

Teaching about consent

Introduction

This support material aims to support you in teaching about consent using the Social, Personal and Health Education Curriculum (1999).

Snapshot from research



Social, Personal and Health Education provides particular opportunities to foster the personal development, health and well-being of the individual child, to help every child to create and maintain supportive relationships and become an active and responsible citizen in society (SPHE Curriculum, 1999a). Education about consent is important for building healthy and respectful relationships, protecting potentially vulnerable children from harm and promoting positive sexual relationships.

The sections are as follows:

- Consent and the SPHE curriculum
- What is consent?
- Teaching about consent
- Sexual consent and the age of consent in Ireland
- Consent and the SPHE curriculum in 5th and 6th class
- Further reading.

Consent and the SPHE Curriculum (1999a)

While consent is not explicitly named in the SPHE curriculum (1999a), many of the foundational principles of consent are present in its broad objectives (SPHE Curriculum, 1999a, p. 10), including objectives to enable the child to:

- develop a sense of **personal responsibility** and come to understand his/her sexuality and the processes of growth, development and reproduction.
- develop and enhance the **social skills of communication, co-operation and conflict resolution**.
- **create and maintain supportive relationships** both now and in the future.
- **develop a sense of safety and an ability to protect himself/herself from danger and abuse**.
- **make decisions**, solve problems and **take appropriate actions in various personal, social and health contexts**.
- become aware of, and discerning about, the various influences on choices and decisions.

The Stay Safe programme, through the topic of 'Touches', explores consent and its relationship to safeguarding. **It is important to note that the Stay Safe programme is mandatory and that this support material is not intended to supersede its use.**

What is consent?

Consent is when we seek permission for something to happen or make an agreement to do something. It requires respect and communication from both parties and is an important concept for children to learn about

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from a young age. Consent includes knowledge about, and respect for, their own and others' boundaries. This is something that is taught across the curriculum from junior infants to sixth class. If a child understands the concept of consent, they will be more likely to have the skills to remove themselves from situations where they feel uncomfortable and respect when others want to do the same. Understanding consent is the basis for understanding sexual consent later in life.

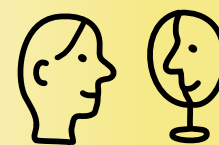
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The concept of consent is something that a person learns about throughout their life and involves an array of social and cultural understandings. The SPHE curriculum can play a very important role in teaching about consent, but informal teaching about the concept, both inside and outside of school, is essential to reinforce children's understanding of the concept. For this reason, a parent information leaflet about how they can develop and support their child's understanding of consent has also been developed.

When you teach about consent, it is important that it is approached in an age and stage appropriate manner, through the learning objectives of the SPHE curriculum, and in keeping with your school's SPHE/RSE policy.

- **Exploring the concept:** Consent can be understood in different ways. Therefore, it is important to develop a shared understanding with children of what it means. Picture books can be a great way of exploring complex concepts with young children and it's quite likely that you will already have books in your school's library that can be used. For example, in 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' you can explore questions around consent including *did she seek permission before touching someone else's things?*

Teacher Reflection



- Do you have picture books in your school that could be used to explore questions of consent?
- **Language matters:** Develop a clear, consistent and shared vocabulary around consent. It is important that children can accurately name their body parts and have statements that they can use to express consent e.g. "Yes, you can..." "No, I don't like when you...", "I don't want you to hold my hand", "Please don't touch me...". Using the correct labels for the body parts helps to break down the stigma that can sometimes surround such terminology. If anatomically correct language is used from a young age with children, then they are more likely not to feel embarrassed or reluctant to talk about their bodies and will be able to talk openly and clearly about what they do and do not consent to. Create opportunities for the children to practice asking for consent, giving consent and not consenting so that they develop a full range of vocabulary around this topic.
- **Teach about bodily autonomy and boundaries:** Bodily autonomy means that you have control over what happens to your body, and this includes who gets to touch it. Teach children to define and express their own personal boundaries and to respect the personal boundaries of others. An easy place to begin is to encourage them to seek permission before touching someone, e.g., "Can I hold your hand?", and to encourage them to define their own personal boundaries.
- **Be mindful of 'teachable moments':** Take advantage of informal 'teachable moments' that present themselves during the school day. Be critical of the materials you use in class and be explicit in

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pointing out if they portray incorrect messages about consent. Be sure to also point out when you do see good practices around consent. Consent should be taught in an integrated manner across the curriculum, not just during SPHE. Think about how good consent practices can be incorporated into your day and your curriculum planning.

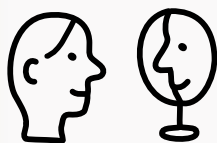
Classroom activity: Exploring my personal space through play

The following activities offer a fun starting point for learning about personal boundaries. They offer children a safe way to begin to think about their personal space, their personal boundaries and their bodily autonomy.

- **Drawing my personal space bubble with string** - ask the children to sit on the floor and using some string or a skipping rope to define their personal space bubble. Ask them to consider scenarios where their personal space bubble may have to be smaller (e.g., on a crowded bus, in a lift, at a football match) and how they feel in these situations.
 - **The hula hoop space bubble activity** – this activity aims to show children that the amount of personal space we require changes depending on who we are with. Place 3 hula hoops on the ground (one large, one medium and one small). Explain to the children that nobody else is allowed inside their hula hoop. Name the following people (Parent, teachers, friends, stranger, etc.) and ask the children to choose which personal space bubble they would feel most comfortable in. For example, with a parent they might choose the smallest hoop, signifying that they are most comfortable sharing their personal space with their family.
 - **Comfort zone traffic lights** – Put children in pairs and ask them to stand on opposite sides of the classroom. One child has a stop sign and the other child walks towards their partner. The child with the stop sign should raise it when the child walking towards them gets close enough.
 - **Drama:** *Through drama, children are also helped to make sense of the world around them and to begin to understand themselves and their own behaviour in relation to the behaviour of others* (SPHE Teacher Guidelines, 1999b, p. 58). Role play can allow children to understand the importance of consent from both perspectives (the person asking for consent and the person consenting or not consenting). Ask children to discuss and role play different scenarios that model good consent practices. Here are some simple examples to get you started:
 - *You are playing with your friend at break time. They want to hold your hand, but you don't want them to. What do you do?*
 - *You would like to borrow some colours from the person you sit beside. What do you do?*
 - *You are playing a chasing game during break time. Your friend catches you and grabs your arm. It hurts. What do you do?*
- Role plays can also be based on other stimuli, for example stories and videos. You might like to ask children to 'rewrite' the story of Goldilocks after she has learned about consent.

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Teacher Reflection

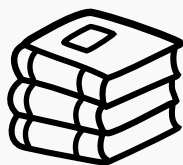


- Can you think of any ‘teachable moments’ of consent that have arisen while you were teaching?
 - Can you think of any missed opportunities to teach about consent? If so, how would you address this if they happened again?
 - Have you encountered resources that give incorrect messages about consent?
 - Are there other subjects, apart from SPHE, that present opportunities to teach about consent?
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- **Recognising and responding to emotions:** It is important that children can understand their own and others’ emotions and express their feelings. Being able to empathise with other people is a foundational aspect of consent. It will also help them to explain the consent statements they make, e.g., “*I want you to stop touching my arm, it makes me feel scared and I don’t like it*”. Listen to children and give them opportunities to express how they are feeling. Often, adults discourage children from showing sadness, anger and discomfort. But learning to identify these emotions can help children to explain when they are hurt, as well as develop empathy, and the ability to recognise similar emotions in other children when their actions are making others uncomfortable. Talk to children about their ‘gut feelings’ or ‘natural instincts’. These feelings are often felt when they are in a situation that makes them feel weird, scared or uncomfortable, but they aren’t sure why. Teach children that these feelings are sometimes correct, and that if they ever feel like that, they can say no, leave the situation and go and get help from someone they trust.
 - **Encourage children to read facial expressions and other body language:** For some children, this will come naturally, but for others, particularly some children with a special educational need, explicit teaching may be required for them to be able to read body language. Charade-style guessing games with facial expressions and body language can be a great way to teach children to read body language. If intervening in a situation where there has been a disagreement, take time to point out the facial expressions and body language that are telling you that the child is upset: (“*I can see Mary is upset because she is frowning and she has tears in her eyes*”). Verbalising this will enable children to take notice of how body language can help them to understand the emotions the other person is trying to communicate.
 - **Teach children that their behaviour affects other people:** Explain that our actions and words can affect other people. Being mindful of how we make others feel is an important aspect of consent. Through stories, explore how characters affect each other (for example, how the Big Bad Wolf makes the Three Little Pigs feel?). For older children, reading different versions of a story written from the perspectives of different characters in that story can highlight how things can be interpreted differently by different people and show the importance of stopping and thinking about a situation from the other person’s point of view.
 - **Teach critical thinking skills:** Critical thinking skills can enable children to critically assess real-life situations and make good and informed decisions about consent. A great way of developing critical thinking skills around consent is by discussing different scenarios that demonstrate consent or examining examples of situations requiring consent in stories or videos. In real-life situations, where a child made a bad choice around consent ask them to ‘rewind’ and consider how they could have handled the situation better or what they would do differently next time. With older children, consider scenarios that impede a person’s ability to give consent, for example, their age, substance use or peer pressure.

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- **Be a role model:** Model good practices around consent for your pupils. This can be done by giving children agency to make choices and respecting their wishes about their bodily autonomy. Give them the opportunity to make choices pertaining to them at school. For example, this could be choices about what they would like to learn about, how they would like to learn and how they would like to demonstrate what they have learned. This will help children to understand that their voice and opinion is important and should be listened to and acted upon by adults.

Snapshot from research



A study by Bragg *et al.*, (2020), found that lessons on consent are more likely to have a positive impact if they take place within a school whose culture models good practices around consent.

Teacher information - sexual consent and the age of consent in Ireland

Sexual consent is when you agree freely and without any pressure whatsoever to engage in a sexual act with someone else. It is a crime to engage in a sexual act with another person who has not given consent no matter what age they are. In Ireland, the law says that you must be 17 years or older to be able to consent to engage in sexual acts. You can find out more about what is defined as a sexual act in the law [here](#). The law is there to protect children and young people. It also aims to prevent older people from taking advantage of younger people. In primary school, as part of the Stay Safe programme, children are taught explicitly about inappropriate touching and helped to understand that no one has a right to touch their body in a way that worries them or makes them feel unsafe. In order to give children opportunities to develop the

competence and confidence necessary to deal with abusive situations, personal safety rules are taught and practiced, including identifying trusted adults in whom children can confide.

Consent and the curriculum in 5th and 6th class

In the SPHE curriculum for 5th and 6th class, children learn about:

- *sexual intercourse, conception and birth within the context of a committed, loving relationship* (SPHE Curriculum, 1999a, p. 58)
- *the rules in society and the importance of adhering to them*
- *to recognise inappropriate or unsafe touches*
- *to understand what to do if they are with people who make them feel unsafe*
- *to discuss a variety of risky situations and behaviour and assess and evaluate how these risks may be avoided or minimised*
- *to discuss and appreciate the role each individual has in keeping others safe and identify occasions when his/her actions can threaten the safety of others* (SPHE Curriculum, 1999a, p. 59)
- *exploring the importance of friendship and interacting with others and realising that making and changing friends is part of the natural process of growing*
- *considering problems that can arise in friendships and other relationships and how these could be handled* (SPHE Curriculum, 1999a, p. 62)
- *listening actively to others and respecting what each person has to say*
- *exploring and practising the many verbal and non-verbal ways in which people communicate with each other* (SPHE Curriculum, 1999a, p. 63)

Discussions about consent, and in some cases sexual consent, may arise when exploring the learning objectives mentioned above. However, it is important that the topic of consent and sexual consent is

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approached in an age and stage-appropriate manner. Support children to develop their understanding of consent as an important part of all healthy relationships. Within the strand units of 'My Friends and Other People' and 'Relating to Others', talk about how they can communicate their own boundaries to their friends and how they can respect the boundaries of others. Ask the children to consider verbal and non-verbal ways of consenting or not consenting. Discuss the importance of respecting another person's wishes. This foundational knowledge of consent will enable them to develop healthy relationships as they progress into their teenage years and begin to develop more intimate relationships.

The following section offers an example of how a discussion about sexual consent could be approached in an age and stage appropriate manner with a 5th and 6th class. As children progress to post-primary school and get closer to the age of sexual consent, they will further develop their understanding of 'sexual consent'.

Addressing the concept of 'sexual consent' in 5th and 6th class in an age and stage appropriate manner

The following section aims to give you the language to discuss sexual consent in an age and stage appropriate manner with children in your 5th and 6th class.

Write the word 'consent' on the board and ask the children to work in pairs and discuss what consent means to them. After a few minutes, ask the children to share their ideas and write them on the board. You might like to scaffold the learning by using examples of consent from books the children have read.

Explain that there are some things that they cannot consent to because of their age and that, in Ireland, children under the age of 17 cannot consent to engage in sexual acts:

"Because some decisions are big and can have long-

lasting results, the law says that there are limits to what a child or young person is legally allowed to agree or consent to. For example, you have to be 16 or older to be able to consent to medical treatment and you have to be 17 or older to consent to sexual activity with someone. To protect a young person from pressure to have sex, the law says it is a crime for anyone to have sex with a young person under 17. This means that you are not legally old enough to agree to (or consent to) having sex until you are 17. Many people wait until they are 17 or older, and in a relationship that is important to them, before they have sex for the first time". (Busy Bodies Booklet, 2020, p. 46)

Finally, it is important to remind children that nobody is allowed to touch them sexually. Remind the children that if anyone tries to touch them sexually or have them touch another person, they should tell a trusted adult (e.g., parent, family member, teacher) immediately. **Topic 3 of the Stay Safe programme** for 5th and 6th class addresses the topic of touches and will also aid you in discussing inappropriate touches.

"If anyone wants to touch you sexually or have you touch them, you should tell a trusted adult immediately. You might be asked to keep it a secret. The person might say that what's happening is your fault or that it's because they love you but that's not true. A trusted adult such as a parent, relative, teacher, youth worker, etc. will help you." (Busy Bodies Booklet, 2020, p. 46)

Be mindful that given the sensitive nature of this topic, it could lead to a child making a child protection disclosure. For more information about how to deal with a disclosure from a child see '**Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017**'.

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What's Next?

How can I support parents?



Home learning: You could provide written or reflective activities that encourage children to share some of their learning about consent with parents.

Communications: Sharing the approach you take for teaching about consent and providing material for parents can support them working with their child on the topic. You may need to be explicit in stating that this topic will be taught in an age-appropriate manner. A parent information leaflet has been developed specifically for parents about how they can support their child's learning in relation to consent. You can find the document in the 'SPHE/RSE Toolkit'

Resources to share with parents/guardians: The online SPHE/RSE toolkit provides resources to share with parents/guardians at each class level.

Resources to teach SPHE/RSE.

A specific resource for parents on the topic of consent is available here.

Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks – Consent

Busy Bodies Booklet

Busy Bodies Videos

Further reading



Busy Bodies Booklet

Stay Safe Programme

The following materials are not intended for use as resources in the primary school classroom, but rather will help you to develop your knowledge and understanding of the concept of consent:

- [An introduction to consent](#)
- [What does sexual consent mean?](#)
- [Consent Matters Resources](#)
- [Active Consent](#)
- [B4Udecide](#)

References

Bragg, S., Ponsford, R., Meiksin, R., Bonell, C., & Emmerson, L. (2020). Dilemmas of school-based relationships and sexuality education for and about consent. *Sex Education*, 1–15.

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HSE. (2020). *Busy Bodies A booklet about puberty and adolescence for you and your parents*. Kerry: Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme

NCCA. (1999a). *Social, Personal and Health Education*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

NCCA. (1999b). *Social Personal and Health Education Teacher Guidelines*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.