

Consent

Children from the age of 11 are to be taught about sexual consent under new government plans to include the topic in PSHE lessons.

So what does this mean your children will be taught about sex and relationships? And what can you do to help your child understand the issues?

What does consent actually mean? It's sometimes more complicated than young people realise. Consent means what it says - mutual agreement to sexual activity - but you must be sure that your partner is both *willing* and *able* to agree. People under 16 cannot legally give consent, nor can anyone who is unconscious or too intoxicated to understand what is happening. Increasingly, experts and activists are pushing for what's called an affirmative standard of consent, meaning the absence of a 'no' is not enough to assume someone is willing - they must actively agree.

- **Emphasise boundaries:** One of the best things you can teach your child about consent is to make sure they know that everyone is the boss of their own body and of who gets to touch it. You can also talk about what sort of physical contact is appropriate in different situations and with different age groups. What is the difference between hugs between friends and hugs from older people? At what age should, say, an uncle, stop holding his niece's hand? Help them see that the distinctions are subtle and they may need to respond differently to the same activity in different situations, so building their awareness that questionable situations might arise.
- **Tell your children to trust their instincts:** Young people often have strong instincts about safety and danger. Let your children know that if a person or a situation is making them uncomfortable, it's perfectly OK to back away. They should be clear, physically and if necessary verbally: they need to know that this is a perfectly legitimate thing to do, even if they are dealing with an adult.
- **Make it clear that no means no and yes means yes:** Teach your children that there are certain words that shut situations down, whatever the circumstances. And by the same token, it's good to express themselves when they enjoy something and to make their preferences known.
- **Don't let troubling jokes go unqueried:** Issues like taking advantage of drunk women are sometimes viewed as funny. If your child makes a joke like this in your presence, ask them why they think it's funny.
- **Go beyond the birds and the bees:** Consent should be an important part of conversations about sex with your child as they get older. Talk about what it is, who can give it and why it matters to healthy relationships.