

"Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape"

How young people understand consent to sex



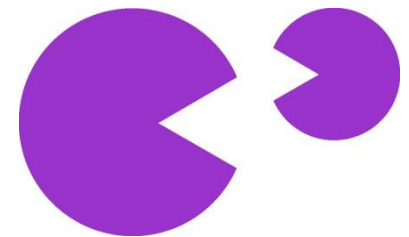
Background

The Office of the Children's Commissioner decided to find out about young people who are sexually exploited in gangs and groups so more perpetrators could be caught and young people can be provided with the support they need.

We began this work in 2011. It has taken two years and we have published six reports with recommendations to address sexual exploitation, including this one.

What did we do?

We asked the Child and Women's Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University to help us find out **how children and young people understand consent to sex**. They worked with a group of young people to make eight short films which involved young people talking about their experiences and whether they said yes or no to having sex or taking part in sexual activity.



The films were used in a survey and young people were asked the following questions for each of them:

1. Were the young people in the film OK with the sex described?
2. Did the young person in the film ask if the other young person wanted to have sex?
3. Was the young person in the film able to say yes or no to having sex?
4. Did they think the situation in the film was rape?

The films were also shown to groups of young people who talked about them with the researchers.

What did we find out?

Lots of young people know what is meant by **'giving'** consent

Hardly any young people understand about **'getting'** consent

Some young people **know what consent to sex is** but find it **difficult to relate to in real life situations**

Other things children and young people told us

Understanding sexual consent

I think that was the best way of doing it. Having consent when you are both talking about it to each other.
Young man (17)

In films parents always sit down and talk to the kids. I don't know anyone in real life that has actually had the conversation
Young man, Year 9

- ➔ Lots of young people's views about sex and relationships are affected by what they see and hear, including porn, music and celebrities
- ➔ How young people think about the ways boys and girls should behave was very important for how they understood consent.
- ➔ Young people said the main places they learnt about sex were TV, magazines and pornography
- ➔ Lots of young people said they found talking to their parents or other family members about sex awkward and embarrassing but said they wanted to learn more about relationships and sex in school

Peer and social pressures

Girls always get called a slag and boys always get called a lad
Young man (16)

She's giving him an open invitation – if she's going to send me photos why can't I do it in person?
Young woman (17)

- ➔ Boys who have sex or take part in sexual activity are thought of differently to girls who have sex or take part in sexual activity - boys are seen as 'legends' while girls are called 'sluts.' Girls often get blamed for being abused and are made to feel as if consent is all about whether or not they give it. Not many people talk to boys about getting consent.
- ➔ 'Sexting' (sharing sexual images via mobile phone or the internet) is a big worry for children and young people. Lots of girls, feel pressured to send 'sexts' and often these are shared by boys without their permission.

What will happen next?

Based on what the researchers found we have made recommendations to help improve things for children and young people. These are:

Schools should make sure that children and young people have the opportunity to discuss what consent means

Schools should talk about pornography and how this affects young people's feelings about relationships and sex

Relationships and sex education should be improved

Guidance should be given to anyone who has shared pictures without getting consent

Contact us

If you have any questions about anything you have read in this report please get in touch with us at info.request@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk or phone us on 020 7783 8330.

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