

Understanding and Raising Awareness on Sexual Consent



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An exploratory review

KEY FINDINGS

Sexual consent can be conceptualized in different ways, but is best seen as a process and differentiated from notion of wantedness.

While explicit affirmative consent standards, which assert that nonconsent should be presumed until consent is actively communicated, appear to offer a theoretically ideal foundation for legislation and policy, they often do not align with real-life experiences of negotiating sexual consent. In practice, people frequently rely on non-verbal and behavioural cues, and verbal communication is not always present.

Alcohol is a significant factor, as nonconsensual sex often happens when at least one of the persons involved is intoxicated. Additionally, power dynamics and sexual scripts – often embedded in normative heterosexuality and masculinity – strongly influence individuals' behavior in sexual interactions. Media also play an important role in this sexual socialisation.

There is little scientific evidence on the effectiveness of sexual consent educational interventions or awareness raising campaigns. However, existing insights suggest that short, one-off interventions are generally ineffective, and that the target group should be closely involved in the intervention development. Interventions should address the nuanced complexities of sexual consent.

Overriding non-consent constitutes sexual violence, but the absence of consent is not the root cause of sexual violence. Therefore, while sexual consent is necessary, it is not sufficient to prevent sexual violence. Transformative education must go beyond sexual consent. Integrating sexual consent education into comprehensive sexuality education – that incorporates nuance and contextuality, addresses gender norms and sexual culture, educates on alcohol use and includes critical media education – holds the potential to shift the broader sexual culture and reduce sexual violence.

Introduction

Both in academic research and in legislative frameworks across various regions worldwide, there is growing interest in and support for consent-based definitions of sexual violence. However, sexual consent can be conceptualized in different ways, and a nuanced understanding is crucial to fully grasp the implications of consent-based sexual violence legislation and to develop initiatives for sexual consent education strategies. The complexity of understanding sexual consent can be illustrated by a recent high-profile court case in Belgium, where a gynaecology student was convicted for rape but exempted from both a sentence as well as a criminal record. This sparked great public outrage, which resulted in the public release of the court's ruling. From this document, it became apparent that the victim had both verbally and physically signalled willingness to engage in sexual contact, but did so while being severely intoxicated, or incapacitated, due to alcohol use. Given that Belgian sexual criminal law states that 'consent must be given by a person who is capable of doing so, voluntarily, with full knowledge', individuals who are incapacitated are not seen as capable of giving consent, even when consent is (verbally) expressed.

In the first chapter, several interpretations of sexual consent will be discussed from a scientific perspective, along with the differentiation of other concepts that are sometimes confused with sexual consent, and factors which influence the negotiation of sexual consent. A second chapter will zoom in on possible strategies to raise awareness and increase knowledge on sexual consent.

Disclaimer: This document is not an exhaustive literature review of the current state of the art regarding sexual consent research. Instead, it provides a brief overview of literature and guidance on how policymakers can best understand consent, and highlights examples of evidence-based consent education and awareness raising initiatives. The briefing was developed in the framework of the workshop 'Consent-based rape legislation in the EU' organised by the Policy Department for Citizens, Equality and Culture at the request of the FEMM Committee (19 May 2025).

I. Understanding sexual consent

Three conceptualizations, two dimensions

Empirical research by Meuhlenhard et al (2016) identified three main ways of defining sexual consent. First, consent can be conceptualized as an **internal state of willingness**. Since internal states are not directly observable, this understanding offers little foundation for developing legislation or policies. Alternatively, consent can be viewed behaviourally, such as through an explicit act of agreeing to something — often referred to as **explicit consent**. This interpretation closely mirrors the legal concept of *express consent*, which involves permission given directly, either verbally or in writing. Yet, in most sexual encounters, consent is not communicated that explicitly, but rather inferred from indirect cues or signals. **Implied or inferred consent**, understood as behavior from which an observer interprets another person's willingness, is the third and most common form of consent in real-life sexual situations.

Alternatively, consent can be conceptualized along two dimensions: verbal versus non-verbal and direct versus indirect (Hall, 1998). Research with college populations shows that most individuals use indirect forms of communication to express (non)consent. Importantly, patterns of consent expression differ by gender. Cisgender men tend to signal consent through indirect non-verbal cues, such as kissing or touching, whereas cisgender women are more likely to use indirect verbal cues, such as referencing condom use. These patterns may reflect broader social and cultural norms that portray women as sexual gatekeepers and men as sexual initiators (Jozkowski, 2013; Jozkowski, 2017; Satinski, 2014). Notably, the influence of these expectations on consent communication among people with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities remains underexplored in empirical research.

The preponderance of research on consent communication focuses on college students and adolescents, and those studies point to a disconnect between how sexual consent is theoretically understood versus how it is communicated in practice. When asked to define consent, individuals typically refer to explicit models, emphasizing clear verbal affirmations such as saying 'yes' or 'no'. Yet, when recounting personal experiences or evaluating hypothetical scenarios, they often rely on nonverbal and indirect signals—aligning more closely with the notion of inferred consent (Holmström, 2020). In fact, existing research consistently shows that consent is more frequently communicated through nonverbal and indirect means than through clear verbal exchanges (Fenner, 2017). Reflecting this trend, recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the behavioural dynamics of consent communication, framing it as a 'negotiation of sexual expectations' (Beres, 2014). This perspective highlights consent as a socially shaped and context-dependent process, rather than a static or universally defined act—contrasting with legal or lay interpretations that often associate consent with specific and universal overt behaviours like verbally saying 'yes'.

Thus, while explicit **affirmative consent standards**, which assert that nonconsent should be presumed until consent is actively communicated, — meaning that silence or lack of resistance cannot be interpreted as consent — appear to offer a theoretically ideal foundation for legislation and policy, they seem incompatible with the experiences of negotiating sexual consent, where non-verbal and behavioural cues are often relied upon, and verbal communication is not always present (Beres, 2014; O'Connor, 2024).

The complexity of sexual consent

When sexual consent is discussed within general society, often little attention is given to the complexity of how consent is usually experienced. For instance, research has shown that people frequently experience ambivalent emotions during sexual situations, and that opposing motives might simultaneously be present, which might complicate interpretations of consent. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that consent is best conceptualized as a process rather than a one-time, binary 'yes or no'- decision. Yet, people often refer

to such single instances of verbal communication when asked how consent should be derived in sexual situations.

Differentiating consent from wantedness

Wanting and consenting are often seen as overlapping terms that are expected to be present simultaneously. However, research has shown that reality is more complex, and that it is important to pay attention to a 'discourse of ambivalence' in sexual encounters, meaning that people may want and not want sexual contact at the same time, for a variety of reasons (Meuhlenhard, 2005). For example, people appear to distinguish between the sexual activity and its consequences, wanting the former but not the latter, especially in casual sex encounters. Given that the wantedness of sex appears to be ambivalent in many situations, gauging wantedness as a measure of consent is problematic, and it is important to distinguish between the two concepts. This can be readily exemplified by the common situation in which an individual consents to and engages in sexual activity even though they do not genuinely want it, typically to meet the expectations or desires of a partner, maintain intimacy, or avoid conflict (Benoit, 2022). Hence, consensual sex may not always be wanted. In contrast, sex may sometimes be wanted, but not consented to. For example, someone might feel sexual attraction to a person while being in a monogamous relationship, and feeling that they want to have sex with this third person, without consenting to it, because they do not want to cross relational boundaries (Benoit, 2022).

In summary, **equating wantedness and consent is problematic because wanting sex is not dichotomous, but rather ambivalent**. It is important that policymakers are aware of this differentiation, and that sexual violence is not judged based on the presence or absence of an indication of wantedness, but rather on the basis of consent. This requires particular attention to language and contextual understanding in the development of policy and legislation.

Sexual consent as a process

While consent is often simplified and understood as a single, gatekeeping event, research indicates that most people view consent as a process (O'Connor, 2024; Gray, 2015; Glace, 2021). People often begin sexual activity tentatively, where they make decisions as the encounter unfolds, often contingent on how they are feeling about what has happened to that point (Hall, 1998). Conceptualizing consent as a process rather than as a one-time, binary decision, has important implications regarding definitions of sexual violence. For example, it is quite common for nonconsensual sexual activity to occur after an individual did consent to other, often less intimate, sexual activities, or after someone consented to a date (Meuhlenhard, 2017). Second, the idea of consent as a process implies that sexual consent can be revoked at any given time, also after any form of sexual activity has already started. Hence, if an individual continues to engage in sexual contact after the other party expressed revocation of consent, this should thus be understood as sexual violence, given that this represents a violation of bodily autonomy (Meuhlenhard, 2017). In light of this **process definition of consent**, it is important to be aware of the risk that affirmative consent campaigns may unintentionally appear to convey a different idea. Specifically, 'yes means yes' campaigns might reinforce the idea that once the word 'yes' is uttered once, all subsequent sexual contact is consensual by definition. This caveat underscores the importance of nuanced consent awareness campaigns in order to avoid reinforcing implicit misconceptions about consent.

Important factors influencing sexual consent

As communication during sexual encounters is highly dependent on the social context in which such an encounter occurs (e.g. whether it involves people in a steady relationship or a looser, more casual encounter), many factors might influence how consent is communicated and interpreted. However, in

general, three factors seem to be of particular importance when it comes to negotiating consent, namely gendered sexual scripts, alcohol intoxication and related expectations, and power dynamics.

Gendered sexual scripts

Sexual scripts are generalized mental representations of sexual interactions that contain individuals' knowledge of the characteristic features of sexual encounters (Simon, 1986). They provide a reference frame for how one should understand and act in sexual situations (Schuster, 2022), both on an individual as on a cultural level. For heterosexual interactions, there are two dominant 'traditional' sexual scripts; the first one implies that a man should always initiate sexual contact and is tasked with sexual pursuit, while the second one implies woman is tasked with explicitly signalling non-consent if she does not want to engage in the sexual contact, or in other words, that women need to act as gatekeepers. These scripts are perpetuated extensively through media (Rodgers, 2023).

Based on such scripts, men and women seem to use different consent negotiation strategies, where women are more likely to use verbal and explicit approaches whereas men tend to assume consent is granted until a partner indicates otherwise (Humpreys, 2007). Furthermore, people hold context-specific sexual scripts for different situations, but these are also gendered and have distinct implications for what is expected from men and women regarding the communication of consent. A Swedish qualitative study using focus groups with young adults, for example, demonstrated that most young adults view 'going home with somebody after a night out' as a sign of sexual consent on both parts. However, the respondents largely focused on the woman's behavior and described women as being responsible for consent communication preceding a possible sexual encounter in these situations (Fenner, 2017). Importantly, research demonstrates that these traditional sexual scripts put pressure on people to act accordingly, and create stress when one attempts to resist behaving in a script-like manner, especially in casual sex encounters. This might lead men to shift their focus to themselves, more specifically towards their performance and dominance rather than on consent-related cues that are signalled by a (casual) sex partner. It is crucial to raise awareness among both men and women about sexual scripts and societal expectations that influence both themselves and their sexual partners in sexual interactions, so that these patterns can be more readily recognized and subsequently discussed.

The role of alcohol

A large proportion of nonconsensual sexual encounters take place when either one or both parties are under the influence of alcohol (Abbey, 2022). This complicates our understanding of consent, as consent refers to a person's freely given and conscious communication of their willingness to engage in sexual behaviours, and the effects of alcohol might impair both free will and consciousness. For example, research has shown that young adults who frequently engage in binge drinking are prone to relying on 'no response signals' rather than on present cues of (non)consent (Marcantonio, 2021). No response signals refer to situations in which a person is not actively saying or doing anything to suggest interest or agreement to engage in sexual behavior, but is also not resisting, saying no, or seeming uncomfortable with sexual behavior. Furthermore, **Alcohol Myopia Theory** states that when intoxicated, people tend to focus on stimuli that are salient to their desires (such as sexual desire), while disregarding signals that are incongruent with those desires (Steele, 1990). Thus, after having consumed alcohol, people may be more inclined to focus on cues that suggest someone may be sexually interested and could be consenting to sex rather than on indicators of discomfort or refusal. Importantly, research has demonstrated that a woman who drinks alcohol is perceived as more willing to engage in sex than a woman who does not (Abbey, 1998; Abbey, 2011). Recent research has added to this, illustrating that young people perceive socializing with peers while consuming alcohol as indicative of interest in sexual behavior, or in other words, as an 'initial consent' cue. Sequentially, leaving an alcohol-intensive environment (such as a bar or a party) with someone to a private location, also signals consent to sexual interactions (Jozkowski, 2025). It is essential for policymakers to recognize that,

from a certain age onward, consent education is best integrated with education on alcohol, given the strong interconnection between alcohol use and both consensual and nonconsensual sexual encounters.

Power dynamics and sexual consent

Usually, (legal) definitions of consent emphasize **voluntariness**, or the idea that one must be able to provide consent free of coercion, and that one has the freedom and the capacity to make an informed decision regarding sexual contact (Featherstone, 2024). Power inequalities may constrain this capacity and freedom. This might be readily apparent in cases when there is a clear gap in authority between two people, such as in professional contexts, but research also indicates the importance of considering the influence of more subtle power dynamics. For example, recent research with young people (age 13 – 23) has illustrated that not only gender and age are experienced as possible factors constraining their freedom to express (non)consent, but also ‘popularity’ or social status, and that these influences are not mutually exclusive. For example, for young people, dating older people often leads to a higher social ‘standing’, but older partners often have more access to opportunities to meet other people, and consequently, communicating nonconsent might pose a risk to breach their relationship, pressuring their autonomous decision-making regarding sexual interactions (Jones, 2022).

Furthermore, power dynamics do not only play a role in sexual interactions between two people who differ in a particular (hierarchical) position, such as age, social or professional status. Also in sexual interactions between people who apparently do not differ so much in terms of their ‘power position’, certain internalized social norms are relevant. Such internalized norms often reflect what is deemed ‘good behavior’ in society, and people police and regulate themselves according to such standards (Linander, 2021). For instance, according to social norms regarding ideal monogamous relationships, unbalanced needs are considered as something that should be taken care of within the context of the relationship, so that sexual needs of a partner need to be met by the other partners in order to see one’s relationship as well-functioning and good. As such, internalized ‘disciplinary’ forms of power might influence our subjective freedom to comfortably express (non)consent (Linander, 2021). Considering power dynamics reinforces the importance of approaching consent communication and negotiation with nuance and sensitivity, preferably with attention to the interpersonal relationships between people across different intersections.

II. Educating and Raising Awareness on Sexual Consent

This chapter focuses on strategies to educate on and raise awareness about sexual consent. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the role of the media in learning about sexual consent. Subsequently, an overview of different types of sexual consent education and awareness raising interventions is provided, including lessons learnt from these initiatives. Finally, we present Comprehensive Sexuality Education as a vehicle for sexual consent education and awareness raising.

Sexual consent socialisation through media.

When talking about educating and raising awareness on sexual consent, it is important to acknowledge the role of the media. This includes movies, tv-series and social media, but also online sexual content such as pornography, and interactions with AI. The (implicit) messages given through these channels socialise people into sexual scripts, including on sexual consent, and have an important impact on how people think about and act in sexual interactions.

Jozkowski et al (2019) analysed sexual consent and refusal communication, including contextual factors that influence this communication, in 50 mainstream **films** from 2013. The vast majority of the consent cues were nonverbal or implicit, with nearly 75% of the consent cues coded as nonverbal. The most frequently depicted refusal cues, on the other hand, were explicit verbal and implicit nonverbal. The authors conclude that these depictions may teach young adults nonverbal consent communication as an expected standard. This is confirmed by studies from Aubrey et al (2023) and Alexopoulos (2023) who studied the exposure to televised verbal sexual consent and found a positive impact on sexual consent attitudes and intentions. Stepien (2023) highlights the contributions media can have to sexual consent awareness raising. TV-series as Normal People and Sex Education that normalize youth sexuality and take a sex-positive approach, both offer examples of communicating affirmative verbal sexual consent, and have the potential to open debate on consent and improve perceived self-efficacy.

Analysing segments of best-selling **pornographic films** from 2015, Willis et al (2020) found that these films supported sexual scripts in which explicit verbal consent is not natural, women are indirect and men are direct, sex can happen without ongoing communication, lower-order behaviours do not need explicit consent, and people receiving sexual behaviours can consent by doing nothing. The impact of such scripts was demonstrated by Marques et al (2024) in a cross-sectional survey among Portuguese adults (average age 26 years) who report that not watching pornography is associated with more positive attitudes towards sexual consent and watching pornography every day is associated with feeling more uncomfortable asking or giving sexual consent.

In the past few years, **large language models** have become increasingly mainstream for internet searches, and also for advice on sexuality. Several studies tested responses from AI on questions related to sexual consent. For example, Marcantonio et al (2023) found that AI provided comprehensive responses that discussed key features of consent and mirror common sexual health education messages, and that the responses used language reflective of sympathy toward potential assault victims.

Most films, tv-series and pornographic films share the implicit messages that sexual consent is nonverbal and implicit. This means that interventions, programmes and campaigns aiming to educate and raise awareness on explicit and verbal sexual consent are in competition with these messages. At the same time, there are several positive deviant examples and media may offer interesting opportunities for interventions.

Interventions and campaigns to learn about and raise awareness on sexual consent

Sexual consent education and awareness raising can also be done through specific interventions, programmes and campaigns. These can take place in **different settings** and take **different forms**.

In their narrative review, Burton et al (2023) analyse 18 peer-reviewed articles on programmes in **educational settings** for young people aged 15–29 years that aim to teach sexual consent. Almost all were studies done in the USA (16) and in university settings (15). Burton et al identified four types of interventions: in-person workshops (13), poster campaigns (3), a video game (1) and a whole school activity (1). Furthermore, they noted that the strategy most taken in these interventions was a risk-behaviour approach that focuses on the risks and potential negative impacts of sexual activity and emphasizing personal responsibility, with a particular focus on the impact of alcohol on sexual consent, while several interventions also started from a more positive perspective outlining sexual consent within the context of healthy and respectful relationships, amongst others also defining consent as affirmative. The authors further note that only few programmes focused on young men or diverse communities or on larger social systems shaping understandings and experiences of sex and consent. Their review did not report on the effectiveness of the included studies.

While Burton et al focused on the educational setting, also other settings can be used for sexual consent awareness raising. Miller (2017) points to the role of **health care providers** to offer education and guidance to adolescent patients on sexual consent and also the American Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine takes the position that health care clinicians have the responsibility to 'discuss sexual consent as an integral component of healthy sexual relationships' and to 'ensure that all adolescents, young adults, and the general public fully comprehend, value, and implement sexual consent principles'. No effectiveness studies for this approach were found.

Finally, multiple organisations and governments have invested in organising **regional or national campaigns** to raise awareness on sexual consent. Examples are provided in Annex 2. Cañaveras et al (2024) performed a content analysis of 23 international and national sexual consent awareness campaigns. They found that many campaigns were nuanced and included affirmative consent, informed consent, consent as reversible, emphasizing verbal consent. However, they also reported that several evidence-based insights were not/less included in the campaigns, in particular the power of communicative acts exerted by the broader environment and peer groups. Evidence on the effectiveness of awareness raising campaigns is very scarce.

Evidence on **effectiveness of sexual consent education and awareness raising campaigns** is mixed, ranging from no changes (Lee, 2024) to some effectiveness on several outcomes (Hovick, 2019; Bonar, 2018).

It is important to note that all studies reporting on effectiveness of sexual consent education describe substantial methodological limitations, including sub-optimal evaluation designs (Hill, 2019; Menning, 2014; Ortiz, 2018; Thomas, 2016), lack of a control group (Baldwin-White, 2019; Bonar, 2018; Erbe, 2016), use of cross-sectional data (Hovick, 2019; Menning, 2014; Ortiz, 2018; Lee, 2024), and use of unvalidated measurement tools (Erbe, 2016; Heard, 2023; Lee, 2024). Furthermore, studies report small sample sizes (Baldwin-White, 2019; Erbe, 2016; Hill, 2019; Jozkowski, 2015; Heard, 2023; Orchowski, 2023) reducing generalisability and opportunities for sub-group analyses. In most studies, the evaluation is done immediately after the intervention, limiting insights on long-term impact (Lafrance, 2012; Friel, 2025).

These methodological challenges make it impossible to draw general conclusions on the effectiveness of sexual consent education and awareness raising. Therefore, instead of focusing on effectiveness, we look at what authors considered **strengths and weaknesses of sexual consent education and awareness raising activities**.

Firstly, multiple authors make it clear that **short one-off interventions are insufficient** and the short-timeframe of interventions is often referred to as a reason for limited effectiveness (Lee, 202; Bonar, 2018; Erbe, 2016; Hill, 2019; Thomas, 2016; Heard, 2023) and they recommend multiple sessions with multiple goals (Baldwin-White, 2019), a succession of messages working together over time (Jozkowski, 2015), exposure to multiple components multiple times (Ortiz, 2018), and integration with other activities and programmes for wider uptake (Hill, 2019; Hovick, 2019).

Secondly, **involvement of the target group** was identified as an important factor for success. Examples include the digital sexual consent intervention for adolescents (US) which was developed with feedback from and pre-tested by young people, including sexual and gender minority youth (Javidi, 202), an online game developed through a participatory design process; students, educators, and subject matter experts (Jozkowski, 2015) and a two-year participatory action research project that resulted in a research-based theatre intervention (Whittington, 2020). Linked to this, authors emphasize the importance of baseline research to understand the baseline knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to sexual consent of the target population (Lee, 2024; Ortiz, 2018), including the cultural context (Baker, 2014). At the same time, several authors acknowledged that their intervention may have excluded specific groups, such as non-binary youth, bisexual and pansexual adolescents (Javidi, 2023; Thomas, 2016).

Thirdly, authors presented several recommendations related to **intervention/campaign content**. A recurring recommendation was to address the complexity of sexual consent in interventions and campaigns, e.g. by understanding sexual consent as a continuum (Whittington, 2019), deconstructing rape culture (Jozkowski, 2015), addressing sociocultural factors (Ortiz, 2018), and including complex aspects as gender roles, power relations, rape myths (Javidi, 2023). Furthermore, focusing on students' own values, to enhance intrinsic motivation (Bonar, 2018), promoting sexual pleasure alongside prevention (Hovick, 2019; Friel, 2025), and focusing on what to do versus what not to do (Thomas, 2016) were recommended as promising strategies. Finally, several authors noted a lack of emphasis on skills building and behaviour change (Lee, 2024).

Finally, there is **little consensus related to the best format** in which to deliver sexual consent education and awareness raising. Several formats were presented as promising, including online games (Jozkowski, 2015), online modules (Heard, 2023), positive colourful banners (Thomas, 2015), and theatre (Friel, 2025).

An important note: for the above section, scientific literature on interventions focusing specifically on sexual consent was included. It is likely that there are many interventions with a more general focus on preventing sexual violence, that also address sexual consent as part of the intervention. These studies were not taken into account.

Comprehensive sexuality education

An intervention that merits specific attention when speaking about educating about sexual consent, is Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). Making safe and healthy choices about sexuality is one of the main objectives of CSE. Therefore, it seems logical that the topic of sexual consent is integrated in CSE programmes. The **main benefits** of integrating sexual consent in CSE are the early start with age-appropriate information and the continued repetition of messages with increasing depth throughout the school career. Furthermore, when CSE is integrated in the school curriculum, the messages on sexual consent reach all children and young people.

Michielsen and Ivanova (2022) compiled evidence on the **effectiveness of CSE**, which shows that CSE contributes to several outcomes related sexual consent, including:

- Improved understanding, respect for and application of consent
- Improved disclosure and reporting skills and behaviour related to sexual violence

- Decreased acceptance of sexual violence
- Increased knowledge of what to do if a person experiences intimate partner violence
- Improved understanding of the causes and consequences of violence
- Improved communication skills related to relationships and sexuality
- Reduced sexual violence and abuse.

Sexual consent is integrated in the main international guidelines for sexuality education to different degrees. The **International Guidelines on Sexuality Education** (ITGSE) from the United Nations were first published in 2008 and substantially updated in 2018. In the latest version, sexual consent takes up an important place. It is noted as a 'Characteristics of effective curriculum development' (p. 91):

'Education about consent is essential for building healthy and respectful relationships, encouraging good sexual health and protecting potentially vulnerable people from harm. Teaching young people to acknowledge and respect other people's personal boundaries can help create a society where no one feels ashamed to willingly engage in sexual activity, or to reject it or revoke consent at any point (IPPF, 2015b). Quality education on consent should strive to support young people in assessing risks and protecting themselves from situations that may lead to unwanted sexual practices, and should help them develop the knowledge and confidence to seek positive relationships with other individuals.'

The ITGSE presents a curriculum of eight key concepts which are equally important, mutually reinforcing and intended to be taught alongside one another. Sexual consent is one of the three sub-topics in key concept 4 'Violence and Staying Safe' (see Annex 1 – Figure 1). It includes a developmentally-appropriate progress in learning objectives. Sexual consent education initially focuses on identifying unwanted sexual attention and help-seeking (5-12 years). For older adolescents, there is a stronger focus on sexual consent itself. Furthermore, it combines knowledge, attitudes and skills: understanding the concept of consent (including factors that can influence acknowledging or giving sexual consent, and gender differences in sexual consent), attitudes towards sexual consent (including acknowledging the importance of sexual consent and considering consensual sexual behaviour as an important part of healthy sexual relationships) and actual skills related to consent (including the ability to give and refuse consent, and the ability to acknowledge someone else's consent or lack of consent). Finally, it equally emphasises giving/refusing and acknowledging sexual consent.

The **European Standards for Sexuality Education** ('the Standards') were developed by the European Expert Group for Sexuality Education and published by the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe in 2010. The Standards are currently under revision. The Standards – in a sidenote on p. 19 – introduce the concept of 'intimate citizenship', which relates to sexual rights from a social science perspective.

'Researchers in social science and sexual studies are currently calling for the establishment of moral negotiation as a valid sexual morality for today. The essence of this morality is that issues should be negotiated in a spirit of mutual consent by mature participants who are equal in status, rights and power. One important precondition for this is that the participants should develop a common understanding of the concept of "consent" and become aware of the consequences of their actions – particularly in the context of relationship behaviour and sexual behaviour.'

While this puts sexual consent central in sexual relationships, the concept is less explicitly present in the content of sexuality education as described in the Standards. We extracted the topics that can be linked to sexual consent (see Annex 1 – Figure 2). The Standards include a number of competencies that are important in order to learn, give and recognize sexual consent. For example, at a young age, the focus is on being able to say 'yes' and 'no', express boundaries, understand acceptable touches and respect the 'yes' and 'no' of others. In older age groups, the focus lies on setting boundaries, refusing sexual experiences and countering

sexual harassment ('Refuse unwanted/unpleasant/unsafe sexual experiences'). Less is explicitly mentioned on acknowledging and respecting consent from others unless in general terms ('Respect others') until the age group 15+ ('Be able to express respectfully one's own wishes and boundaries and take into account those of others').

It is important to note two **key challenges** regarding using CSE as a strategy to learn about sexual consent. First, in practice, sexuality education often focuses only or largely on biological aspects and cannot be considered comprehensive. In their study in 25 European countries, Ketting and Ivanova (2021) found that only in nine countries the sexuality education that was offered could be considered comprehensive. Second, where has been continuous support for CSE in the past three decades from the highest political levels, including from European institutions (e.g. the Lanzarote Convention from 2010 or the Recommendation CM/Rec (2019) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on preventing and combating sexism from 2019) – especially because of its potential to prevent violence and abuse (Michielsen, 2022) –, there is also strong opposition against CSE. Targeted and organized opposition against specific topics – such as sexual and gender diversity and abortion – has been increasingly growing in the past two decades. Furthermore, through the spread misinformation, this opposition is spreading in the general population (Kuhar, 2017; Paternotte, 2018; Kovats, 2015).

Box 1. Raising the bar

This Chapter discussed educating and raising awareness about sexual consent. It is important to take a step back and be explicit about what sexual consent education and awareness raising aims to achieve, i.e. to prevent sexual violence. Therefore, the underlying assumption is that educating people about sexual consent contributes to the prevention of sexual violence. However, there is little evidence that this is the case (Beres, 2018; Jeffrey, 2022). As pointed out in part 1 of the briefing, consensual sex is not necessarily wanted. Nor is it automatically pleasurable and free from coercion (Jeffrey, 2022).

Risk factors that influence both sexual consent and sexual violence are multiple and diverse, and include, amongst others, rape myths attitudes, sexual dysfunction, low self-esteem and personality traits such as impulsivity. Critically important are norms on heterosexuality and masculinity that facilitate sexual violence: *'The central issue or defining feature of sexual violence is not a lack of consent but gendered power relations and, in the case of men's sexual violence against women, men's entitlement, superordination, and denial of women's desires and ability to meaningfully co-determine the conditions and quality of their sexual relations and experiences.'* (Jeffrey, 2022).

Overriding non-consent constitutes sexual violence, but the absence of consent is not the root cause of sexual violence. Therefore, sexual consent is necessary, but not sufficient to prevent sexual violence. As argued by Beres (2018): *'[...] a standard of sexual consent too low to operate as sexual violence prevention. Sexual consent is a concept conceived in law to distinguish criminally negligent behaviour from 'ok' behaviour that is deemed acceptable by law. There are still many harms created through consensual sex. [...] Transformative education should raise the bar well above a standard of consent to focus on challenging heteronormative constructions of masculinity and femininity that create the cultural scaffolding of rape.'*

Recommendations

Embrace the complexity of sexual consent. Sexual consent is not a simple, one-time agreement, but a dynamic, ongoing process in which also contextual factors (e.g. relationship factors, alcohol context, power dynamics) need to be considered. Furthermore, consent cannot be equated with wantedness. Policies, legislation and educational programmes should take this complexity and distinction into account.

Comprehensive education on sexual consent. Comprehensive and early education on sexual consent is a long-term strategy that can contribute to redesigning sexual culture. Education on sexual consent should begin early in childhood and continue throughout a child's entire school career. If the aim is to prevent sexual violence, educational and awareness raising programmes need to go beyond sexual consent, be embedded in larger sexuality education programmes, and include other factors driving sexual violence, such as gender norms, and normative heterosexuality and masculinity. As simplistic affirmative consent campaigns might unintentionally reinforce certain misconceptions about consent, for example the idea of consent as a one-time decision, incorporating nuance and contextuality in consent education and campaigns is crucial. Since nonconsensual sex often happens when at least one of the people involved is intoxicated by alcohol, from a certain age, consent education is best integrated with education on alcohol. Additionally, critical media literacy is essential to support young people in navigating the complex messages about sexual consent they encounter in digital and social media environments.

Expand and deepen research. There is a pressing need for more inclusive and nuanced research on sexual consent. This includes:

- As most research is focused on heterosexual student populations, there is need to understand sexual consent across diverse age groups (such as older adults), relationship contexts (like long-term partnerships), sexual orientations, gender identities, and perpetrator profiles
- In the current evidence base regarding conceptual studies on sexual consent, qualitative research is heavily represented. This is consistent with the complex and nuanced nature of how we understand and communicate consent. However, given that qualitative studies often rely on small sample sizes and that the goal of these studies is to gain a deep understanding of a complex phenomenon rather than to generalize findings, conclusions can only be drawn tentatively and cautiously. Future research could contribute to the current evidence base by testing valuable insights from existing qualitative work for generalizability, and quantify those findings through quantitative studies on larger samples.
- Innovative context-sensitive evaluation frameworks need to be developed in order to learn from existing interventions and programmes.
- Fundamental research into sexual behavior and decision-making is essential to inform effective prevention strategies.
- New thinking frameworks, such as conceptualizing sexual consent as a complex adaptive system, could provide innovative insights.

Annexes

Annex 1: Sexual Consent in international sexuality education guidelines

Figure 1: Sexual Consent in the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education

4.2 Consent, Privacy and Bodily Integrity	
Learning objectives (5-8 years) Key idea: Everyone has the right to decide who can touch their body, where, and in what way Learners will be able to: - describe the meaning of 'body rights' (knowledge); - identify which parts of the body are private (knowledge); - recognize that everyone has 'body rights' (attitudinal); - demonstrate how to respond if someone is touching them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable (e.g. say 'no', go away', and talk to a trusted adult) (skill); - identify and describe how they would talk to a parent/guardian or trusted adult if they are feeling uncomfortable about being touched (skill).	Learning objectives (9-12 years) Key idea: It is important to understand what unwanted sexual attention is and the need for privacy when growing up Learners will be able to: - explain that, during puberty, privacy about one's body and private space become more important for both boys and girls, particularly access to toilets and water for girls (knowledge); - define unwanted sexual attention (knowledge); - recognize that unwanted sexual attention towards both boys and girls is a violation of privacy and the right to decide about one's own body (attitudinal); - communicate assertively to maintain privacy and counter unwanted sexual attention (skill).
Learning objectives (12-15 years) Key idea: Everyone has the right to privacy and bodily integrity Learners will be able to: - describe what is meant by the right to privacy and bodily integrity (knowledge); - acknowledge that everyone has the right to privacy and bodily integrity (attitudinal); - express how they feel about their right to privacy and bodily integrity (skill). Key idea: Everyone has the right to be in control of what they will and will not do sexually, and should actively communicate and recognize consent from their partners Learners will be able to: - define consent and explain its implications for sexual decision-making (knowledge); - acknowledge the importance of giving and perceiving sexual consent (attitudinal); - express consent and not giving consent in relation to their personal boundaries regarding sexual behaviour (skill).	Learning objectives (15-18+ years) Key idea: Consent is critical for healthy, pleasurable and consensual sexual behaviour with a partner Learners will be able to: - analyze the benefits of giving and refusing sexual consent and acknowledging someone else's sexual consent or lack of consent (knowledge); - compare and contrast how men's and women's bodies are treated differently and the double standards of sexual behaviour that can affect consensual sexual behaviour (knowledge); - recognize that consensual sexual behaviour is an important part of a healthy sexual relationship (attitudinal); - demonstrate ways to communicate giving and refusing consent and to recognize consent or lack of consent (skill). Key idea: It is important to be aware of factors that can impact the ability to acknowledge or give consent Learners will be able to: - discuss what it means to listen for, acknowledge and act, or not act, on sexual consent (knowledge); - compare and contrast examples of situations where consent is and is not acknowledged or given (knowledge); - analyze factors (e.g. alcohol and other substances, GBV, poverty, power dynamics) that can affect the ability to acknowledge or give consent (knowledge); - recognize that it is important to avoid factors that can impair sexual consent (attitudinal); - demonstrate ability to give and refuse consent (skill); - demonstrate ability to acknowledge someone else's consent or lack of consent (skill).

Source: UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women & WHO, 'International technical guidance on sexuality education. An evidence-informed approach', UNESCO, Paris, 2018.

Figure 2: Sexual Consent related content in the European Standards for Sexuality Education

Age	Information	Skills	Attitudes
0-4 years	"Yes" and "No" feelings (<i>emotions</i>) Good and bad experiences of your body. What feels good? (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) If the experience/feeling is not good, you do not always have to comply (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) The right to be safe and protected (<i>sexuality and rights</i>)	Express needs and wishes (<i>the human body and human development</i>) Express own needs, wishes and boundaries (<i>sexuality</i>) Say yes/no (<i>emotions</i>) Apply the three-step principle (say no, go away, talk to somebody you trust) (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) Say "Yes" and "No" (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) Express needs and wishes (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) Know where you can touch (<i>social and cultural determinants of sexuality</i>) Talk about (un)pleasurable feelings in one's own body (<i>sexuality</i>)	Respect for others (<i>sexuality</i>) The attitude that their own experience and expression of emotions is right (<i>emotions</i>) The attitude "my body belongs to me" (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) Respect for their own and others' bodies (<i>social and cultural determinants of sexuality</i>) Acceptance of social rules about privacy and intimacy (<i>social and cultural determinants of sexuality</i>) Respect for "no" and "yes" from others (<i>social and cultural determinants of sexuality</i>)
4-6 years	Sexual feelings (closeness, enjoyment, excitement) as a part of all human feelings (these should be positive feelings; they should not include coercion or harm) (<i>sexuality</i>) Good and bad experiences of your body/what feels good? (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) If the experience/feeling is not good, you do not always have to comply (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) The right to be safe and protected (<i>sexuality and rights</i>)	The attitude that they have a choice (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) An awareness of risks (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) The attitude "My body belongs to me" (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) Respect for others (<i>sexuality</i>) Respect for their own and others' bodies (<i>social and cultural determinants of sexuality</i>)	Trust their instincts and apply the three-step model (say no, go away, talk to someone you trust) (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) Express needs and wishes (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) Express and communicate own emotions, wishes and needs (<i>emotions</i>)
6-9 years	Sexual violence and aggression (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) Abuse (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) The right to be safe and protected (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) Differences in individual needs for intimacy and privacy (<i>emotions</i>) Different kind of pleasant and unpleasant relationships (<i>relationships and lifestyles</i>) National laws and regulations (<i>age of consent</i>) (<i>sexuality and rights</i>)	An understanding of acceptable sex (mutually consensual, voluntary, equal, age-appropriate, context-appropriate and self-respecting) (<i>sexuality</i>) An awareness of risks (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) Respect for others (<i>relationships and lifestyles</i>) A sense of responsibility for one's own health and wellbeing (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) An awareness of choices and possibilities (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) Feelings of responsibility for oneself and others (<i>sexuality and rights</i>)	Express and communicate emotions, own wishes and needs (<i>emotions</i>) Communicate own expectations and needs within relationships (<i>relationships and lifestyles</i>) Respect for others (<i>sexuality</i>) Name own feelings adequately (<i>emotions</i>) Set boundaries (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) Trust their instinct and apply the three-step model (say no, go away, talk to someone you trust) (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>)
9-12 years	The prevalence and different types of sexual abuse, how to avoid it and where to get support (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>)	Refuse unwanted sexual experiences (<i>sexuality</i>) Express needs, wishes and boundaries and respect those of others (<i>emotions</i>) Take responsibility in relation to safe and pleasant sexual experiences for oneself and others (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) Express boundaries and wishes and to avoid unsafe or unwanted sexual experiences (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>) Act within these [sexual] rights and responsibilities (<i>sexuality and rights</i>)	An acceptance of sexual rights for oneself and others (<i>sexuality and rights</i>)
12-15 years	The prevalence and different types of sexual abuse, how to avoid it and where to get support (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>)	Refuse or stop unpleasant or unsafe sexual contact (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>)	A sense of responsibility regarding prevention of sexual abuse (<i>sexuality, health and well-being</i>)

	Different styles of communication (verbal and nonverbal) and how to improve them (<i>relationships and lifestyles</i>) Different kinds of pleasant and unpleasant relationships (<i>relationships and lifestyles</i>) National laws and regulations (age of consent) (<i>sexuality and rights</i>)	Acknowledge sexual rights for oneself and others (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) Make a conscious decision to have sexual experiences or not (<i>fertility and reproduction</i>) Develop skills in intimate communication and negotiation (<i>sexuality</i>) Enjoy sexuality in a respectful way (<i>sexuality</i>) Express needs, wishes and boundaries and respect those of others (<i>emotions</i>) Communicate own expectations and needs within relationships (<i>relationships and lifestyles</i>) Develop negotiation and communication skills in order to have safe and enjoyable sex (<i>sexuality, health and wellbeing</i>)	An acceptance of sexual rights for oneself and others (<i>sexuality and rights</i>) Acceptance, respect and understanding of diversity in sexuality and sexual orientation (sex should be mutually consensual, voluntary, equal, age-appropriate, context-appropriate and self-respecting) (<i>sexuality</i>)
15 years and up	Sexual violence (<i>sexuality, health and wellbeing</i>)	Be able to express respectfully one's own wishes and boundaries and take into account those of others (<i>sexuality</i>) Reflect on the power dimensions of sexuality (<i>sexuality</i>) Counter sexual harassment; self-defence skills (<i>sexuality, health and wellbeing</i>) Ask for help and support in case of problems (<i>sexuality, health and wellbeing</i>) Make a conscious decision to have sexual experiences or not (<i>fertility and reproduction</i>) Develop skills in intimate communication and negotiation (<i>sexuality</i>) Be able to express respectfully one's own wishes and boundaries and take into account those of others (<i>sexuality</i>)	

Source: Extracted from World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe & German Federal Centre for Health Promotion (BZgA), 'Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe: A Framework for Policy Makers, Education and Health Authorities and Specialists', BZgA, Köln, 2010.

Annex 2: Examples of sexual consent awareness campaigns from Europe and good practices

We searched for campaigns that aim to raise awareness on sexual consent among (large groups of) the general population. We will provide a few examples below, that are illustrative of the type of messaging and strategies used in large-scale campaigns.

- The [‘We-Consent’ Campaign](#) is a 3-year national campaign in Ireland, organized by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (DRCC). The campaign aims to ignite a national conversation about sexual consent. The campaign offers resources, toolkits, video’s and other information on a website. Furthermore, the campaign has social media presence, organizes workshops, and spreads posters. The campaign tracks progress through yearly cross-sectional surveys probing, amongst others, for understanding of and attitudes related to sexual consent. The year 1 monitoring reports improved understanding of sexual consent (47% of respondents reported a better understanding of consent compared to the previous year) and attitude shifts (48% indicated a more positive attitude towards consent). It is not possible to causality attribute these findings to the campaign.
- The [‘Sans Oui, c’est interdit’](#) (without a yes, it’s forbidden) runs in higher education in France. It fits within the national plan to combat sexist and sexual violence in higher education and research (2021-2025) and consists of 21 measures, including a national communication campaign on the concept of sexual consent. We could not find information on the outcomes and impact of the campaign.
- The [‘Is ‘t oké?’](#) (‘Is this OK?’) campaign from three Flemish (Belgium) organisations (Sensoa, vzw Zijn and Zij-Kant) ran in 2019. It used posters, social media clips with influencers, cartoon, a self-test to assess one’s own behavior, and actions targeting higher and secondary education levels. The aim is to prevent sexual transgressive behaviour. The campaign aims to sensitize about transgressive behaviour, improve sensitizes and improve openness to discuss the topic, as well as make people reflect on their own behaviour and the importance of consent. We could not find information on the outcomes and impact of the campaign.
- The [‘Ben je oké?’](#) (‘Are you OK?’) campaign of the Dutch expertise centre on sexuality Rutgers aims to open discussions on transgressive sexual behaviour. The campaign can be seen in nightlife, at events and festivals, at student associations, at companies, at colleges and universities and in many municipalities on the street. A toolkit informs about the most important measures to prevent unwanted sexual behavior. The campaign also focuses on bystander interventions. We could not find information on the outcomes and impact of the campaign.
- The [#JDWIDI](#) Campaign of Amnesty International in Wallonia (Belgium) puts forward 10 rules for sexual consent. This makes it the campaign with the most comprehensive messaging. Also for this campaign, we could not find information on the outcomes and impact of the campaign.

Interesting practices of sexual consent education

[Sensoa Flag System: a tool for assessing and talking about sexual \(transgressive\) behaviour \(Sensoa, s.d.\)](#)

The Flag system was developed by Sensoa, the Flemish expertise centre for sexual health. It helps professionals, working with children, young people or (vulnerable) adults, to encourage discussion on (transgressive) sexual behaviour, assess sexual behaviour more objectively and respond appropriately. Based on the assessment of six criteria, sexual behaviour is classified into four categories of severity,

denoted by different colour flags: a green flag resembles acceptable sexual behaviour, a yellow flag stands for moderately transgressive behaviour, a red flag indicates serious sexually transgressive behaviour and a black flag stands for very serious sexually transgressive behaviour. For each colour of flag, you are presented an appropriate response. For each situation, the following six criteria are assessed:

- Mutual consent: do all involved clearly agree and feel comfortable?
- Voluntary engagement: is there no pressure or coercion?
- Equality: are all involved equal?
- Level of development or functioning: does the behaviour fit a certain age or developmental stage (children)? Or does it fit the level of functioning (adult)?
- Context: is the behaviour appropriate to the situation and circumstances?
- Impact: is there no harm to those involved physically, psychologically and emotionally?

If the answer to the questions formulated above is 'yes', a green flag will be assigned to the situation. If one or more of the criteria is not (fully) okay, another colour of flag will be given to the situation, depending on the severity of which the criteria are exceeded.

Consent is one of the main criteria within the Flag System. It is broadly defined, emphasising both its explicit and implicit nature, the fact it can be withdrawn at any time as well as the voluntariness that needs to be present in the situation for consent to be given. Not only does this criterion help professionals assess the severity of a situation, it also gives them important language to discuss a situation with children, young people or (vulnerable) adults.

Today, the Flag System is used within different EU-countries, such as the Netherlands, Austria, Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus. Since the criteria of the Flag System have been proven to be useful to get the conversation going on situations of sexual behaviour even with children and young people, Sensoa has been using its framework within different educational packages as well, such as 'Mijn Wens, Mijn Grens' ('My Wish, My Boundary' - teaching materials from ages 3 – 18 years old around setting boundaries and giving consent) or the work formats for children and young people on the Flag System.

Rutgers Sexual Consent Campaign 'Ben jij oké?' ('Are you Okay?') (Rutgers, s.d.)

Started by raising awareness in nightlife and entertainment venues since 2009, the 'Ben jij oké?' / 'Are you okay?' campaign by Rutgers (the Dutch expertise centre for sexuality) aimed to activate bystanders when being confronted with sexual transgressive behaviour. But after doing research together with Tinder in 2024, they discovered that out of 1000 Dutch 18 – 25 years olds, 90% indicated that checking consent is the norm. Most of them (73%) checked for consent before sexual interactions verbally, 18% non-verbally and only 9% admitted not checking for consent at all. When consent was checked multiple times throughout the sexual contact, the sexual contact was perceived as more pleasant. With those numbers in mind, Rutgers decided to tackle the subject of consent more explicitly in this campaign.

Stating that 'Checking consent multiple times helps', Rutgers aims to encourage young people to ask for consent during sex – and keep checking for consent. In that way, they emphasise the fact that consent can be given and withdrawn at any time and that it might not always be that easy to recognize what the other likes or dislikes. This campaign also emphasises that consent is a process, rather than a one-time decision.

To help young people to check for consent, Rutgers published multiple educational and inspirational tools, such as a TikTok channel with videos on the topic, interviews with influencers who talk about giving consent and respecting consent or an online quiz on the topic of flirting ('Do you flirt okay?') in which consent has a central role. Rutgers has also developed a training for professionals on consent. In this training professionals learn how to support young people in giving and respecting consent.

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