ways. Consenting judgements in particular were associated with a variety of strategies to combine information cues.

### Non-consenting judgements

Giving a rating that Aoife did not consent to oral sex was typically reflected in the combination of multiple cues. This example shows how 'alcohol' and 'verbal consent' were aligned and complementary: "They were under the influence of alcohol so they were not thinking as clearly as they would sober and Aoife only said yes to finding a private place" (SA141F, Story 2, Rating: 2). The next example describes some dissonance between cues, but with strong disapproval of Martin outweighing Aoife being attributed a role in going to the bedroom: "Aoife's head was firmly pushed down to Martin's genitals without being asked but yet she allowed herself to go into a bedroom with him" (SA29F, Story 2, Rating: 2). In this example explicit reference is made to linking a rating to the judgement cues that supported it, identifying Aoife as lacking capacity to consent but giving her some responsibility for agreeing to give oral sex: "I chose go disagree as clearly a naggin is too much for a 15 year old, but at the same time she agreed so Martin isn't fully in the wrong" (SC28M, Story 3, Rating: 2).

Responses to the story version where Aoife did not smile and had her head pushed down employed multiple cues in a more polarised manner. For example, terms like "could not", "never", and "pressuring" are used here: "Aoife could not give consent because she was under the influence of alcohol. Aoife never explicitly gave consent, either verbally or non-verbally. Martin was influencing her and possibly pressuring her into being intimate with him. Aoife was under the age of consent so couldn't give consent" (SC3F, Story 3, Rating: 1).

### Neutral judgements

Neutral ratings tended to be associated with incompatible observations and inferences. These information cues had different implications that participants did not reconcile. For example, one participant referred to Martin pushing Aoife's head down, perceiving it as inappropriate ( "Martin pushed her head down which means it wasn't consent", SDB3M, Story 3, Rating: 3), but went on to write "but Aoife didn't stop, so it was non-verbal consent").

Process descriptions of neutral ratings explicitly referred to having two non-compatible pieces of information. The neutral rating did not indicate lacking a view, being unclear, or undecided. This rating was actively chosen to address having two information cues that were equally valued. These cues could relate to both Martin and Aoife, for instance:

- Martin pushed her I believe. But she smiled and did it so I am neutral (SB3M, Story 2, Rating: 3)

In other instances, participants were weighing up two pieces of information about Aoife:

- I chose neutral because she never gave him verbal consent but it may look like she did give him consent non-verbally (SA37F, Story 2, Rating: 3)

### Consenting judgements

Young people who rated Aoife as consenting adopted a number of strategies in writing about their judgements. Some acknowledged Martin being in a position of power or control, yet still felt that Aoife willingly gave oral sex. Others identified his behaviour as non-problematic and her responses as consenting.

In this example, misgivings are identified yet appear to be outweighed by other cues: "I think the smile showed enthusiasm. However she didn't physically say yes. Martin also seemed to have control over what was going on. Aoife said ok to going somewhere private" (SE70F, Story 1, Rating: 4). Here Martin not asking for verbal consent and firmly pushing her head were enough to outweigh Aoife's smile: "It was kind of consent but he didn't ask her and he pushed her head firmly but she did smile" (SA80F, Story 2, Rating: 4).

For other participants, Martin's actions and Aoife's responses could be constructed in ways that normalised his behaviour and retained a sense of her agency ("he was firm but she was comfortable", SB31M, Story 2, Rating: 5). This participant describes Martin unproblematically and references Aoife's smile in strongly evaluative terms: "Seemed grand as it's not like our lad Martin was sober and taking advantage of her. The field was even. Also the cheeky smile meaned she knew well what was going on" (SE101M, Story 1, Rating: 4). For this participant, the intimacy could be assimilated to a normalising hook up script applicable to parties: "Martin initiated everything and they were both drunk, but things like this happen all the time at house parties … there's never any problems really" (SB32M, Story 2, Rating: 4).

A number of the consenting judgements that referenced multiple cues related back to Aoife specifically. Aoife going to a private space and not saying stop were frequently combined, especially in the context of her smiling. These cues combined into a consent rationale. This participant cites actions that Aoife took and others that she did not take: "Aoife did not resist or stop Martin or complain. She also smiled which meant she was happy to do it" (SB44M, Story 2, Rating: 5).

In this example an explicit relation is made between the rating and multiple information cues that point toward Aoife freely choosing to engage in oral sex: "I chose this answer because there wasn't anything that told me that she did not want to continue. When they began kissing she didn't pull away and when they continued there was no sign of not wanting to continue" (SB19M, Story 2, Rating: 5).

# SOME PUPILS ACKNOWLEDGED MARTIN BEING IN A POSITION OF POWER OR CONTROL, YET STILL FELT THAT AOIFE WILLINGLY GAVE ORAL SEX

# JIM AND CLAIRE: FEMALE AGGRESSION TO A MALE

All of the young people read a consent communication story about Jim and Claire. They had kissed a few times previously but are not in a relationship. On this occasion they are part of a group of friends at a house party. Claire asks Jim to come up to her bedroom to help with something. She initiated kissing. He says he wants to go downstairs but she keeps moving forward, then they have sex. In this story the initiator is a young woman, and so this challenges the gender stereotype that men are always looking for sex and play the role of initiator in seeking sexual intimacy.

## SHARED STORY CONTENT

Jim (19) and Claire (19) were part of a group of friends who had got to know each other well. The group usually hung out together each week. Jim and Claire had kissed a few times, and usually enjoyed each other's company, but he didn't want to get more involved.

There were a few nights out after the end of term. On the last night the group were pre-drinking beer and spirits in someone's house. Then they went out to two pubs, having a few drinks in each one. The group came back to the house around midnight. They were in the living room watching stuff on YouTube, chatting and messing, and had a few more cans each.

Around 1AM Claire called Jim out of the room to ask him for help with something. She brought him upstairs to a bedroom. She started kissing him. He responded. After 20 minutes Jim said he wanted to go back downstairs. Claire kept moving ahead with intimacy, touching him and saying she wanted sex with him. Claire took out a condom and put it on Jim. Jim was in two minds about it. He didn't really want to do it but he had sex with Claire.

The participants responded to five statements about this story on a Likert scale from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'. The percentages of young people who gave ratings of disagreement, neutrality, and agreement with each of the statements are presented below ('Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree' are compiled into one category, as is 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree').

Overall, the young people who read the story broadly agreed that Jim did not consent to sex, he did not want to have sex with Claire, that her behaviour was unacceptable, and his friends might not understand if did not have sex with her. This is a positive finding as it demonstrates recognition that Jim had sex with Claire when the conditions for consent were not present – he gave indications that he was not comfortable with it and sex took place after Claire had verbally pressured Jim.

*Table 38. Summary of quantitative ratings made, percentage of all participants and by gender.*

| | | All participants | Females | Males |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Jim consented to sex with Claire** | Agree | 14.8 | 9.3 | 19.4 |
| | Neutral | 24.6 | 18.8 | 30.3 |
| | Disagree | 60.6 | 72.0 | 50.7 |
| **At the end, Jim wanted to have sex with Claire** | Agree | 12.6 | 6.6 | 18.0 |
| | Neutral | 19.4 | 13.2 | 26.0 |
| | Disagree | 68.0 | 80.1 | 55.9 |
| **At the end, Jim was willing to have sex with Claire** | Agree | 43.3 | 38.6 | 47.9 |
| | Neutral | 25.8 | 23.3 | 28.6 |
| | | 30.9 | 37.9 | 23.5 |
| **Claire's behaviour was unacceptable** | Agree | 64.9 | 80.1 | 52.1 |
| | Neutral | 20.4 | 11.5 | 28.6 |
| | Disagree | 14.7 | 8.4 | 19.3 |
| **Jim's friends might not understand it if he told them that he didn't want to have sex with Claire** | Agree | 70.8 | 72.1 | 69.9 |
| | Neutral | 18.3 | 15.3 | 20.5 |
| | | 11.0 | 12.9 | 9.6 |

There were three main qualifications to a positive interpretation of the ratings made of the follow up statements:

- There were notable differences in the ratings given by males and females.
- Many participants gave a neutral rating in response to the statements.
- A number of participants thought Jim could have been willing but not consenting.

*Figure 17. Percentage of students who agreed that Jim consent to sex and that Jim's friends might not understand if he did not want to have sex with Claire.*

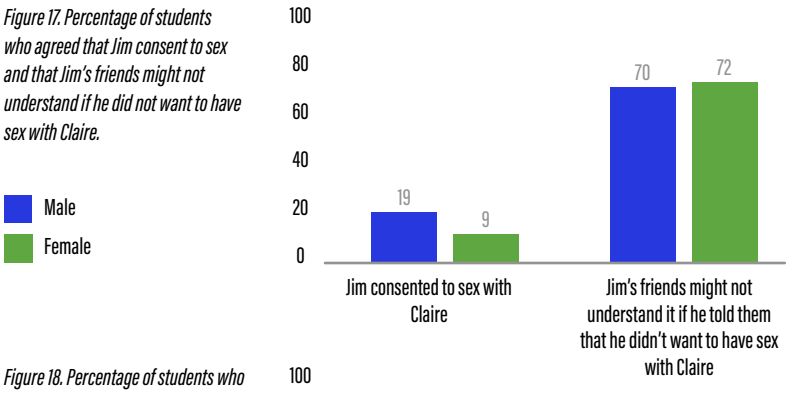
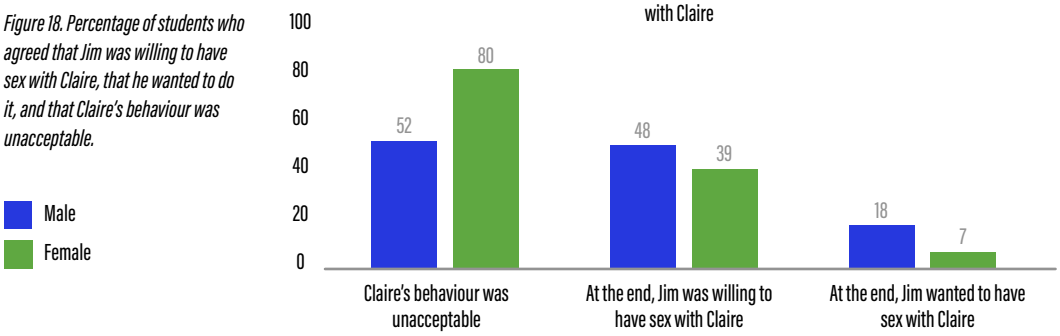



*Figure 18. Percentage of students who agreed that Jim was willing to have sex with Claire, that he wanted to do it, and that Claire's behaviour was unacceptable.*



### Females were more aware of Jim not consenting

Female participants showed a consensus of 70% or more agreement in ratings of four of the five statements – all except whether Jim was willing to have sex with Claire. There was more diversity among the male students, with approximately 50% of males in agreement on four statements and strong agreement on one statement.

Gender-based patterns in ratings were reflected in gaps between male and female students in the ratings that they made. A majority of the male students disagreed that he consented or wanted sex and agreed that Claire behaved unacceptably. Yet this represents less consensus than the female students displayed. There was a gap between males and females of 15-25% in the rate of disagreement with three statements – whether Jim consented, if he wanted to have sex, and whether he was willing. There was a gap of 30% between males and females in the percentage agreement with the statement that Claire's behaviour was unacceptable.

The consequence of this gender gap was that one-fifth of the male participants agreed that Jim consented to sex (9% of females), 48% agreed that he was willing to have sex (39% of females), and 19% disagreed that Claire's behaviour was unacceptable (8% of females).

### Significant numbers of neutral ratings

Young people who chose neutral ratings may not have agreed that Jim consented to sex but they did not disagree either. Overall, between one-fifth and one-quarter of the participants made neutral ratings in response to the five statements (a range from 18-26%). For example, one quarter of the participants were neutral with respect to whether Jim consented to sex or whether he was willing to have sex.

It was more common for males to choose neutral ratings. Nearly one-third of the males were neutral as to whether Jim gave consent to sex (along with 19% who said he was consenting). One-quarter or more were neutral as to whether Jim wanted to have sex, was willing to do so, and whether Claire's behaviour was unacceptable. This represented a difference of up to 17% between males and females in the selection of a neutral option.

### Willingness as a grey area of consent

The ratings made of the statement 'At the end, Jim was willing to have sex with Claire' were distinctive and suggested that Jim could be seen as willing but not consenting, a grey area of consent with significant implications.

Responses to this item had the greatest variation, particularly among females. This is seen in ratings of whether Jim wanted to have sex and if he was willing to do it. Only 7% of female students agreed that Jim wanted to have sex and 80% disagreed. Ratings of his willingness to have sex were much more diverse. The proportion of female students who agreed that Jim was willing was significant (39%) and was as large as the proportion of females who as disagreed that he was willing (38%). In addition, nearly one-quarter of the females were neutral as to Jim's willingness.

While notable, the contrast in male students' ratings of Jim wanting to have sex and being willing to do it was less pronounced. Approximately one-quarter of male students disagreed that he was willing to do it, one-quarter were neutral as to his willingness, and nearly half agreed that he was willing. In comparison, a clear majority of males disagreed that Jim wanted to have sex, one-quarter gave a neutral rating, and one-fifth agreed that he wanted to.

The variation in responses to the statement about Jim's willingness suggests different understandings across the students of the term 'willing' – that he could be willing but under duress, willing but with misgivings, or fully willing to engage. For many students, Jim could be willing to have sex while not consenting to it. Willingness in this case could have a more relational or social basis than being an expression of personal preference. He assented to please Claire, avoid conflict, to save face, or due to social pressure. In these instances not wanting or consenting to it seems like a clear depiction of Jim having no control, yet by being willing he nonetheless seems to exercise agency, raising doubts over whether his non-consent would be seen as having a significant impact on him.

## JIM AND CLAIRE QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Eight content analysis categories were designed following a review of the written responses participants made to the question 'Please write in any thoughts or ideas about how consent applied here for Jim and Claire'. These categories allow the responses to be coded and explored further. The categories were first used to code a sample of responses and assessed through a measure of inter-rater reliability. The categories were then applied to all the written responses to this story. The percentage of participants who referred to each category is presented below, providing an insight on patterns of information use and how participants made sense of the story.

*Table 39. Percentage of participants coded to each content analysis category.*

| | All participants | Female participants | Male participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Claire** | 43.7 | 58.2 | 31.7 |
| **Jim did not consent** | 30.5 | 38.3 | 23.7 |
| **Jim did consent** | 22.2 | 21.3 | 23.4 |
| **Jim should have spoken up** | 10.4 | 13.2 | 8.3 |
| **Jim was uncertain or unclear** | 8.5 | 7.7 | 9.3 |
| **Alcohol** | 10.9 | 14.6 | 8.0 |
| **Peer pressure** | 6.4 | 10.8 | 2.2 |
| **Role reversal** | 6.0 | 5.6 | 6.7 |

Despite the relatively low percentage of students who rated Jim as consenting to sex, the content categories show considerable discussion of his motivations, behaviour, and actions. A total of 60% of participants were coded to one of the four categories that refer directly to Jim and 6% were coded to more than one of these categories. Less than half of the participants had their written responses coded for 'Claire'. Given Claire's active role as an initiator, it is surprising that she was not referred to more often, but it reflects a similar pattern to references made to Martin in the previous story.

There was some evidence of gender-specific patterns in the topics that participants described in their written comments, with more females being coded for 'Claire' and for 'Jim did not consent'. Taken together with gender differences in quantitative ratings, despite sharing Jim's gender identity, male participants were less likely than females to empathise with his experience.

The content categories reflected the quantitative ratings of consent that were made. Over 70% of the participants coded to 'Claire', 'Jim did not consent', 'Alcohol', 'Peer pressure', and 'Role reversal' gave a quantitative rating of disagreement that Jim consented to sex. By comparison, only 30% of participants coded for 'Jim did consent', 44% of those coded for 'Jim was uncertain or unclear', and 44% of those coded for 'He should have spoken up' disagreed that Jim consented to sex.

The written comments linked to the content categories are explored below, using a qualitative content analysis approach to review each category as a theme.

## JIM DID CONSENT

This category explores how participants reviewed the story and decided that Jim did consent to sex with Claire. The key point for these participants was that he had sex with her, which indicated a willingness to engage. Different interpretations were provided of his motivation to do so. Some saw him as actively wanting to have sex while others described more passive states – that he allowed sex to take place either by (a) choosing to go along with it, or (b) by not stopping Claire.

### He wanted to do it

Jim could be seen as having control over what happened to him and wanting to have sex. He did not have to have sex with Claire if he did not want to, so by extension he must have wanted to do it ("Lol … if he didn't want to he wouldn't have done it", SE17O, no rating). Any expression of discomfort did not reflect his 'real' intentions; his actions in having sex with Claire were a better guide to his true motives. These two participants started with the same phase "If he really didn't want to", with one finishing by writing "all he had to do was say no" (SA49F, Rating: 3) and the other that "he would have put more effort into stopping her" (SE23F Rating: 4).

Some participants saw Jim as having the ability to stop what happened at any time, that he did not have to have sex, and "he could have easily gotten up and left" (SA51F, Rating: 4). Several participants identified Jim as having an equal role or even being the initiator by 'leading Claire on' ("He was obviously horny or just wanted to be able to say that he wasn't a virgin and so he had sex. I don't think he should have, it's unfair to lead someone on like that and he did so willingly" (SA7F, Rating: 4).

While the following participants gave a quantitative rating that Jim did not consent to sex with Claire, the use of 'could' and 'should' language identified that he had options open to him:

- He should have stopped Claire and voiced his feelings about it (SC158F, Rating: 2)
- Jim could of said 'no' directly and walked downstairs" (SE44F, Rating: 2)
- He shouldn't have kissed her if he didn't want to have sex with her. he shouldn't have gone upstairs if you didn't want to have sex (SA133F, Rating: 1)

### He went along with it

The next level of agreement identified in the qualitative responses shows Jim deciding to go along with having sex with Claire through passive consent rather than making an active, autonomous decision. It was easier for him to agree to have sex than to leave ("he still went along with it", SC130M, Rating: 5; "he just gave in", SA12F, Rating: 2).

Jim's actions provided sufficient evidence for these participants to infer that he was consenting because he did have sex ("Jim followed through with the act so he did consent", SC13M, Rating: 4). He got to a particular point of intimacy and after that "it was easier to go along with it then to say no" (SA27F, Rating: 4).

For these students it was not simply acquiescence to Claire's intentions, Jim also got something from it:

- Maybe Jim was just horny so he let Claire suck his dick and just said he might as well let her bang him (SB33M, Rating: 5)
- James didn't want to at first but he decided that it's sex and it benefits him (SE176M, Rating: 1)

### He did not stop it

Another indicator that Jim was consenting was that he did not put up a sufficient barrier to having sex ("he didn't want sex but didn't stop it", SE31M, Rating: 2). This was reflected in the use of 'did not' to position Jim as not having told Claire to stop repeatedly ("he only protested once and made no move to stop her", SC28M, Rating: 3). This is illustrated in the next example that features multiple negative terms concerning Jim: "He didn't say that he didn't want to. Even if he didn't want to, he didn't do anything to stop it" (SA79F, Rating: 3).

This interpretation implies that it was Jim's responsibility to stop what happened, that he "didn't correct or deny the situation" (SC78M, Rating: 3). In this example it would have been easy to stop Claire yet he did not, and while it was not right for her to act as she did Jim was responsible because he 'let it happen': "Jim could have easily gotten Claire off him but he decided to let it happen. It's still not ok but he could have stopped it" (SE130M, Rating: 2).

## HE SHOULD HAVE SPOKEN UP

This category describes what Jim should have done or was supposed to do to communicate his non-consent verbally. He was seen as having the autonomy and capacity to be more verbal, but failed to exercise these capabilities. The implication was that he freely chose to have sex with Claire. He was identified as not being verbal in communicating what he wanted ("Jim didn't say yes or no to having sex with Claire", SDA4M, Rating: 1). Some young people inferred his wanting to go downstairs as indirect verbal non-consent ("Jim said he wanted to go back downstairs which showed he didn't want to have sex with Claire", SA118F, Rating: 3), but this was not sufficient for others ("He should of said a second time that he didn't want to go further with Claire", SB11M, Rating: 2).

Further examples referred to what Jim 'should' have said (e.g., "Jim should have told her straight out that he didn't want to have sex with her" SDB16M, Rating: 2; "Jim should've tried harder to say no", SDB2M, Rating: 3). They convey the sense that Jim failed to do something and was found lacking:

- Jim should have spoken up and spoke his mind, he should feel in control of his own sex life (SE128F, Rating: 2)
- Jim should have been more confident to say to Claire that he didn't want to participate (SE105F, Rating: 4)

He is presented here as having the option to say no, he could easily have said no, both forcefully and clearly: "Jim should have pushed her away and said 'no sorry I'm not comfortable' (SA59F, Rating: 3). He "could always say 'no'" (SE105M, Rating: 4), if he really did not want sex then "all he had to do was say no" (SA49F, Rating: 3) yet he did not and so suggested he was consenting ("If he really didn't want to, he would have said no", SA64F, Rating: 4). He had sex "when he didn't have to" (SA138F, Rating: 3).

Appealing to a gender stereotype about males being assertive and in control, this participant wrote that "Claire would have stopped if Jim had given her a firm no" (SA50F, Rating: 4), a turn of phrase used by several others, for example "if he was more stern about it" (SA106F, Rating: 1) or "he could have been firmer with Claire" (SA40F, Rating: 4). In not doing so, Jim was being unclear in expressing his preferences, which could explain or justify Claire's behaviour – "Maybe Claire just thought he was playing hard to

"HE IS PRESENTED HERE AS HAVING THE OPTION TO SAY NO, HE COULD EASILY HAVE SAID NO, BOTH FORCEFULLY AND CLEARLY"

get" (SE26M, Rating: 3), "He did not tell her right away that he did not want it, he led her on" (SC154M, Rating: 2).

## JIM WAS UNCERTAIN OR UNCLEAR

The next theme explores how Jim's consent was described as uncertain or ambivalent in the written comments. Uncertainty was identified through particular terms, for instance here we see participants writing that "Jim was neutral about him and Claire having sex" (SE5O, Rating: 2) or that "technically he gave consent" (SA146F, Rating: 3).

Jim's uncertainty was also conveyed when participants described consent cues that were hard to reconcile. Here the participant weighs up two information cues that appear incongruent: "Jim didn't give Claire consent, but on the other hand he only tried to stop her once" (SA3, Rating: 2), while in this example the consent cue itself is seen as open to interpretation: "There was no yes or no said all that was said is that he wanted to go downstairs" (SE65M, Rating: 4). This participant rated Jim as not consenting, but nonetheless described him as being willing to have sex: "Jim didn't want to have sex with Claire but he was willing to" (SE156F, Rating: 1).

Some participants used quantitative terminology to attribute uncertainty to Jim. Rather than the participants being unsure about Jim's consent, they concluded that Jim himself was uncertain or unclear: "Jim wasn't 100% about it" (SBB4M, Rating: 3), "he half consented, but he didn't not verbally consent" (SB12M, Rating: 3), "I think he gave half consent" (SA57F, Rating: 3), "he was having second thoughts about having sex with Claire but it wasn't a full no" (SE105M, Rating: 4).

Jim's action in having sex while saying that he wanted to leave could be resolved by focusing on his behaviour to guide their interpretation. Each example here opens with Jim not wanting to have sex or not consenting, yet moves on to say that in the end he wanted to have sex or was at least willing to do so, reflected in ratings of 3 or 4 on whether Jim consented:

- Jim did not consent but he still had sex with Claire, which means deep down he actually wanted it (SB44M, Rating: 3)
- He didn't want to but didn't act on it, he still had sex with Claire (SC134M, Rating: 3)
- Jim didn't really want to have sex but in the end he was asked and consented (SE136M, Rating: 4)

# JIM DID NOT CONSENT

Descriptions of Jim not consenting identified him as having given ample signals of non-consent to sex with Claire. His language or actions were singled out as clear showing his non-consent and references were made to Claire sexually assaulting or raping him. This participant describes several factors pointing to non-consent, evoking a vision for consent that requires full agreement: "Consent should be wholehearted as Jim did not really want sex and mentioned going downstairs, they should not have gone ahead with it as there was no consent" (SE49F, Rating: 1).

The use of terms such as 'never', 'made it clear', and 'clearly' portray Jim as being unequivocal in his non-consent. This is a different image than that presented by participants who saw him as uncertain or consenting. Jim not saying 'yes' and wanting to go downstairs were clear signals of non-consent for these young people:

- Jim never said he wanted to (SB47M, Rating: 1)
- Jim never said 'yes' to sex and never agreed to Claire putting on the condom (SE37M, Rating: 2)
- Jim made it clear he wanted to go back downstairs (SB20M, Rating: 2)

Wanting to go downstairs was "his way of saying no to Claire" (SE1O, 2). If he consented to kissing, it did not mean that agreement carried over to sex ("Jim responded when Claire began to kiss him, so he gave consent to kissing but asked to go downstairs", SA126F, Rating: 2). Here the participants infer that Jim "felt pushed" (SE1M, Rating: 2), that he "did it under pressure" (SE81M, Rating: 2), or "he was vulnerable and she took advantage of him" (SA114F, Rating: 3).

References to Jim not consenting extended to seeing Claire as raping him, that "this could be considered rape since Jim was drunk and clearly resisting" (SBA7M, Rating: 1) or "he was forced he got raped by a girl" (SC138M, Rating: 2). Comments coded to this theme explored both personal and social reasons that led Jim to have sex when he did not consent to do so.

For this participant, Jim was concerned about personal consequences, he was "probably intimidated by Claire or worried about what might happen if he refused" (SA26F, Rating: 1), while in this case Jim's concern is about relational consequences: "It may have been he didn't want to reject her or didn't know how to say no" (SA76F, Rating: 2). The following example cites both personal and social reasons: "He continued as he may of been aroused or afraid of being shamed by her or her friends" (SE106F, Rating: 1).

Identifying Jim as not consenting was important for these participants because of the importance of acknowledging that the idea of men always wanting sex was a false stereotype:

- Because he is a man it's viewed that they always want sex (SC2F, Rating: 1)
- Just because he's a boy does not mean he always wants sex (SC20F, Rating: 2)

By extension, the need for consent was the same regardless of the gender identity of the partner:

- Consent is the same for both boys and girls (SC29F, Rating: 1)
- Consent is a mutual thing and it's ok for boys to say no too (SA15F, Rating: 1)

# CLAIRE'S ROLE

This category explores the young people's perceptions of Claire's actions, which ranged from viewing her behaviour as acceptable to descriptions of rape. A small number of participants described her actions as fully acceptable, consistent with the view that Jim was consenting because he stayed in the room and had sex with her. It was more typical to frame her behaviour negatively.

One option was to describe her actions in relational terms as a failure of communication, an insensitivity to Jim's signals or preferences. Alternatively, it could be a conscious decision by Claire to force or push Jim to have sex. In either case, Claire was in a dominant position of power and control, but her actions were viewed from a non-legal perspective and in some examples further qualified by terms like 'kind of' or 'a bit'. Other participants referred to Claire's actions as an assault. They used the term 'rape', and while the legal definition of rape does not match what happened in the story, its use conveyed the judgement that it was profoundly wrong for Claire to have sex with Jim without his consent.

### Misperception

Although some participants described Claire as assaulting Jim, others viewed Claire as making a mistake, misunderstanding the situation or even that she had no responsibility for what happened ("no one was really at fault", SA116F, Rating: 3). For this participant, Claire did not have enough information about Jim's intentions ("Jim didn't give consent but didn't make it known") and so her behaviour was understandable ("Claire probably thought there was nothing wrong", SC71M, Rating: 2).

There was some ambiguity even among participants who saw Claire's behaviour as understandable. This participant wrote that "Claire may have had no idea of Jim not wanting to have sex", but that "Claire

should have made sure to ask Jim though" (SC141F, Rating: 3). While these participants saw her behaviour as open to question it was ultimately acceptable ("Claire was not in the wrong as she did not push him too hard", SE73M, Rating: 3; "Claire was not behaving correctly but she didn't force him into anything", SC12F, Rating: 4). She should not have behaved in this way but would not have had sex if she believed Jim was non-consenting ("she wouldn't have done it if he didn't want to really do it", SE56F, Rating: 4).

### Communication failure

Viewing Claire's actions as a failure of communication included seeing her as insensitive to what she was being told ("Claire didn't really listen to Jim when he said he wanted to go downstairs", SA31F, Rating: 2), even though Jim's signals about consent "should indicate to Claire he doesn't want to have sex" (SB11M, Rating: 2) and she "should've got the hint" (SA59F, Rating: 3). Whereas she "should have listened and stopped" (SA88F, Rating: 3), Claire was lacking in empathy and "didn't think of the other person" (SC109M, Rating: 3). She didn't "check if he was comfortable with it" (SC145F, Rating: 1) or "ask for Jim's consent" (SBC5M, Rating: 2). Claire's assumptions extended to thinking "that he was willing just because he was a male" (SC31F, Rating: 2).

The solution was for Claire to communicate with Jim and talk to him about what he wanted:

- Claire should have gotten verbal consent from Jim and stopped when he asked her to (SE62F, Rating: 1)
- There should have been a conversation about boundaries … Jim would have expressed that he only wanted to kiss her (SC30F, Rating: 2)
- Because they weren't in a relationship, it is Claire's responsibility to ask for consent considering she was the one who wanted sex (SC155F, Rating: 2)

This participant offered perspectives on both people in the story, and while critical of Claire he wrote that her behaviour did not have serious consequences for Jim: "Claire didn't care about consent, she's a bitch. Jim didn't consent but he didn't mind" (SBB3M, Rating: 2).

## THE PUPILS FELT THAT MALES EXPERIENCE A SOCIAL PRESSURE TO HAVE SEX, BUT ALSO VIEWED COERCION AS CLEARLY WRONG

### Force, pressure, and rape

Claire's actions were typically seen as unacceptable, with her behaviour interpreted as forcing, pressuring, or as a sexual assault on Jim. She assumed a controlling position ("Claire had all the power in this situation", SC9M, Rating: 20, "Claire was the dominant one"; SB14M, Rating: 2) and then abused this power:

- Claire's behaviour was atrocious – … She could've respected his wants and should've stopped (SA57F, Rating: 3)
- Jim wanted to go back downstairs which Claire should've allowed straight away instead of continuing and persuading him when he wasn't ready (SE123F, Rating: 2)

This perspective identified Claire as forcing herself on Jim ("he had no choice. Claire was demanding", SE12F, Rating: 2), for instance she "ignored the fact that Jim wanted to go back downstairs. She also put a condom on Jim rather than him putting it on himself" (SE38M, Rating: 2).

Nevertheless, different interpretations were offered in making sense of her actions.

Some participants used qualifiers to invoke force or pressure while allowing some ambiguity. She "kind of pushed herself onto Jim" (SE92M, Rating: 2), or "kind of forced Jim to have sex although he was willing in the end" (SBC1M, Rating: 3). A distance was placed between Claire and the consequences of her actions ("She was a bit forceful but he could have said no at any point", SB35M, Rating: 4). As a result, it was possible to hold back from identifying Claire as assaulting Jim ("I think Claire was being very rape-y, but did not rape Jim. … Claire was being very aggressive", SB10M, Rating: 3).

Other young people did state that Claire assaulted Jim and typically identified it as rape. Some of the statements that referred to her raping him provided reasons for choosing that term. Her actions were described as rape because Jim had no agency or free choice. This was reflected in statements such as "he didn't give consent" (SB132F, Rating: 1), "Jim told her he didn't want to but she didn't listen" (SC50F, Rating: 1), "he didn't want to it and didn't put the condom on his self" (SA23F, Rating: 1), "he didn't want anything more than kissing. She forced herself on top of him which was completely disgusting" (SA131F, Rating: 1), "Jim made it clear he wanted to go back downstairs" (SB20M, Rating: 2), and "Claire pushed Jim to have sex even though Jim didn't want to" (SB39M, Rating: 1).

## ROLE REVERSAL

Reversing the gender roles in the situation was a powerful means to understand the significance of what happened to Jim. Role reversal removed the strong gender expectation that men want sex and can assert their will at any point in a situation. This participant contrasted the view of Jim's male peer group with that of a female group of friends: "I don't think Jim's friends would believe that he didn't want to have sex. Unfair as it would be rape the other way around" (SC96F, Rating: 2). The impact of being forced to do something was minimised when a male is victimised by a female: "When men are the victims it is brushed off. If the story was the other way around the reaction from friends would be very different" (SC143M, Rating: 2).

Some participants described the impact of a reversal of gender roles as producing a 'different' perspective ("a different story if Jim was pushing Claire", SE60M, Rating: 2; "if it was the other way around it would be different", SC104M, Rating: 1). The evaluation associated with this form of language was that it would produce "more concern" (SC94F, Rating: 2).

'Concern' is a relatively mild turn of phrase compared with participants who favoured comparisons with 'murder' and 'war' ("there would be murder. He'd be afraid if somebody came upstairs and caught them", SC80M, No Rating; "there would be war but because Claire pushed Jim, nobody would care or listen to Jim", SB32M, Rating: 3). Other role reversal comparisons invoked legal language, highlighting links to assault or rape ("if Jim had acted this way to Claire he would be in court", SC97M, Rating: 1; "Jim would be in prison", SC98M, Rating: 1). In keeping with this, explicit references to rape were also made:

- If it was the opposite way around it'd be rape! (SBC18M, Rating: 1)
- This would be classified as rape and Jim's life would be destroyed (SE118M, Rating: 2)
- She would probably call rape (SE57F, Rating: 1)

This participant saw the situation faced by males affected by assault as very difficult, with Jim experiencing a serious sexual assault but struggling to be believed:

- Huge double standard for men and women in rape culture. Claire essentially raped Jim but because he is a man less people would be inclined to take him seriously. This is the most serious of the three stories because he explicitly said he wanted to stop (SC66F, Rating: 2)

## ALCOHOL

The use of alcohol could represent relevant background information that informed how the story was interpreted:

- The context could be of a drunken mistake between the two of them ("she was drunk and he was drunk", SC119F, Rating: 3; "both of them were drunk which may have clouded their judgement", SE127M, Rating: 1).
- The impact of alcohol use might be specific to Jim, including not being competent to give consent ("prevented him from speaking up about not wanting to have sex with her", SE100F 2; "in my opinion, this could be considered rape since Jim was drunk and clearly resisting", SDA7M, Rating: 1).
- It may mean that Claire could not give consent and Jim had responsibility ("[he] should not of had sex with Claire as he knew she had been drinking all night", SA29F, Rating: 2; "Jim should have left and not continued as Claire was most likely too intoxicated", SB42M, Rating: 4).

Usually alcohol was used in making sense of Claire's behaviour. In this example the participant gave a quantitative rating that Jim did not consent, yet alcohol helped to explain Claire's action ("most likely didn't realise she pressured him", SA91F, Rating: 2). These participants acknowledged that her behaviour was not right, using terms such as 'inappropriate', 'unacceptable', or 'no excuse', yet saw alcohol as providing a reason why it happened:

- Claire continued which in my opinion is a bit unacceptable though she was drunk (SE74M, Rating: 2)
- Claire may not have been thinking straight. However, that is no excuse for pressuring someone to have sex with you (SA34F, Rating: 1)
- Understandable as she was drunk but it is no excuse as a form of consent (SB43M, Rating: 2)

This example shows alcohol as a contextual factor that contributed with Jim's actions to lead to a judgement that Jim definitely did not give his consent: "Alcohol involved (not freely given), not mutual as Jim wanted to go back out of the room. Jim had not consented to sex, not consented to kissing (not ongoing)" (SC37F, Rating: 1).

## PEER PRESSURE

This theme identifies peer expectations as a motivating factor for Jim to comply with Claire's request for sex. Comments coded to this theme express empathy and understanding for Jim. They were associated with quantitative ratings of disagreement or neutrality that Jim consented to sex. He was in the difficult position of being judged, either by male peers who expected him to have sex if he could or by Claire who demanded sex ("Jim felt pressured by Claire to have sex and would have felt judged by his friends if he didn't", SE68F, Rating: 1).

Embracing the stereotype that men want sex and take any opportunity to do it, Jim's friends "would not believe that he didn't want to have sex" (SB17M, Rating: 2) and would laughed at him ("laughed at if he said he didn't want to but she did", SE13M, Rating: 2). This could take the form of 'slagging' or ridiculing Jim's character and choices ("sadly Jim's friends as we know would have slagged him for not having sex", SE128F, Rating: 2). Jim would have pre-empted peer judgements and factored them into his decision to have sex ("Jim was a little bit peer pressure into it by his own thoughts, because he might have felt his friends would laugh at him", SA59F, Rating: 3).

Walking away from sex would invoke "stigma" and being "called a pussy" (SC161F, Rating: 2). This highlighted the gendered nature of peer judgement for a male ("this is a tricky situation as if Jim doesn't do it people will question his masculinity", SE161M, Rating: 2; "it is a lot harder for someone to believe that a man doesn't want sex", SE41F, Rating: 1). This reflected wider gender norms and roles, for instance it would be difficult for Jim to talk openly about what happened and his reaction to it ("they may not understand as guys don't really talk about their feelings a lot to each other", SA12F, Rating: 2).

These comments suggest significant social pressure arising for a male who turns down sex, providing an insight into why Jim may be willing to have sex when he did not want to do so. However there was also encouragement from some participants for Jim not to care what his friends believed ("Jim … shouldn't care if his friends think different of him if he doesn't want to have sex", SC14F, Rating: 2).

# SAM AND ALEX: ONGOING AND MUTUAL CONSENT

The story about Sam and Alex was read by 214 of the young people who completed the schools survey. It was included in one version of the survey to study reactions to one partner saying 'no' to sexual activity in the context of a gender-neutral description that suggests a transgender or non-binary identity. A total of 70 females, 142 males, and two non-binary survey respondents gave their responses to this story.

Compared with the two previous stories, which explore perceptions of whether the initiator action taken by Martin and Claire was acceptable, the main focus in this story was on how the survey respondents viewed consent communication as being ongoing and mutual.

In the story, Sam and Alex are members in a LGBTQI group and have been going out together for three months. They had sex for the first time the week before. The consent communication scenario concerns Alex saying "no, I don't want to" when Sam wants sex. Sam is confused and feels rejected. Alex finds it hard to explain that it would be better to go slower. There seems to be a negative impact on the relationship as a result of this scenario.

The participants rated six statements using a 5-point Likert scale from "'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'". The statements asked participants to respond to Sam and Alex's reactions in the story and give their views on social norms concerning sex in a relationship and talking about consent. The survey participants were also asked to write down their responses to two open-ended items ('Please share your thoughts on Sam's reaction when Alex said "no, I don't want to", 'What could have made the situation better?').

## SHARED STORY CONTENT

Sam (17) is outgoing, enjoys meeting new people, and is active in a local LGBTQI group. Alex (17) joined the group 6 months ago and 'came out' for the first time. For the past 3 months, they have been 'going out together'.

A week ago at a friend's house party, they found a private room. When they were alone Sam asked Alex to 'have sex'. Afterwards they shared how they were feeling and they both said it had been great.

The following week they found themselves alone again. Sam said "I want to do it again", and started to unzip Alex's jeans. Alex said "No, I don't want to". Sam was confused and then worried "What's wrong? You were into it last time... What have I done?... Did I do something wrong?...Don't you want me anymore?"

Alex didn't know how to explain that it just didn't feel right this time, and that going a bit slower might help. Sam went home, but the next day when they saw each other at school the atmosphere between them was not the same.

The ratings show that the young people who took part in the story supported the right to say 'no' to sex and the need to talk about consent in a relationship context. Nearly everyone (98%) agreed that it was okay for Alex to say "no, I don't want to" in response to Sam wanting sex. More than nine out of ten (92%) respondents agreed that people need to talk about consent. There was a small gender difference in ratings of this statement, with 98% of females in agreement compared with 89% of males.

*Table 41. Percentage of survey respondents who gave their agreement to consent communication statements: High consensus responses, by gender.*

| | | All participants | Females | Males |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **It was okay for Alex to say "No, I don't want to"** | Agree | 98.1 | 100.0 | 97.2 |
| | Neutral | 1.9 | 0.0 | 2.8 |
| | Disagree | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| **People need to talk about consent, even when in a relationship** | Agree | 91.6 | 98.6 | 88.7 |
| | Neutral | 7.0 | 1.3 | 9.2 |
| | Disagree | 1.4 | 0.0 | 2.1 |

Two of the statements received majority agreement from the pupils. These were two complementary statements that it was OK for Sam and Alex to be having sex in a relationship (77% agreed) and that it was not OK for Sam to assume Alex would be into sex just because they did it before (65%).

There were some gender differences in response to these two items. More females (83%) than males (57%) agreed that it was not OK for Sam to assume Alex would be into sex, whereas more males (82%) than females (67%) said it was OK for them to be having sex as they were in a relationship.

Females who did not agree it was OK to have sex in a relationship tended to select the 'neutral' rating option, and males who did not agree that Sam should not have assumed Alex wanted sex tended to select the 'neutral' option.

*Table 42. Percentage of survey respondents who gave their agreement to consent communication statements: Moderate consensus statements, by gender.*

| | | All participants | Females | Males |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **It was OK for them to be having sex as they were in a relationship** | Agree | 77.1 | 67.1 | 82.4 |
| | Neutral | 20.1 | 27.1 | 16.2 |
| | Disagree | 2.8 | 5.2 | 1.4 |
| **It was not OK for Sam to assume Alex would be in to sex just because they had done it before** | Agree | 65.4 | 82.9 | 57.0 |
| | Neutral | 24.3 | 11.4 | 31.0 |
| | Disagree | 10.3 | 5.7 | 12.0 |

Two items received minority levels of agreement. Forty per-cent of participants agreed that Sam was right to be worried when Alex does not want sex. A large percentage chose the 'neutral' option (40%) and 21% disagreed that Sam was right to be worried. The background to this item was that Sam was worried in the story due to concerns about rejection and changes in the relationship. Overall, this pattern of ratings reflects diverse views on how to react if a partner says they do not want to have intimacy in a relationship context. More males (47%) than females (26%) agreed that Sam was right to be worried about what Alex's refusal might mean.

One-quarter of the participants (27%) agreed that Sam and Alex will get together again. A majority (60%) chose the 'neutral' option and 14% disagreed that they will get together again. There were no gender differences in ratings of this statement.

The agreement pattern suggests that many pupils saw this incident having a significant impact on Sam and Alex's relationship, with most of the pupils reporting uncertainty whether the situation will be successfully resolved. The open-ended written responses to questions showed an overriding tendency to say that the resolution lies in having open communication based on respect and an empathic valuing of the other person's perspective.

| | | All participants | Females | Males |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sam is right to be worried** | Agree | 39.7 | 25.7 | 47.2 |
| | Neutral | 39.7 | 47.1 | 35.9 |
| | Disagree | 20.6 | 27.1 | 16.9 |
| **They will get together again** | Agree | 26.6 | 27.1 | 26.8 |
| | Neutral | 59.8 | 60.0 | 59.9 |
| | Disagree | 13.6 | 12.9 | 13.4 |

*Table 43. Percentage of survey respondents who gave their agreement to consent communication statements: Low consensus statements, by gender.*

Taken together, the quantitative responses to the six statements show a positive trend to recognising that turning down a partner's request for sex is valid and that having different views on sex in a relationship is best resolved by talking about consent. There were some signs of traditional gendered perspectives in the responses, with a greater tendency among males to assume that relationships involve sex and that one partner may expect to have access to sex.

# SAM AND ALEX QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The survey respondents were invited to write responses to two open-ended items ('Please share your thoughts on Sam's reaction when Alex said "no, I don't want to"', 'What could have made the situation better?'). The responses were reviewed and qualitative content categories devised in order to group the responses. A sample was coded first to assess inter-rater reliability. Next, all of the responses to 'Please share your thoughts on Sam's reaction when Alex said "no, I don't want to"' were coded to five categories. Responses to the item 'What could have made the situation better?' were coded into four categories.

Half of the females (51%) and nearly one-third of males (31%) were coded to 'Sam was confused', which included observations acknowledging and exploring Sam's reaction when Alex said they did not want to have sex. There was also a gender difference in the percentage of pupils coded to 'Sam should have acted differently', with 40% of females and 15% of males giving examples of what they should have done or stating their behaviour should have been different.

A similar percentage of males (29%) and females (23%) were coded to 'Judging Sam', which included mostly negative evaluations and judgements of whether Sam behaved correctly. Finally, relatively small percentages of the pupils were coded to 'Alex can say what they want' and 'Alex did not want to have sex', both of which highlighted that Sam should not have assumed that sex would happen.

| | All participants | Females | Males |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sam was confused** | 37.5 | 51.4 | 31.3 |
| **Judging Sam** | 26.4 | 22.9 | 28.5 |
| **Sam should have reacted differently** | 23.1 | 40.0 | 15.3 |
| **Alex can say what they want** | 12.0 | 10.0 | 13.2 |
| **Alex did not want to have sex** | 6.9 | 4.3 | 8.3 |

*Table 44. Percentage of students coded to content analysis categories for the item 'Please share your thoughts on Sam's reaction when Alex said "no, I don't want to"'.*

Gender differences were identified in the percentage of survey respondents who were coded to the categories used to group responses to 'What could have made the situation better?'. Overall, 79% of females were coded to one of the categories that refer to how talking about consent makes the situation better, compared with 58% of males. Nearly a quarter of females were coded to more than one of these categories, while only 3% of males were coded to more than one of them. This pattern shows a clear gender difference, with females being much more likely to identify open consent communication as a positive response when two people have different expectations or preferences for sexual activity.

There was a gender difference in the use of the category 'Sam talking about it', with more females (40%) referring to Sam being the active person talking to Alex compared with males (17%). A gender difference in 'Alex talking about It' was also apparent, as 36% of females were coded to this category that referenced Alex being the active person in talking compared with 15% of males.

The final category with a gender difference was 'Sam being more understanding', which references Sam being more empathic and accepting. The percentage of females coded to this category (40%) was double that of males (21%). Similar percentages of males (29%) and females (27%) were coded to 'Both talking about it', which included references to Sam and Alex being active in speaking about sex and consent.

*Table 45. Percentage of students coded to content analysis categories for the item 'What could have made the situation better?'.*

| | All participants | Females | Males |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Both talking about it** | 28.2 | 27.1 | 29.2 |
| **Sam being more understanding** | 27.3 | 41.4 | 20.8 |
| **Sam talking about it** | 24.5 | 40.0 | 16.7 |
| **Alex talking about it** | 21.3 | 35.7 | 14.6 |

# MORE MALE PUPILS THAN FEMALE PUPILS AGREED THAT SEX MAY BE EXPECTED IN A RELATIONSHIP

## GENDER IDENTITY

The story referred to both Sam and Alex as having come out and being members of a LGBTQI group. The language in the story was gender-neutral. No personal pronouns were attributed to Sam or Alex, and their names could refer to either gender or to them having a transgender identity.

The use of personal pronouns shows that the young people saw Sam and Alex as being two gay males. There were 585 references to 'he', 88 to 'they' and 12 references to 'she'. Nearly all of the references to 'they' were in reference to 'both Sam and Alex' rather than as a gender neutral personal pronoun. This finding indicates a tendency among the young people to attribute a traditional gender category to story characters who are portrayed using gender neutral language, and may mean that they had a strong expectation for traditional gender identities or limited knowledge of transgender identity.

The written responses do provide some examples of different personal pronouns. While a male survey respondent identifies both story characters as male in this example: "He must have been confused as Alex said he loved it last time" (SDB9M), in this case another male respondent refers to Alex as female: "Sam should have accepted Alex's statement and left her alone" (SC33M). In contrast, this male describes Alex as being male or female: "If Sam didn't start to unzip Alex's pants before he/she said yes to sex" (SDA8M). Here a male identifies Sam in a gender neutral way: "I think that Sam was worried that they had done something wrong and that Alex was uncomfortable" (SC162M). In this example, a male respondent refers to Alex in gender-neutral terms: "While it does make sense in the moment, if he keeps up this attitude of 'they must hate me'" (SDA7M).

The content analysis categories are described below to explore how the survey respondents made sense of the story and reacted to the situation when Sam assumed Alex would want sex again. The responses show a clear recognition that consent is an ongoing process and should not be assumed from one occasion to another. The categories developed after each written response are combined to represent how the students reacted to Sam and are followed by how Alex is represented.

## SAM

The written responses show a progression from identifying how Sam would have felt after Alex said 'no' to sex to statements about what Sam should have done in this situation. Under the category 'Sam was confused', some participants identified with the reaction Sam had when Alex said 'no' to sex ("I understand why he was shocked", SC114F; "It's only natural to be shocked by Alex saying no", SC106M). They went on to describe why Sam would have been confused, highlighting that Alex had consented last time ("it was OK beforehand but now he didn't want to"; SDC2M; "Alex said he loved it last time", SDB9M). This would have left Sam confused about what happened ("He obviously likes Alex and for Sam to be rejected he felt dejected and disappointed", SC105F) and left thinking about what it meant: "It's worrying to hear it's you and your partner have had sex before and then the other person decides they don't want to, it would make the other person overthink and question themselves" (SC92M).

A number of the young people expressed judgements about how Sam had behaved, which were gathered under the 'Judging Sam' category. Sam had "reacted over the top" (SDC7M), "reacted in an immature way" (SDC16M), and Sam "shouldn't have freaked out like that" (SDB12M). His reaction was "a bit over dramatic" given that it was a clear cut situation where Alex had indicated a preference not to have sex: "because when a person says no, it's no" (SDA8M).

These comments extended into viewing Sam's behaviour as having disrespected Alex and acted in a controlling way: "It was very pressuring, it was kind of like guilt tripping" (SC95M). For another survey respondent, "it wasn't right for him/her to assume that it was what Alex wanted "(SC2F). While most of the judgement statements about Sam portrayed him as having acted improperly, some of the young people judged Sam's behaviour as acceptable ("his reaction was ok", SDC13M; "he had a right to be worried', SC96F; "it was an initial reaction which I think is fair", SC37M).

Responses grouped under the categories 'Sam should have reacted differently' and 'Sam being more understanding' emphasised that it would have been better for Sam to be more accepting and respectful of Alex.

These responses use 'should have' to show this:

- He should have accepted how Alex felt (SDC18M)
- He should have waited and respected the fact that Alex wasn't into it, and asked later as emotional care is good for relationships (SC69M)

# THE PUPILS SAW OPENNESS, EMPATHY, AND TALKING AS KEY TO IMPROVING CONSENT COMMUNICATION

Other responses contrasted Sam's reaction with a better response of being patient and understanding, with the term 'calm' being used several times:

- He should have be more calm and understanding (SC55F)
- Asking why calmly may have made Alex more comfortable to talk about (SC37F)

The use of 'should have' is contrasted with examples that cite what Sam 'should not have' done. For example, "Sam shouldn't have rushed" (SDC2M) and "Sam should not of said 'I want to do it again' and just assume" (SC82M). The term 'if' was employed to identify parts of the story that pupils did not agree with and that showed a lack of understanding from Sam:

- If Sam didn't start to unzip Alex's pants before he/she said yes to sex (SDA8M)
- If Sam didn't go ahead and unzipped Alex's jeans, and thought just because they did it once, doesn't mean he wants to do it again (SC151F)
- If Sam didn't overreact (SDB3M)
- If Sam was more understanding about it (SDA4M)

For some of the participants, 'understanding' was an important goal in making sense of a consent situation. In this case, it meant that Sam needed to have achieved an understanding before reacting, based on the realisation that consent is ongoing, Alex may have been more uncertain than Sam, and perhaps Alex just did not want to have sex that night:

- For Sam to understand that just because he done it once might not mean he will be the same next time (SC43M)
- Sam could have understood that Alex may want to take things slow, consider he's only been "out" for 6 months and been with Sam for 3 of those (SC152F)
- If Sam was to understand that it wasn't him and Alex just didn't feel like having sex that night (SC42M)

Once Sam had an understanding then this should follow on to an acceptance of the other person's preferences:

- That Sam accepted his answer and continue with what they were both comfortable with (SC70F)
- Sam to just accept it (SDA3M)
- Sam should have accepted Alex's statement and left her alone (SC33M)
- If Sam really cared about Alex he would of been okay about this (SC12F)

Acceptance was a statement of respect for the other person, a value that underpinned the response from several of the survey respondents:

- If Sam respected her decision and talked to her immediately after instead of Sam making it awkward (SC73M)
- Sam could have been more kind towards Alex (SC114F)

Empathy represented another underpinning for the preferred response from Sam, which would have allowed for taking on Alex's perspective:

- Sam could've handled the situation better and understood where Alex was coming from (SC135M)
- Sam should have respected Alex's decision and laughed it off but still inquired on the reason for him turning him down (SDB1M)

The primary strategy that Sam should have used in this situation was to talk to Alex. Sam should have asked Alex about what they wanted to do that evening before being forward and trying to unzip Alex's jeans. These examples use 'if' to present a better situation where Sam would have communicated first:

- If Sam had asked Alex instead before assuming (SC44M)
- If Sam had asked Alex if he wanted before touching him (SC155M)
- If Sam had asked Alex did he want to have sex instead of assuming that he wanted to just because he wanted to the last week (SC6F)

The importance of verbal consent was referred to both explicitly and implicitly:
Sam asking Alex from the start like the first time, seeing if he wants to or not (SC21F)

- If Sam asked for consent (SDB11M)
- More communication from Sam's end on the idea of consent (SC2F)

Talking was also the solution when Alex reacted to say 'no' to sex:

Sam should have said 'it's ok' and then expressed his confusion in a calmer way (SC93F)

Sam could have stopped what he was doing and ask Alex to talk about it (SDC17M)

Sam talking to Alex in a sensitive manner would also help in achieving communication after the event: "Sam should not ask too much into it, if someone doesn't want then they don't want to. Sam should not make him feel guilty, but comfortable" (SC159F).

# ALEX

Most of the written responses focused on Sam, in discussing the behaviour in the incident, what should have been done instead, and what Sam could do now. The content analysis categories that referred to Alex largely elaborated on the idea that they had the right to say no but also highlighted how it may have helped the relationship if Alex had talked more to Sam about their preferences and feelings.

Responses under the category 'Alex did not want to have sex' typically made sense of Alex's reaction by saying they did not want to have sex at that time ("just didn't want to", SC149F; "it was probably just Alex not wanting it, SC132M). It could have been a specific issue that day ("may not have been in the mood and that's grand", SDA3M; "he might not feel well", SC70F).

Alex deciding not to have sex that evening may not mean something significant in the context of a relationship: "Just because Alex didn't want to have sex doesn't mean Alex wasn't attracted to Sam anymore" (SDA2M). However it could signify that Alex had experienced regret after sex the previous week and wanted to take it slower as a result: "Alex might have felt they rushed into sex and mightn't want to do it again for a while" (SC30F).

The young people were clear that if Alex did not want to have sex then they should not do it. These responses were grouped under the category 'Alex can say what they want'. There were references to Alex's right to say no as a principle that applies no matter what ("a right to say no if you don't want it", SC104M; "Alex has the right to say no", SDA4M; "Alex is fully entitled to say no", SC71M; "If he said the answer is no, no means no", SC100M). This respondent backed up Alex's right to say no but said it would have been helpful to clarify for Sam what the reason was: "He has every right to say he doesn't want to, but he could've been clearer on why he didn't" (SC118F).

'Alex talking about it' was the main response specific to Alex that came out from the question about what would have made the situation better. This category focused on suggestions from the young people for Alex to explain what their feelings were and why they did not want to have sex ("Alex could have explained clearly and respectfully", SC3F). The term 'if' was used to present a situation where Alex went beyond 'no' to put the decision in context:

- If Alex could have explained why he didn't want to do it again (SC156M)
- If Alex explained their feelings and thoughts about what they mean to say (SC161F)

There was a sense in which Alex saying 'no' was respected but nonetheless an expectation that within a relationship there was a need to clarify and elaborate on the reasons why: "If Alex could have explained how they were feeling more clearly" (SC142M). This extended to attribution of some responsibility to Alex for explaining and for the change in the relationship:

- If Alex explained to Sam, maybe the atmosphere wouldn't of changed (SC108M)
- Alex could have explained why he didn't want to, seeing as they were in a relationship (SC99F)
- Alex could have said he wanted to go slow before Sam asked (SC92M)
- Alex could've said it a bit better then 'no I don't want to' as that makes it sound a bit bad (SC15F)

Some of the respondents gave suggestions as to what Alex could have said when talking to Sam. The suggestions highlighted that Alex saying that not wanting sex was specific to the situation, rather than involving Alex's feelings about Sam as a person:

- He could have explained it was nothing with Sam, he just didn't feel like doing it that night (SC46F)
- Alex reassuring Sam that it wasn't his fault he just didn't want it (SC132M)
- If Alex had said 'maybe another time, but I don't feel like it right now' (SC87M)
- If Alex told him something like 'I'm just not feeling it right now', maybe Sam would have been less worried (SDC13M)

## BOTH TALKING ABOUT IT

The category 'Both talking about it' referenced Sam and Alex working together to enhance their communication about sex and consent. This would enable them to have a clearer understanding of mutual expectations ("they both could've had a conversation about how they are honestly feeling" SC53F). Having more open communication would have helped with the situation that arose and other situations ("Communication would have improved the situation", SC3F; "if both of them were more open with each other", SC72M; "talking about it to each other. not getting paranoid and worried", SC123M).

Some respondents referred specifically to the situation in the story. They referenced the views that each person had a part to play, with Sam asking what Alex was comfortable with and Alex talking more to Sam more about the reasons for not having sex:

- Alex telling Sam what's wrong and Sam asking for permission (SC163M)
- If Alex explained why he didn't want to have sex, and if Sam could of reacted different and asked Alex if he's okay and that they don't have to do it (SC158F)
- If Sam had asked Alex if he wanted to do it in the first place. If Alex explained why he didn't want to do it more (SC7F)

Some respondents spoke about the direction of the conversations that Sam and Alex could have to establish clear consent communication for the future:

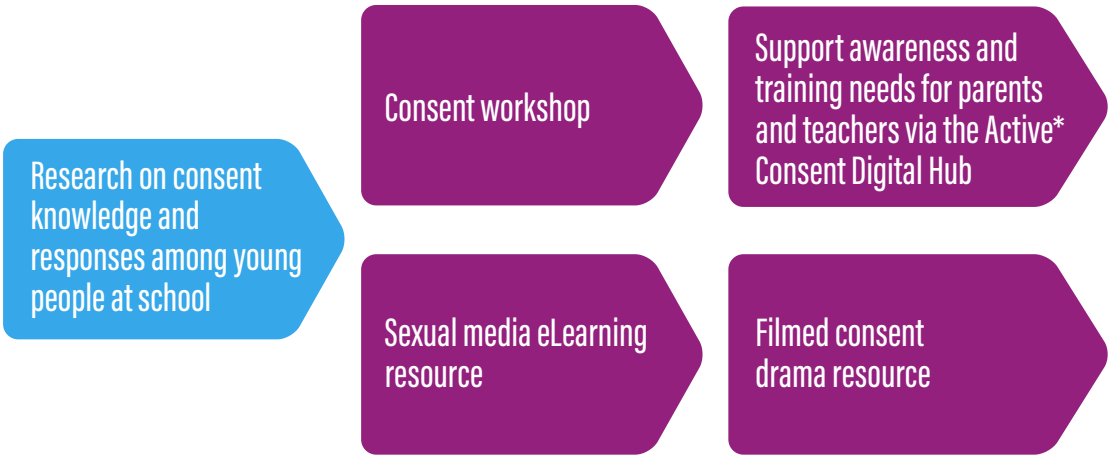
- If they could ask each other for consent and they could talk about what is allowed and what is not allowed (SDA11M)
- Talk about consent and how sexually active they want to be (SC14F)
- Sam could have accepted his 'no' without question and then had a conversation with Alex about consent, and how they both feel. It would have been healthier +less stress put on Alex (SC67F)
- They should have talked about it and set boundaries from the start. This way they would know what is okay and what's not (SC28M)

# THE ACTIVE* CONSENT SCHOOLS PROGRAMME AND RESEARCH FINDINGS: CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This report sets out the research underpinning the newly launched Active* Consent schools programme. These new resources for schools are provided by the Active* Consent programme using a multi-disciplinary approach involving psychology, youth development, sexual health promotion, and the use of theatre and drama as pedagogy.

The programme will be available for schools through direct engagement with the Active* Consent programme as well as through the online learning hub that the programme is developing during 2021-22 in collaboration with the Department of Justice and the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science. The funding and support made available through Lifes2good Foundation, Rethink Ireland, and NUI Galway have enabled the Active* Consent programme to realise the ambition of a research-based, highly engaging and relevant consent education package for 15-17 year-olds that complements the existing programming for young adults available in colleges throughout Ireland.

The resources are framed in how contemporary Irish teenagers engage with learning. As a result, knowledge derived through research with their peers is emphasised when working with pupils on both the achievement of positive consent communication and the right to be free of harassment, pressure, and harm in the exploration of intimacy and sexual behaviour.




The programme highlights clear information and supports; an approach that extends to the provision of supports to the parents, guardians and teachers who, alongside young people, comprise the school community. The programme resources are complementary and integrated, yet remain engaging and diverse through the use of multiple modes of delivery. These range from in-class discussions to self-directed online learning to viewing dilemmas and positive role models enacted through drama in a group setting.

This research includes an evaluation of the consent workshop for Transition Year and Fifth Year students, which is further supported by teacher training and awareness-raising for parents and guardians. This is the first part of the programme, made available immediately in Autumn 2021, which will be followed by two complementary resources to strengthen young people's learning and skills acquisition: *How I Learned About Consent*, a theatrical film on consent for teenagers, and *Sex on Our Screens*, an eLearning Sexual Media Resource for Schools that addresses topics such as pornography, sexual scripts and body image.

The Active* Consent schools programme is supported by research with young people and by youth working with the research team as collaborators in the development of the programme resources. The research survey conducted to inform the programme provides the first in-depth exploration of consent communication among Irish teenagers.

The survey findings have fed directly into the development of the programme resources; for example, by including in the consent workshop several of the stories that had been researched in the survey. In addition, the survey findings stand alone as an important insight into how young people in Ireland think and feel about consent, what consent principles they endorse, and how well the principles translate into reactions to stories that explore negative, controlling behaviours and dilemmas for consent communication.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE AND CONSENT

Despite the increasing acknowledgement of the need for holistic sex education programmes in schools to support adolescents with consent education, much work is required before this ambition is fulfilled. Although the scope and depth of research on consent and college students has grown considerably in the past decade, there remains a small number of studies on how teenagers understand and apply principles of consent.

Establishing a stronger knowledge base is a prerequisite for researchers and practitioners who wish to design consent education programmes that are acceptable to young people and which are effective in supporting their needs. The schools survey described in this report provides important lessons for the Active* Consent programme and for the wider community.

There is a strong positive base among young people on consent in respect of understanding consent and applying important principles. These strengths comprise a critical resource. The existing knowledge and skills that young people have should be acknowledged in communicating with them about consent and supported further through consent education.

The vast majority of young people who took part in the survey supported the need for consent before sexual activity and overwhelmingly critiqued clear examples

of non-consent that they read about. The young people readily accepted that saying 'no' to sex was valid in a relationship and that consent on a previous occasion did not mean that consent should be assumed in the future.

Many of the people who responded to the survey referenced clear principles that guided them in their judgements. These principles were linked to their knowledge of sexual assault, how power and pressure can be used in sexual activity, the impact of alcohol on the ability to give consent, and the age of consent.

Communication, talking, and establishing a base of trust were readily identified as helping consent to be achieved between two people. Talking and having a mutual understanding were also suggested as ways to improve communication and how differences in expectations between two people may be overcome.

A number of 'grey areas' surrounding consent were identified as well. The principles of consent did not necessarily translate directly to how participants responded to realistic consent stories. These grey areas should be an important focus of discussion with young people.

Most young people felt that a smile was sufficient to communicate consent in a hook-up scenario where alcohol was involved. Many students felt that someone could be willing to have sex despite not consenting to it or wanting to do it. This highlights the need for education and resources to emphasise the role of alcohol on consent communication in more depth for young people.

While the right to say 'no' was strongly supported, many students said that the person who says 'no' in a relationship context should also provide an explanation for why they do not want sex. Views on the impact that alcohol has on decision-making varied between survey respondents, with many people not remarking on it at all.

A number of young people chose 'neutral' ratings in their ratings of statements and in their written responses. While this meant that there the percentage of respondents who agreed with a controversial issue was typically low, it also had the implication that many people did not actively challenge or clearly define a situation as unacceptable.

Several of the findings from the research suggested beliefs and expectations that should be challenged in consent education programming with young people. Many of the young people seemed to base their judgement of whether consent was present

"THE VAST MAJORITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO TOOK PART IN THE SURVEY SUPPORTED THE NEED FOR CONSENT BEFORE SEXUAL ACTIVITY"

on the behaviour of the person whose consent was in question. There was less focus on the actions of the initiator. If the person carried out a sexual act, this could be taken to mean that they wanted to do it or were willing to engage in it. Once someone had engaged in a sexual act, there was a tendency for some of the survey respondents to use wording like 'could of', 'should have', or 'would have' to describe alternative behaviours that the person would have employed if they were truly non-consenting.

A clear 'no' or absence of any consent signal was required before some of the young people regarded an action as non-consenting. While the students were very attentive to the presence of a 'no', other strategies to convey non-consent such as indirect comments or body language were often not viewed as strong signals.

There were considerable gender differences in the survey findings. While it was acknowledged that a male has the right to say no to sex, this was made problematic because of the general expectation that his peers would not understand this reaction and may mock him for turning down sex. There was also an expectation that a male is more able than a female to leave a situation if he does not consent.

The second gender difference was in how survey participants responded to questions on general principles of consent, openness to casual sexual encounters, and in how the stories were viewed. Male respondents were more likely to agree it is acceptable to assume an active or even controlling position in a sexual encounter, such as pushing someone's head down firmly or persuading someone to have sex. More males than females were open to causal encounters, which could set up different expectations for consent and a gender difference in how sexual encounters are viewed or interpreted. Nevertheless, many of the males who took part in the study provided a strong endorsement of active, positive consent and were critical of scenarios where this did not occur. In turn, some females were accepting of positions that are not compatible with an approach of positive and active consent.

The survey respondents identified a number of barriers to consent. This sets up an opposing motivation that could work against the positive principles and beliefs that are held on a personal level. The barriers frequently included uncertainty over having the knowledge and skills required for consent, but for the most part highlighted social concerns. Uncertainty over what peers believe or an assumption that verbal consent would be awkward

highlight the importance of teenagers' confidence and the perception that they are part of a wider community of consent that works in practice as well as in principle.

Taken together, the findings provide important insights and a step forward in our knowledge of how Irish teenagers understand consent and apply that understanding in a real-world context. The findings ground the Active* Consent schools programme resources in the language, reality, and positive aspirations of young people. Consistent with the research-driven ethos that has guided Active* Consent since 2014, the findings have shaped the programme goals, content, and approach to delivery.

## NEXT STEPS FOR THE ACTIVE* CONSENT SCHOOLS PROGRAMME

This report has highlighted the impact achieved by the Active* Consent workshop for schools. It showed that the consent workshop was evaluated positively as an acceptable and effective strategy for engaging young people aged 15-17 on consent, with a particular focus on knowledge and skills for consent communication.

The vast majority of the pupils who took part in the workshop found it relevant and would recommend it to a friend. The comparison of pre- and post-workshop ratings to items reflective of consent knowledge, skills, attitudes, and peer perceptions showed significant improvements as a result of taking part.

In response to the impact of Covid-19, a flexible mode of delivery was built into the workshop design, with options to deliver the workshop ranging from in-class to remote or online. The workshop can be delivered by professionals in the area or by teachers who have been trained. The evaluation found no difference in post-workshop scores or in acceptability ratings to be dependent on delivery mode or facilitator type. The workshop was similarly effective when delivered by teachers and through an online platform.

By preference, the workshop is best suited to an in-class mode of delivery, as this allows teachers to have a clearer sense of comfort levels and responses. This form of delivery also promotes more face-to-face discussion between peers.

In terms of sustainability, the scalability of the workshop depends on having teachers trained to deliver it. The piloting of training with teachers was positive. Those teachers

who delivered the workshop felt well-supported and found it to be effective and highly worthwhile as a strategy for consent education. The workshop manual and PowerPoint resources provided a clear scaffolding and support for the delivery. The Active* Consent programme has a range of training and professional development options that teachers can access. These range from half-day training on the workshop through to a full 10-ECTS professional development module on consent validated through NUI Galway.

It is important that consent education is part of a holistic approach to sexual health education, and moreover that it contributes to a whole-of-school strategy toward culture change. It is an important ideal that not only should young people be supported to be more open in consent communication, but that teachers, parents or guardians should also be more open in communicating about consent with young people.

The achievement of this goal involves having the knowledge and skills to do so, and the prompt provided by the introduction of a research-based consent education programme at school level was described as helpful by parents and guardians who took part in the awareness-raising seminar. The seminar was offered online as part of the workshop piloting process, and showed:

- A high degree of support from the families for consent education to take place in the schools.
- Satisfaction with the seminar as a strategy to keep them informed about school developments as well as to enhance parental knowledge of the topic.
- A personal connection made between the workshop taking place and the intention to speak with teenage children at home about the topic of consent.

Overall, the results of the schools consent workshop pilot were highly encouraging. The strategy used demonstrated the advantage of taking a positive and holistic approach to support the school community to engage with research-based consent programming.

The Active* Consent schools workshop, awareness and training resources are now available for schools to engage with for the new academic year 2021-22. The schools programme also includes two further resources which will become available in Autumn 2021 and at the beginning of 2022. Both of these are based on an extensive research base as well.

The theatrical film on consent for teenagers will be available as a resource that builds on the learning achieved through the consent workshop. *How I Learned About Consent* draws on the findings from the Active* Consent schools survey and workshop piloting, as well as having an independent base of research derived from rolling out a drama-based approach to consent education with college students.

The eLearning resource *Sex on Our Screens* is being piloted from September 2021 and will be available from the start of 2022. The final resource content and associated teaching / classroom materials will be informed by the piloting process, while the resource itself is based on a number of research studies with young adults and parents. This research identified how pornography impacts on learning about sex and consent. It also explored needs and preferences for information, education, and skills for critical thinking and communication about the sexual media that young people tend to be exposed to from adolescence onwards.

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