

# **Beyond 'yes' and 'no': Reimagining consent education through boys' reflections on power, emotion and relational uncertainty**

## **Study Overview**

The study explored teenage boys' perspectives on sexual consent through qualitative research conducted in three English schools and a follow-up workshop. Participants described consent as emotionally complex and shaped by peer cultures, reputational anxieties and conflicting gender norms. While some echoed widely circulated narratives, such as fears of false accusations, these were often expressed with ambivalence and used to navigate uncertainty and vulnerability.

The study highlights limitations of risk-based, procedural consent education, which boys can experience as accusatory or reductive. Instead, it argues for a relational, dialogic approach that supports emotional literacy, critical reflection and ethical engagement.

The paper foregrounds boys' capacity to engage with nuanced accounts of power, intimacy and responsibility when given the space to do so. It concludes that meaningful consent education requires structural support, not just improved messaging, enabling educators to create relational and reflective learning environments amid contested cultural terrains.

The current 'Evidence Bits' is based on the open access publication: Setty, E. (2025). Beyond 'yes' and 'no': reimagining consent education through boys' reflections on power, emotion and relational uncertainty. *Gender and Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2568415>

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## Key Definitions and Conceptual Findings



### Consent as relational and affective (not procedural)

Consent transcends individual acts to encompass situated processes influenced by emotion, power and context.

Consent is often negotiated through attunement, hesitation and affective responsiveness, rather than through explicit sequences of agreement.



### Limitations of dominant consent models

The study highlights limitations of risk-based, procedural consent education, which boys can experience as accusatory or reductive.

Rigid pedagogical binaries foreclose the emotional labour and relational uncertainty that boys described.

## Further Related Readings

Setty, E. (2022). Educating teenage boys about consent: The law and affirmative consent in boys' socio-sexual cultures and subjectivities. *Sex Roles*, 87(9), 515-535.

Setty, E. (2025). Young people and sexual consent: Contextualising 'miscommunication' amid 'grey areas' of ambiguity and ambivalence. *Sex Education*, 25(1), 140-155.

Setty, E. and Hunt, J. (2024). *Reimagining RSE: A Safe Uncertainty Approach to Adolescent Intimacies*. Emerald Publishing.

# Key Findings

## Point 1

**Boys experience consent as emotionally and socially complex:**

- Boys across settings experienced consent education as reductive, offering scripts for risk management rather than relational insight.
- They were not simply echoing misogynistic scripts but grappling with affective uncertainties of adolescent intimacy.

## Point 2

**Binary 'yes/no' approaches leave boys under-prepared:**

- Legalistic framings offered a sense of clarity and security, [but] left many boys feeling unprepared for the emotional nuance and interpersonal complexity of intimate encounters.

*"It makes consent look obvious, when in reality it's anything but." (Workshop participant)*

## Point 3

**Peer cultures shape consent practices:**

- Consent was not simply a private negotiation but a socially contingent practice embedded in broader emotional and relational economies.
- Boys described the emotional rewards of group belonging alongside pressure to conform to behaviours they did not always endorse.

## Point 4

**Boys demonstrate capacity for reflexive ethical engagement when given dialogic space:**

- The workshop demonstrated boys' capacity for critical reflection when offered space for open and respectful dialogue.
- Participants critiqued masculinity norms that emphasized dominance, emotional detachment and control, describing these as restrictive and coercive.

# Key Policy and Practice Implications

## NEED TO REFRAME CONSENT EDUCATION:

- The study argues for a relational, dialogic approach that supports emotional literacy, critical reflection and ethical engagement.
- Meaningful consent education requires structural support, not just improved messaging.

## MOVE BEYOND RISK-ONLY FRAMINGS:

- RSE was focused almost exclusively on risk and harm, often casting [boys] as presumptive threats
- A broader framing that includes vulnerability, trust, intimacy and pleasure does not imply minimizing the reality or significance of gendered violence.

## DIALOGIC, SOCIO-AFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY AS A POLICY DIRECTION

- Pedagogies that support both emotional literacy and ethical accountability are required.
- Small shifts, such as inquiry-based discussion, emotional reflection and peer dialogue, can help create more generative classroom cultures.

## SYSTEM-LEVEL RESOURCING IS ESSENTIAL

- Without time, training and support, teachers may fall back on risk-aversion or disengage entirely.

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