TEENAGE BOYS AND SEXUAL CONSENT

GUIDANCE FOR EDUCATORS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This guidance document is based on a two-stage research project. The first stage of the project was conducted in collaboration with **Life Lessons Ltd**. and I'm grateful for their involvement in recruiting participants and co-facilitating the research. The second stage was conducted with the help of Jeremy Indika (**Something to Say**) and Will Hudson (**Society Unlimited**), and I thank them for helping to co-facilitate the workshop and for sharing their reflections to support the development of the guidance.

Across both stages of the project, I am indebted to the participants for their willingness to speak openly and honestly about their perspectives and experiences connected to sex, consent and relationships. It is these perspectives and experiences that form the basis of the guidance contained within this document.

Finally, I thank the University of Surrey for funding both stages of the project and for their support and advice throughout.

INTRODUCTION

This guidance has been designed to support educators and others who work with young people to effectively address the topic of 'sexual consent' with teenage boys. Sexual consent has, for some time, been high on the public consciousness and schools and other youth-facing institutions and organisations have been tasked with imparting education that helps young people to develop a clear understanding of consent as part of healthy relationships.

The **#everyonesinvited** movement laid bare the extent of a range of oftentimes normalised sexual harassment and abuse taking place within young people's peer cultures and interpersonal relationships (see Ofsted, 2021). While not all young people are involved in or are affected by non-consensual sexual behaviours, it is apparent that the issue needs addressing. This should be done so through not just through warning young people about the risks and harms of sex and relationships but, instead, enabling and empowering them to have positive and healthy relationships.

Importantly, consent is not just a matter of the individual and of discrete interpersonal relationships; it is a social and cultural phenomenon and young people learn about and enact consent based on the meanings and norms that exist within their wider peer, familial and other social contexts (e.g., Abbott, Weckesser and Egan, 2021; Coy et al., 2013; Setty, 2020). This guidance is therefore designed to help educators and others address consent as spanning individual, interpersonal and social contexts in ways that are meaningful and relevant to teenage boys.

The reason for the focus on teenage boys is that data suggests that girls are more likely to experience and be negatively affected by non-consensual sexual behaviours and boys, both as individuals and in groups, are more likely to act out these behaviours (see Ofsted, 2021). As a result, it is important to educate boys about consent and encourage them to act responsibly and ethically in their interactions and relationships with girls and within their male peer groups.

Yet, simply blaming boys and generalising about their attitudes and behaviours is unlikely to be helpful (see Flood and Burrell, 2022). Some boys are same sex attracted and the topic of consent is still important for them. Furthermore, the assumption that all boys act in a uniform way shaped by stereotypical norms of masculinity is simplistic (as found by Frost et al., 2002). Boys also need to be taught about their own rights to consent and to have recognised the different ways in which they relate to sex, gender and relationships beyond stereotypical norms.

It is through making space for boys to talk about their feelings and experiences and validating these that it will be possible for educators to identify the challenges that boys face. Educators will then be better able to support them to have positive and healthy relationships – with themselves, their peers and their (male or female) partners.

ORGANISATION OF THE GUIDANCE

This document first outlines the rationale for the guidance, drawing on research conducted in 2022 with teenage boys about the topic of sexual consent.

It then presents recommendations for talking about consent with teenage boys and how best to educate them about consent in ways that recognise and address the complexity of the topic. This section includes ideas for how educators can strengthen boys' abilities to critically reflect on the conditions in which they, their peers and their partners make choices about sex and relationships.

It is hoped that this guidance enables educators and others to help boys develop their self-knowledge and, in turn, improve their capacity to exercise ethical and responsible judgment in their relationships.

These recommendations have been developed based upon the participatory co-design workshop held with teenage boys in 2023. The appendix contains some of the stimuli used during this workshop, which may be helpful for educators to consult.

CONTRIBUTORS

This guidance has been produced by Dr Emily Setty from the University of Surrey. Dr Setty is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology and I have conducted extensive research about sex and relationships with young people.

This research has focused on how young people learn about sex and relationships and the individual, interpersonal, social and cultural factors that shape their experiences, including of abuse and harm connected to sex and relationships.

It has primarily involved qualitative studies whereby young people have spoken about their perspectives and experiences. Studies have explored how new technologies are affecting sex and relationships for them and how their experiences span both online and offline environments in the contemporary 'digital age'.

Dr Setty has worked with teachers, parents and other stakeholders to understand their perspectives on these matters and to identify what they need in order to feel able and willing to engage effectively with young people to support them to develop positive and healthy relationships.

You can find out more about Dr Setty and her work **here** and she regularly posts updates on **Twitter**.

This project was supported by:

Life Lessons Ltd., who provide video resources and complete lesson plans for schools via a constantly updated spiral curriculum for relationships and sex education, including on the topic of consent. Find out more about what they offer **here**.

Jeremy Indika, of '**Something to Say**', who tackles the problem of child sexual abuse through work in schools and with other youth-facing professionals. He offers inspirational talks, including to young people, to raise awareness of the problem and to support safeguarding. Find out more about him and his work **here**.

Will Hudson is a theatre-maker with over 20 years' experience in theatre and applied arts. He is founder of social arts initiative Society Unlimited, applying his theatre practice as a catalyst for social inclusivity, wellbeing, relationships and consent awareness. He is undertaking a PhD in theatre at the University of Surrey, with his research exploring the intersection of performance, embodiment and authenticity within masculinity. Running parallel to his doctoral research, Will is currently training as a transpersonal therapist at the Psychosynthesis Trust. More information can be found out about his work **here**.

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PART 1

TEENAGE BOYS' PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF CONSENT EDUCATION

The first part of the guidance summarises the findings from a multi-site, multi-method study conducted in 2022. The study was designed to identify how boys feel about the education they have received on consent through RSE in school and the opportunities and challenges for RSE on consent.

The study was conducted in an elite independent boys' school, an inner-city boys' school and a co-educational academy school, all in London and southeast England. It involved observing lessons on consent (and other topics), focus groups with boys in year 8 through to sixth form and discussions with teachers. It was co-designed and co-facilitated by Dr Emily Setty and collaborators from **Life Lessons Ltd.**

Full details about the schools, sample, methods, analysis and findings can be found open-access **here** and a shorter blog-style piece summarising the research is **here**.

The findings from this study are not necessarily representative of the situation in all schools nor the perspectives of all boys and teachers. Instead, they raise some important issues about educating boys about consent based on this sample of boys and the schools involved in the study. To develop the recommendations for education on consent contained in part 2, a further workshop was conducted with a separate group of boys to explore the findings and to hear their views on how educators and others can best work with boys to address the issues connected to sex, consent and relationships.

WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THE RESEARCH?

There were five key themes arising from the research:

1 Consent was being taught, and understood as, an objective legal reality and as requiring affirmative consent ('yes means yes' and anything less is not consensual).

2 Consent was typically framed and understood as a transactional dynamic, with boys being the 'initiator' of sexual activity and, therefore, responsible for obtaining consent.

3 Boys often 'othered' the perpetration of non-consensual sexual activity to 'bad' and 'irresponsible' boys and men and distanced themselves from these behaviours.

4 Many of the boys were concerned and anxious about consent, however, because of perceived 'grey areas' and 'power dynamics' that, they believed, affect the formulation, communication and interpretation of consent.

5 Concerns about being 'falsely accused' of non-consensual sexual activity expressed by some of the boys seemingly related to fears and anxiety about risky and precarious heterosexual interactions between boys and girls.

1 THE LAW AND 'AFFIRMATIVE CONSENT'

In England, the Department for Education (DfE, 2019, p.29) statutory guidance on Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) requires schools to teach young people the law on consent and how to 'actively communicate and recognise consent from others, including sexual consent and how and when consent can be withdrawn.' The guidance thus emphasises both knowledge and skills. The relevant law in England and Wales comes from the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which defines consent in terms of freedom, capacity and informed choice and requires both parties to ensure that consent is given.

Each of the schools in the study adhered to this obligation and the lessons on consent were organised around the legal framework (also see Gilbert, 2018; Whittington and Thompson, 2017). There was extensive focus in the lessons on the implications of alcohol and drug use for capacity, as well as age (regarding the illegality of sexual activity between minors and between minors and adults). Active and participatory teaching and learning methods typically involved pupils being asked to assess whether hypothetical scenarios contained the necessary features to be defined as consensual and to identify any features that may compromise or negate consent. There was, therefore, a right and a wrong answer although scenarios often addressed complexities and ambiguities relating to pressure, assumed consent, power and intoxication. There was some emphasis on why consent may be compromised in a given situation, for example 'casual sex' at parties (because intoxication is common, parties are less likely to be sufficiently acquainted to assess consent and social or 'peer' pressure may be present).

Across the schools, pupils were advised to follow the tenets of the 'affirmative consent' model, which holds that 'yes means yes', 'no means no' and anything less than a directly communicated 'yes' is not consent (see Gilbert, 2018; Mueller and Peterson, 2012). Analogies to non-sexual situations were frequently used (e.g., the **Cup of Tea video**).

Focus group discussions with the boys found that they had readily absorbed the educational messages about consent and were able to recite them. Many were quite positive about this education.

'... it's been quite interesting... we kind of understand it [consent] better'
(co-educational academy)

The boys appreciated the straightforwardness of what they were being taught. For example, a boy in the inner-city school said that learning 'the exact law' is 'good' because 'you can actually follow the procedure', with another adding that he 'didn't know you had to question them [their partner] before [the lessons].' One boy had previously thought that consent is 'a mutual thing... when the emotion is right, you have intercourse' but said that he now believes that it requires direct communication. A boy in the co-educational school said he liked learning about consent in school because:

'... there's rules... you can understand it and there's someone who has experience, a teacher, and they can explain it to you rather than learning through experience yourself.'

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSENT EDUCATION

The boys seemed quite open to being taught about consent and wanted reliable, factual information that can help them to understand what they need to know and their responsibilities. It could be seen as somewhat positive that boys are being encouraged to take responsibility, which represents an improvement from some of the rape myths and victim blaming narratives that sometimes surround sex and consent in society and that, in turn, can shape young people's attitudes and sexual consent cultures (see, for example, Coy et al., 2013).

However, at this point, **it is important to be aware that the law and affirmative consent are not necessarily the same thing**. The law does not demand affirmative consent and it is important to tease out the differences because, as is outlined below, the idea that sexual activity requires a direct verbal yes was troubling for some of the boys and underpinned their anxiety about being 'falsely accused' of non-consensual sex.

Furthermore, while the boys' positive sentiments may be reassuring to educators, it was also apparent that, as one boy in the independent school said, **there is a difference between the 'facts' they are being taught and how consent is 'applied in real life.'** While they seemed capable of understanding the facts, there was some uncertainty and a lack of confidence about establishing consent in 'real life' situations. For these boys, their concerns related to their assumed roles, and responsibilities, as 'initiators' of sex coupled with the perception that consent is rarely directly and verbally communicated and even if it is, that any communication may not always be reliable.

2 BOYS AS 'INITIATORS' OF SEX AND RESPONSIBLE FOR OBTAINING CONSENT

The stereotypical norm that heterosexual boys initiate sex and are responsible for obtaining consent from female partners featured in the focus group discussions about consent with the boys. There was very little discussion of same-sex interactions and consent, with same-sex partners being seen as more 'alike' and 'equal'. Likewise, any emphasis on boys' rights to consent was mostly absent. To some extent, the schools in the study portrayed consent as 'gender neutral' but as focus group discussions with the boys unfolded, it was clear that they conceived of themselves as initiators.

A boy in the inner-city school said that consent is:

'... the man asking the woman. If she agrees, they do it, but if she doesn't, they don't.'

Interestingly, another boy in this school added that 'even if she is coming to you, it's right to ask her multiple times if she's alright with it', with a fellow participant explaining that this is because boys are 'like the dominant... the stronger species.' When asked whether these beliefs reflect 'reality', one boy said that it is 'what it ends up being because that's what they present to us, so you kind of feel you have to do it that way' and another describing it as 'stereotyping'.

Boys in the co-educational school said that the dynamic 'depends on the person, not necessarily their gender' but that 'it would more commonly be girls who feel pressured... that whole kind of thing, like a male-dominated society'.

The boys perceived a wider gender norm to operate that puts them in a position of power. However, they were also troubled by the way that it operates as a stereotype that may not reflect how they really feel on an individual level. Some boys felt that there is not enough emphasis on how boys develop their understanding of what they do and do not want in terms of sex and a trivialisation or lack of recognition of any experiences of unwanted sex affecting boys.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSENT EDUCATION

While boys may be developing a sense of responsibility for consent within heterosexual relationships, there are problems pertaining to the suggestion or presumption that consent is more of a matter for – and potential problem within – heterosexual relationships. **There also needs to be a focus on how consent unfolds within different types of relationships and the gender norms that shape expectations and assumed responsibilities for consent.**

In turn, there is a need to address how 'power' may exist socially or culturally but may not directly translate to what takes place within different relationships and situations with boys also being affected by unwanted sexual experiences (see Jackson and Scott, 2010, for a discussion about the distinct, albeit inter-related, levels of individual, interpersonal and socio-cultural meanings and experiences). How experiences are defined and responded to – both by boys and others around them – may, nevertheless, be shaped by gender norms and stereotypes (e.g., that boys 'always want' sex and so are unlikely to be negatively affected by non-consensual sex).

3 NON-CONSENSUAL SEX AS PERPETRATED BY 'OTHER' BOYS.

Most of the boys in the study insisted that they would never want to engage in non-consensual sex with a partner, either in a 'casual' sexual encounter or in a more committed relationship. They typically described boys who do so as 'careless' and 'irresponsible.'

'...they [boys who perpetrate non-consensual sex'] don't really care what the other person thinks. It's like, I want this, this is what's going to happen.'
(co-educational academy)

A boy in the inner-city school said that these types of boys are unable to 'wait for the right time' and are motivated by their 'own pleasure' and are acting 'without really thinking.'

Many of the boys were concerned that the increased focus in society on unwanted and non-consensual sexual activity involved all boys being 'tarred with the same brush'. They felt that narratives of 'toxic masculinity' involved blaming all boys and men for the actions of a minority.

Yet, while they felt unfairly maligned for what they believed was the intentional violation of consent by a minority of 'bad' boys and men, several were concerned about the risk of inadvertent non-consensual sexual activity. Some boys in the independent school, for example, said they are not 'bad' and wouldn't want to hurt anyone but may 'accidentally' do so and that, in the moment, 'things may happen'.

Intoxication through alcohol was repeatedly raised in the focus groups with 'casual sex' when drunk at parties being deemed a normative and expected adolescent ritual. The boys recounted having been taught that sexual activity in such contexts is risky for consent and this message was often conveyed in the observed lessons on consent. Some boys in the inner-city school felt that boys can be 'impulsive' and may 'do stupid things' and 'may feel bad about it after, but they just didn't have self-control in the moment.' There was a narrative of boys being 'slave to their desires' which means they 'might start forcing it on the other person.'

Boys in the independent school felt that the solution is better self-awareness and a preparedness to take a 'step back' and assess the situation, 'resist peer pressure' and 'deal with arousal.'

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSENT EDUCATION

While the boys said they want to have positive and healthy relationships characterised by consensual sexual interactions and activity, they were troubled by the idea of supposedly 'inadvertent' non-consensual sex. They both problematised gender norms and stereotypes, but **the idea that boys have out-of-control sex drives and poor self-control shaped their explanations for the risk of 'going too far' and engaging in non-consensual sexual activity.** Rather than reinforcing this narrative, it is important to reflect on whether it constitutes an available and accessible heuristic through which boys construct a more complex problem of consent and a lack of intra- and inter-personal skills and socio-emotional literacy. The boys in the study were concerned about the pressures and power dynamics that they believed infused sexual interactions. Yet, their awareness of these issues did not seem to translate into confidence in dealing with them (see also Hirsch et al., 2018, for similar findings with young adults on a US college campus).

4 PRESSURE AND POWER – 'YES' MAY NOT ALWAYS BE PRESENT AND, EVEN SO, MAY NOT ALWAYS ACTUALLY 'MEAN YES'.

While the boys were able to recite the educational message that consent is only consensual if there is a direct verbal yes, many raised concerns that sexual interactions may not always feature this type of communication and, even if they do, 'yes may not always mean yes'.

Such concerns were sometimes responded to by other boys in the focus groups with statements like, 'well, if it's not a yes, then it's a no' and that 'without a clear yes, it's not okay, you shouldn't do it.' On the face of it, there was no 'grey area' – if there isn't a yes, there isn't consent and so sexual activity shouldn't happen.

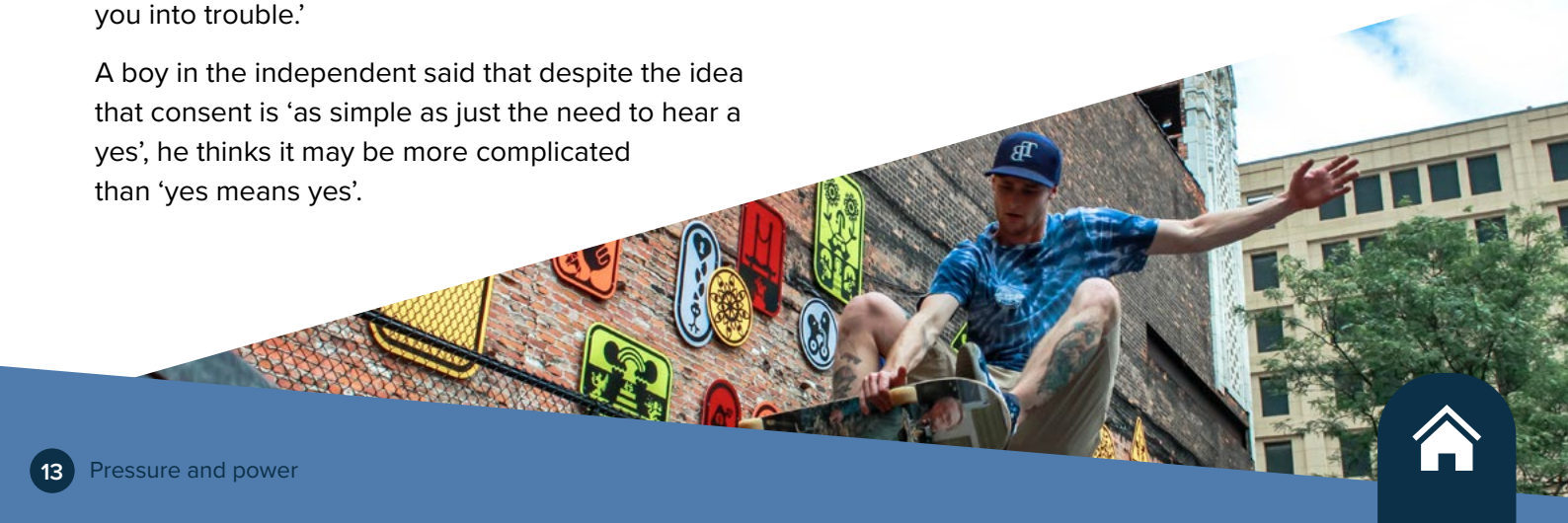
more complicated than 'yes means yes'

Yet, many of the boys were not convinced. A boy in the inner-city school, for example, said that 'in practice, sometimes people aren't really able to be clear about what their intention is... so while consent might be black and white... there are a lot of grey areas...' which, another added, may 'lead you into trouble.'

A boy in the independent said that despite the idea that consent is 'as simple as just the need to hear a yes', he thinks it may be more complicated than 'yes means yes'.

Intoxication was perceived to be a problem; for example, a boy in the inner-city school said it means that 'sometimes the person cannot be thinking straight [or] could be like drunk... so could be saying yes', even though they don't really mean it or may come to regret it subsequently. There were lots of concerns expressed about what would happen if both parties were drunk and who would be responsible for consent when the ability of both to communicate and interpret consent/non-consent may be compromised. The boys tended to frame such situations as a case of 'regretted sex' rather than non-consensual but that if there was a power dynamic (e.g., one party was very intoxicated and the other less so), the person with the 'power' would be responsible.

Most boys felt that direct communication is less necessary in established relationships – where there may be more trust and mutuality – than in new or casual relationships. However, some boys in the inner-city school talked about how establishing consent in these latter contexts can feel 'awkward' and the parties may be 'nervous' which may inhibit them from communicating openly and directly. They believed that as boys (and, therefore, as 'initiators'), they need to be aware of the 'signals' and 'body language' and should try to obtain consent 'seductively' and without 'ruining the mood.' They were thus concerned both about consent and with the need to adhere to sexual scripts which do not allow for, or make risky, direct requests for consent.



There was some emphasis among the boys on non-verbally obtaining consent through successive stages of intimacy with consent being assumed in absence of their partner actively stopping them from continuing. There was also some discussion about assumed consent when the person invites their partner to go to a private space or to come to their house when no-one else is at home. Yet, it was also stated by some boys in the inner-city school that it is important to 'establish... whether they actually feel inclined to do something' and to 'make the purposes clear before you get onto the action', suggesting that certain dynamics may imply that the person is interested in or wants to engage in sexual activity, but should be checked rather than assumed as definitely consensual.

Lots of the boys were concerned about pressure in that 'some people can say yes to sex, but not really want to because they feel pressured.' As a result, even the present of a 'yes' was not always reassuring to them.

Some boys spoke about needing to create 'safe spaces' for their partner to give, refuse and withdraw consent. Yet, 'rejection' was considered very difficult – both to give and to receive. Several boys felt that both boys and girls may consent to unwanted sex because they fear rejecting their partner and 'hurting their feelings', creating 'awkwardness' and, potentially, losing the relationship or the person's interest.

These pressures were defined in somewhat gendered terms – girls were believed to want to please their male partners and so to engage in unwanted sex because they think that is what boys want and expect of them. Boys, meanwhile, were deemed to be negatively affected by 'peer pressure' and stereotypical norms of masculinity regarding their supposed constant and incessant desire for sex. Several boys spoke about (hetero) sexual prowess and accomplishment being celebrated in male peer groups but that, as individual boys, their feelings and desires may be more complicated than this in reality.

'... [boys may feel pressure to have sex] to be cool, to get attention'
(co-educational school)

'... from a boy's point of view, sex is something that's like bigged up... it's a must... if you have sex more often, you can be boss...'
(inner-city school)

'[boys may feel pressure to be] dominant and [to] follow along with [unwanted] sex.'
(independent school)

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSENT EDUCATION

There was a difference between the boys' understandings of what consent should involve and what they feel it involves in reality. On an abstract level, they appreciated the simplicity of a directly and verbally communicated yes, but this conflicts with the pressures and power dynamics that may affect a given situation. Direct verbal communication may not align with expectations for and experiences of sexual interactions and refusing consent may be difficult due to pressures and fears of rejection.

In these regards, it may be perfectly possible for a yes to be present but not to reflect genuine consent while sexual activity may take place that either or both parties did not want due to pressures and a disinclination from speaking openly and directly. As a result, **it is important to identify the pressures and power dynamics that may affect a given situation and to address them specifically rather than assume that they can be resolved by reinforcing the requirement for directly communicated consent.**

5 'FALSE ACCUSATIONS' OF NON-CONSENSUAL SEXUAL ACTIVITY

When boys and men express concerns about being 'falsely accused' of non-consensual sex, it is sometimes believed that they are being defensive and hostile. Moreover, such concerns are often disregarded as misplaced and misinformed due to data suggesting that sexual assault and rape cases are subject to very high attrition rates through the justice process and, therefore, there is little evidence of a widespread problem of false accusations compared to the significant problem of low conviction rates. Yet, the data from this study indicated that the boys' concerns were underpinned by a series of factors:

- They were being taught that consent is a legal issue and that for sexual activity to be legal, it must be consensual.
- They were also being taught that they must adhere to the principles of affirmative consent whereby only a directly communicated 'yes' constitutes consent.
- They had internalised a norm that boys are usually the initiators of sex and, therefore, are responsible for obtaining a direct 'yes', lest they risk getting into trouble for non-consensual sex.
- Yet, they believed that 'in reality' sexual interactions often don't feature a direct 'yes' and, even if they do, any yes may not be a reliable indicator of genuine consent.

From all this followed a concern that they risk being told that they have engaged in non-consensual sex and there is no way for them to be entirely confident that they have obtained genuine consent. Some boys felt that girls may 'lie' – i.e., they may clearly consent to sex at the time but then later say they didn't consent, the boy knew it and sexual activity took place anyway. These boys expressed hostile sentiments toward girls who, they believed, may regret sex, or want to take 'revenge' and so later say it was not consensual. Yet, more common was the belief that girls may genuinely experience unwanted sex but that the boy was under the impression that they were consenting, got 'carried away' or wasn't skilled enough to pick up on the cues or that the girl may have gone alone with the sexual activity but felt unable to refuse or withdraw their consent (e.g., due to any pressure they may be feeling or a reluctance to reject the boy).

Some boys were aware that the realities of the evidentiary requirements for a conviction of rape or sexual assault meant it was unlikely that they would face legal censure in these types of situations. Yet, they were worried about reputational damage and the pain for both parties if there is an accusation of non-consensual sex. Others were under the (misinformed) view that girls are 'instantly believed' if they report non-consensual sex and the accused boy would be arrested or, even, 'thrown in prison' following an accusation.

There was some discussion of repeatedly verifying consent and, even, seeking written statements of consent. Some boys referred to a disinclination toward sex and relationships with girls due to the risks, either in themselves or, they believed, among boys and men generally.

While hostility and misogyny were sometimes apparent among the boys, in the main, they were concerned about lacking the emotional literacy and interpersonal skills for consent particularly given the normative contexts of pressure and expectation that they felt pervade (hetero)sexual interactions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSENT

Rather than just telling boys that so-called 'false accusations' are rare, it is important to explore and understand what they mean by the term 'false accusations'. While mindful of not endorsing the 'miscommunication' model of consent, it is important to focus on skills such as empathy, perspective taking and communication. Framing heterosexual interactions, in particular, as fraught with risk may just feed into hostile narratives regarding false accusations and, in turn, further entrench division and oppositionality. Instead, a positive framing of relationships as a space whereby individuals can learn how to communicate and understand one another may help in challenging the idea that boys are at risk from girls. It may also help in avoiding the idea of consent as a transaction whereby it has to be 'obtained' in order to protect oneself against legal censure and punishment rather than as fundamental to a positive and healthy relationship.

PART 2

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSENT EDUCATION

After sharing the findings from the study, educators and other stakeholders requested ideas and suggestions for educating teenage boys about consent in an inclusive, constructive, relatable and, therefore, impactful way. These requests inspired the second phase of the research – to produce some guidance for consent education via a co-design workshop with teenage boys.

METHOD

A 3-hour workshop was conducted on the University of Surrey campus on a weekday evening in June 2023. The workshop was co-facilitated by Dr Emily Setty, Jeremy Indika and Will Hudson (see 'contributors' above). A total of 16 boys participated and participants were reimbursed for their time and travel.

We began the workshop with introductions and an explanation of the main findings of the research. We then set ground rules and held some warm-up activities before splitting the boys into three groups of their choosing to explore how education on consent could address the following topics:

- ' False accusations'
- ' Pressure and consent'
- ' Power and consent'

Appendix I shows exactly what the boys were asked to consider under each heading, with each group taking one topic. The boys then had around one hour to discuss their ideas for consent education in connection with the topic, with the facilitators spending time with each group. After their small group discussions, we reconvened as a full group and discussed each group's ideas. This full group discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed. We also took some notes of the small group discussions and the boys noted down some ideas on paper and whiteboards, which we kept for reference.

SAMPLE

Of the 16 boys:

Age: Four boys were aged 16 and twelve were aged 17.

Sexual orientation: 13 were heterosexual and three were bisexual.

Ethnicity: 11 were 'Any White'; one was 'Any mixed'; and the rest were 'other': one 'Brazilian'; one 'white Asian/Caribbean'; and one 'Ashkenazi Jewish.'

All of the boys lived in southeast England. None were involved in the original research discussed in part 1. They were recruited via local schools and out-reach channels.

DEVELOPING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The boys raised several issues with current education on consent and identified ways that it can be improved. The ideas and suggestions described below are based on the reflections on the small-group and whole-group discussions. The boys themselves have not been asked to assess the specific conclusions drawn about what is and is not likely to be effective and relatable; instead, these ideas and suggestions are based on interpretations of what the boys said and our experience of holding the workshop. It is hoped that the ensuing recommendations incorporate boys' voices and perspectives based on our judgments of what will be helpful for educators and other stakeholders as they design and deliver consent education and talk to boys about sex, consent and relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSENT EDUCATION WITH TEENAGE BOYS

It is important to caveat that while this guidance has been developed with a particular focus on teenage boys, the issues raised in the research – and the ensuing ideas and suggestions for consent education – are not necessarily just applicable to teenage boys and can be explored in mixed groups and settings.

As discussed in part 1, the reason for thinking about teenage boys specifically is that they are a key target group in efforts to improve young people's sexual practices and experiences and to enable and empower them to have healthy and positive relationships both as teenagers and into adulthood.

The aim of this guidance is to help educators and other stakeholders engage effectively with teenage boys and to avoid making them feel unfairly maligned, generalised about or otherwise alienated. Stakeholders are free to adapt and apply the ideas and suggestions in ways that work for them within their settings.

The recommendations are organised around the following aspects of consent education:

1. The 'ontology' of consent and the role of the law in educating about consent
2. The use and role of scenarios for educating about consent
3. Addressing multi-dimensional power dynamics
4. Forming and making choices
5. Communicating with partners
6. Giving and receiving rejection
7. Becoming socially and emotionally literate before and during relationships

The ideas and suggestions within each sub-section are cross-cutting and reference may need to be made to different sub-sections when seeking to address particular aspects of consent.

1 THE ONTOLOGY OF CONSENT AND THE ROLE OF THE LAW IN EDUCATING ABOUT CONSENT

Consent is often taught as an 'object' – permission, agreement etc. – that, ideally, should be underpinned by *genuine* willingness of the person providing consent to participate in the proposed activity. In turn, it is typically emphasised that consent should be ongoing and that individuals have the right to withdraw their consent at any time. Yet, it also needs to be recognised that consent, as a process, may go beyond just hearing the words 'yes', 'no', 'stop', etc. and consent and non-consent may be communicated and interpreted in different ways.

By looking at consent as a process, it can be addressed through developing skills rather than as solved through specific words or actions. For example, an educator may say:

> *"To ensure sex is consensual, make sure you ask the person if they consent and that they directly say yes and if they ever say stop or no, you must stop."*

Instead, the educator could say:

> *"What awareness, skills and outlooks do we need in order to understand whether we personally are feeling happy and okay with whatever is happening or being proposed (or, indeed, that we are proposing) and what skills do we need to assess this in our partner?"*

The boys in the workshop discussed the skills as both intra- and inter-personal – in essence, **they need to understand themselves, what they want and why they want it and to be able to communicate with their partner about their own and their partner's wants and needs.** Perspective-taking, empathy, self-regulation and an attunement to proximal and distal pressures and expectations were all described as key skills (discussed further in the sub-sections below).

The outcome of framing consent in terms of skills shifts focus from the recitation of facts about what constitutes consent to recognising the complexity of consent – practicing the ability to reflect on the skills needed and the challenges in developing and applying these skills can then be part of the pedagogic process. Learners may not feel entirely confident by the end, but reflective practice is a skill that will aid them in their relationships and interactions. In other words, there may be uncertainties remaining about when it is possible to conclude that oneself or one's partner is consenting, but the process of identifying that is helpful as it encourages mindfulness and care in one's relationships and interactions. This approach also pushes back against assumed consent and the invisible dynamics of expectation and obligation and enables a focus on the invisible that can oftentimes pervade young people's sexual cultures.

Learners can be asked to think about:

- What is consent?
  - How do we know when we want to do something?
  - How does it feel to be unsure or not want to do something?
  - How may we simultaneously want something for one reason but not want it for another?
    - E.g.: may we be worried about having sex but not want to lose or offend our partner?
    - May we feel that there is pressure to have sex (perhaps from friends/peers who we think are sexually active), even though we're not sure?).
    - Are there any other situations?
    - Does the gender or sexual orientation of the person potentially affect the feelings they may have or the pressures/expectations they may feel?
  - What might uncertainty or unwillingness look like in someone else? What may they be thinking or feeling?
  - What may be the difference between consenting because you want something to happen versus consenting because you are willing for it to happen?

The law on consent can be addressed, not as an end in itself, but as a framework for understanding the complexities of consent. For example:

- What does the law say about consent?
  - Freely given.
  - Informed.
  - Given with capacity (age, mental state, etc.)
- What does this mean in reality?
  - There are specific situations that cross the legal threshold and mean that sexual activity may be legally defined as non-consensual e.g., if a person was forced or coerced to give consent; sex between a minor and an adult (subject to the defense of reasonable belief available for adults who engage in sexual activity with minors aged 13-15); if a person was not fully informed about the sexual activity (e.g., 'stealthing')
- What does the law solve and what does it leave unresolved?
  - What does 'force' and 'coercion' look like?
  - Is all force and coercion potentially illegal? What about if someone says,
    - 'if you love me, you'd have sex with me?',
    - 'Everyone else is doing it, come on, don't be frigid',
    - 'You're a guy, for goodness sake, of course you should be up for sex with me',
    - 'my last partner had sex with me, why won't you?'
    - 'I know you had sex with your previous partner, why won't you do it with me?'
  - Likewise, if a person says they really fancy you and so they want you to send them a nude image and the person then blanks you the next day at school, does that count as informed consent? Or was the sender of the image consenting under false pretenses?
  - What other scenarios are left unresolved? i.e., what other situations may seem 'dodgy', 'harmful' or 'unethical' but are not necessarily illegal?

The above statements and situations may not cross a legal threshold but may not be acceptable ethically nor constitute a healthy or positive interaction.

Therefore, we need to ask ourselves – to what extent can law guide our behaviour and what else do we need to consider?

A perhaps controversial question to explore is:

If you knew you could 'get away with it' legally, would you intentionally engage in sexual activity that you knew your partner did not want?

Most people would probably say no to that, which indicates that it is not the law itself that fully guides behaviour and people don't just avoid harming other people out of fear of being arrested. People are also guided by their values and moral compass. We need, therefore, to ask:

What are the values and skills that we need in order to have healthy and positive interactions based on genuine consent?

Given the limitations of the law in resolving what it means for sex to be positive and ethical, we have developed models e.g., the affirmative consent model that shifts the focus to initiators to make sure that they do not assume a person is consenting and that they obtain a clear and direct yes before engaging in any sexual activity.

What is good about affirmative consent? Some examples:

- Addresses victim blaming and puts responsibility onto initiators.
- May help in inspiring open and honest communication between individuals.
- May reduce the risk of sexual violation through ensuring that individuals have an opportunity to give or refuse consent before anything happens.

What are the problems with affirmative consent or what may need to be thought about further?

- Do sexual interactions always involve this type of direct communication?
- Is it somewhat transactional? Is there always a clear 'initiator'? What about more fluid and dynamic interactions?
- Does 'yes' always mean 'yes'?
- What about if people aren't sure about what they want?
- What happens after a 'yes' has been said? What does the initiator need to do to make sure that consent is ongoing? What does a withdrawal of consent look or sound like?

These added complexities mean that it is not just about our values but also about the skills we need to navigate sexual interactions whereby there may be pressures and power dynamics at play. The concern about being 'falsely accused' among boys can start to make sense because they may not want to violate someone, but ambiguity and ambivalence may compromise genuine consent. The boys in the workshop felt that a legalistic framing of false accusations may explain why some boys (and men) become cautious about or avoid sexual interactions. There was mention of a 'celebrity culture' in which public figures are coming forward to retrospectively allege unwanted or non-consensual sexual experiences or, at least, a reconsideration of previous experiences as potentially coercive. Some of the boys felt that many girls may, in hindsight, change their position on their sexual experience, shifting responsibility to their partner in line with celebrity influencers doing the same, through personal regret or pressure of being "slut-shamed". This resulted in "fear" being a big factor that confused the process of consent.

There ensues the potential for division and hostility – instead, educators should recognise that the sentiment underlying false accusations (i.e., the confusion and uncertainty) is not necessarily invalid but need to provide boys with alternative literacy and language to make sense of their concerns.

It involves a shift from saying:

'False accusations are really rare, and the solution is just to make sure you get consent and don't engage in any sexual activity without affirmative consent.'

... to saying:

'Okay, what is the fear or concern here? Why do you think someone say that someone has done something that the person didn't intend or didn't realise they were doing? How do people define their experiences as wanted or unwanted? Consensual or coercive?'

If sentiments are shared regarding girls 'lying' due to regretting sex or wanting to protect their reputation, encourage critical engagement: 'Why might girls regret sex?' 'Why would they feel they have to protect their reputation?' 'What about same-sex partners – may they have problems in these regards?'

If issues are raised around the uncertainties of consent, then push back on the idea that this is a 'false accusation'. Instead, encourage reflective and critical thinking about how uncertainty can be dealt with not through suspicion and hostility but through developing the values, attitudes and skills needed for healthy and positive relationships. **Rather than framing sex and relationships as fraught with risk, try re-framing relationships as a potential solution to uncertainty when they involve communication, openness and perspective-taking.**

2 THE USE AND ROLE OF 'SCENARIOS' FOR EDUCATING ABOUT CONSENT

Scenarios – addressing sexual activity specifically or non-sexual analogies – are often used in consent education. The workshop with the boys identified that the use of fixed scenarios – be they about sex or an analogy – may not be ideal.

Rather than seeking to develop and share the elusive 'realistic scenario', instead scenarios need to be flexible with the discussion around what is expected and defined as 'realistic' being as meaningful as the scenario itself. To engender such discussion, **broader statements regarding the potentialities and possibilities for sex and consent should be used to discuss and explore the factors that affect consent, and the awareness, outlooks and skills needed to think critically about these factors and how to address them**. Scenarios could, therefore, not necessarily be presented as fully developed but as indicative, with the focus being on the discussion that follows:

Examples of situations to explore could include:

- Dancing, drinking and flirting at a house party – eventually decide to go to a private space together in the house.
- Been in a relationship for a few months – haven't had sex yet but nearly turning 16 so starting to think it should happen soon and friends are starting to ask about whether you're going to 'lose your virginity' to your partner.
- Hanging out with someone you fancy and you really want to kiss them – the chat is going well but not sure if they see you as a friend or fancy you back.
- Steady relationship for a year, sexually active together and one of you has a 'free house' for a weekend so you decide to sleep over after they invite you.
- Round your mate's house hanging out in a group, decide to text someone you fancy and see if they are free to meet up, been flirting for some time and you suggest it'd be cool to spend time alone together if they're up for it.
- At the park with a group of friends one evening, having some drinks and start daring each other to do different things. One person tells another two people that they have to go in the bush together for five minutes and then come back and everyone has to guess what they just did.

Ask: are these scenarios realistic or possible? What other scenarios may there be? Does age, gender, relationship, or any other factor affect how such scenarios may arise or unfold?

Once the scenarios have been developed, discuss:

- What may people be thinking, feeling and expecting in these situations?
- May different parties in the situation have different thoughts, feelings and expectations?
- Would people feel able and willing to talk openly about what they want and don't want to happen? Why/why not?
- What would 'consent' look like in this situation? What would it look like if someone wasn't consenting?
- At what point is consent given? How easy/difficult is it to refuse or withdraw consent?

To address the nuances of consent in a given situation, the next section on addressing multi-dimensional power dynamics may be helpful. First, a note about non-sexual analogies:

In the workshops, the boys were unanimous in their disdain for the 'cup of tea video'. It wasn't the video itself that was the problem but how it is being used:

"... it's not that you have to stop showing the kids to come to the video. It's used as a starting point for a conversation not, 'oh yeah, great, we've covered consent. Now let's move on' ...it's too systematic. It's just like the education system is just trying to simplify everything... I'm just gonna throw this at you because I don't have the energy or time to go into depth."

Is sex like tea?

Hence, educators may want to keep using the cup of tea video (or any other analogy-based resource), but it should be used as a starting point to talk about what remains unresolved, asking questions such as:

- Why may we say yes to tea that we don't want?
- Why may we act like we're enjoying the tea when we're not?
- Why may it be difficult to say no to a cup of tea that someone has prepared after we previously said we want it?
- How may someone react to you saying no to a tea they've offered you or made you?
- What if you're not sure if you want the tea or not?
- Do people sometimes just start making tea without always asking, assuming that you want it, especially if you've had it with them before?
- Is sex like tea? Or are there differences and specific things we need to consider when it comes to sex?

Essentially, it's about showing how the abstract simplicity of consent may be more complicated in reality. Any analogy-based resource should not, as stated by the boy above, be used as an end in itself, but instead to explore these types of complexities.

As one boy said:

'the cup of tea video makes consent look obvious, when, in reality, it's anything but obvious...'

3 ADDRESSING MULTI-DIMENSIONAL POWER DYNAMICS

Already, we can see that 'power' shapes the considerations we need to give to consent. When asked about the power dynamics that may constrain the operation of free choice and the (perceived and actual) ability to give, refuse and withdraw consent, the boys listed factors such as:

- Gender – in terms of masculinity (not being a boy per se)
- Status – popularity, appearance, wealth etc.
- Being the initiator/more dominant person
- Age – older

They also felt that wanting a relationship with a person and fancying them may put you in the less powerful position – you want the relationship *more* and that may act as a coercive force, i.e., because you may go along with things you don't want to keep the person interested.

The factors intersect, for example, a girl dating an older boy may feel pressure to agree to unwanted sexual activity. A boy dating an older girl may gain 'status points' and be assumed to want and consent to sex with her, but the girl may be shamed for being with someone younger. Furthermore, a 15 year-old and a 17 year-old having sex may be more normative than a 16 year-old having sex with a 21 year-old, despite the former being illegal under consent legislation and the latter being legal (subject to no aggravating factors or breach of trust).

When thinking about power, space should be made for thinking about the different axes of power and how they intersect. **This includes how power may exist on a social and cultural level but is not necessarily felt or enacted by individuals or in interpersonal relationships**. As such, power may be visible or invisible within a situation and coercive or manipulative dynamics may be intentionally used by the 'powerful' person against the less power person, but not always. It is important to identify how **people may use power to their own advantage or how power may result in constraints on free choice that the 'powerful' person didn't realise or intend**.

To explore with boys: **What is the difference between 'masculinity' holding power and boys as individuals holding power?**

- Masculinity norms – strength, sexual prowess, reward for sexual accomplishment, dominance, non-committal attitude to relationships – may act as a coercive force in sexual interactions to the detriment of girls (insofar as girls are expected to comply with norms of femininity including around a lack of sexual desire and a subordination of personal needs to fulfil the sexual needs of boys).
- But – do all boys live up to these norms or want to have relationships based on these gender dynamics?

- Masculinity (and femininity) exists as a construct in society, but many boys are unwilling and/or unable to live up to the norms. Hence, we can interrogate how normative dynamics of masculinity and femininity may create power imbalances but not in ways that map neatly onto girls' and boys' experiences nor heterosexual or same-sex relationships in all their diversity..
- Sometimes, boys may not feel very powerful or may feel disempowered. This includes in their interpersonal relationships with girls (whereby they may also experience abuse or unwanted sexual activity) and within their peer groups.
- Boys' peer groups can be characterised by displays of masculinity that can involve or are predicated upon harm to others, including girls, gender non-conforming young people and boys 'lower down the pecking order' or status hierarchy (e.g., sharing nude images of girls with each other, sexualised and sexist 'banter' etc.).
- But – the boys themselves may feel ambivalent or under pressure to adhere to these cultural performances to achieve and maintain social inclusion.

Exploring these points with boys involves looking at the tensions and contradictions that arise with power. For example, they may be told they are the ones holding the power as the dominant initiators but then why don't they feel power? **That's because the stereotype or norm exists at a social and cultural level, which may shape expectations at the individual and interpersonal level but doesn't determine how people actually feel or what they want for themselves or in a given situation or relationship**. Hence, it is possible to feel conflicted or confused and that, in some sense, both things can be true at the same time – **masculinity may hold power over femininity in ways that make girls vulnerable, but not all boys want to harm or exploit girls.** The solution isn't to blame boys or hold them responsible for all the problems but to help them reflect and develop the self-knowledge and socio-emotional skills and literacy they need to devise and enact their own choices for themselves and their partners beyond stereotypical norms.

Educators must acknowledge the challenges in pushing back against taken-for-granted norms. Masculinity plays in boys' peer groups can be a coercive force in themselves – it may, on the one hand, feel fun and there can be pleasure gained from being part of a group. But, again, there can also be ambivalence depending on whether it really reflects what they want and how they feel or whether there is some kind of compulsion present (again, thinking about the continuum of consent – a boy may willingly participate in these performances but may feel conflicted about it).

It is also important to think critically about contemporary mediated portrayals of masculinity: **How may particular narratives about what it means to be a boy/man be attractive in some regards, but are actually predicated on simple or one-dimensional ideas that preclude scope for more diverse and heterogeneous identities and lifestyles?** Is it just another way of compelling boys to act in a certain way that may or may not align with what they want to feel able to achieve? Overall, does it make them feel better or worse, or more or less free? Perhaps, there may be some ambivalence or internal conflict – they may aspire to a particular 'ideal' but find the pressure to do so somewhat oppressive. Encouraging critical thinking about those feelings is important.

In this regard, boys are often taught about what constitutes *toxic* or *bad* masculinity. The boys in the workshop were able to identify and critically engage with depictions of masculinity that they felt were toxic or otherwise one-dimensional and unhelpful. Yet, there was a perceived lack of positive portrayals of masculinity and a belief that boys may play up to what they expect or feel they have to be, when actually many boys may be feeling ambivalent about or discomforted by these ideas.

This issue relates to what has been termed 'pluralistic ignorance' – lots of people don't really want to aspire to or conform to the norm but feel that it is what is expected of them by others. How, therefore, can boys be helped to break down these ideas and develop broader understandings of and possibilities for masculinity? A potential activity could involve:

- Anonymously sharing (e.g., via post-it notes) statements about the expectations for masculinity and 'ideal' constructs of masculinity.
- Mapping out other orientations that boys may have toward masculinity that may be closer to or further away from these statements (also via anonymous post-it notes stuck up around the statements).
- Discussion about what this means for freely chosen heterogenous masculinities.

Boys may feel that there are 'no references' for alternatives to what the boys in the workshop described as 'hyper-masculinity' but through exercises such as the above, they may be able to start developing their own references and break down the pluralistic ignorance that compels them to think, feel and act in particular ways.

Another way of thinking critically about masculinity is to **broaden out from just heterosexual masculinity norms**: a boy in workshop expressed his view on how masculinity works in, what he termed, “gay culture”. He described a pressure to be hypersexual whereby the ‘gay community’ is characterised by social policing and is not always be accepting unless you conform to the norm. He said that there is a big “hook up culture” and guys who are more “reserved” or not as “sexually active” can feel marginalised. His perspective may not be representative of all gay young men nor all of the ‘realities’ of the gay community but, regardless, it brings to the fore the need to think about how norms operate across different contexts and not just all about boy-girl dynamics. Thinking beyond heterosexual masculinity could be part of the above ‘post-it note’ activity.

Finally, it is important to think about the **pleasures of power** as a part of recognising ambivalence and internal conflict. Something may feel *wrong*, *dangerous* or *risky* but the power plays involved may be enticing or exciting. This may relate to power held over another person or that another person holds over us. Here, it is important to think critically about the boundaries of power – how may that power become coercive or exploitative? For example:

- What is the difference between being ‘protective’ – which may feel like an expression of love – and being ‘controlling’?
- What is the difference between confidence and arrogance?

Encourage boys to think of other finely balanced traits and behaviours in relationships and the need to be self-aware and reflective about why individuals act in the ways they do toward others – is it always about ‘love’, ‘passion’ and such like, or may it also involve insecurity, projection or coercion?

think about the pleasures of power

4 FORMING AND MAKING CHOICES

A key conclusion from the project was that the conditions in which individuals form and make choices are complex and may enable or constrain the operation of free choice.

In the workshop, the boys spoke about being 'pressured'. This pressure may come from friends, wider peers, parents and other relatives, media (of all kinds), formal education, 'society in general', and so on.

Sometimes pressure may be invisible and just part of the taken-for-granted norms and expectations that shape behaviour. Sometimes it may be visible – people may either feel they have to do something they don't want to do, or someone may try to directly pressure them to do so.

In the workshop, the belief was that people need to learn to identify pressure and then to identify what they *really* want and have the strength and confidence not to go along with pressure and, in turn, not to pressure others. There was a big discussion in the workshop about accepting difference in oneself and others. However, as the boys said regarding the simplicity of the 'cup of tea' message on consent, there was some belief that "we almost want to categorise" each other in order to "simplify and generalise and make everything make sense in a simple way". That is an understandable impulse, particularly in adolescence when identity projects are heightened as are peer and romantic relationships. Yet, it was also said by one boy that "trying to have everyone fit into a mould is just never going to work [we need to allow] people to be themselves".

Human beings are, however, always being influenced – it's part of being a social animal. We co-create norms and try to fit in with one another (see Larsen and Veenstra, 2021 for a discussion about social norms in adolescent peer contexts). Therefore, as well as exploring how, when and from whom pressure arises and in what forms, it is also important to ask:

- Why do we make the choices we make?
- Is it always about what we *want*?
- How do we *know* what we want?
- How does what we want change and develop over time, in different situations, with different people and so on?

The differences between being influenced and being pressured can then be explored, with an emphasis on the positive and negative dimensions to social influence. For example, some boys in the workshop said that friends can offer encouragement for them to act bravely and to take risks in a positive way (e.g., approaching girls despite a fear of rejection). This encouragement can aid in self-development and may result in positive outcomes but may also tip into unhealthy pressure or an over-focus on approaching girls to shore up self-esteem or one's position in the peer group (which may lead to negative behaviours toward girls), so, again, it's all about helping boys look at it from both sides and in a balanced way.

For sexual consent, it is important to zoom out from the individual and the interpersonal interaction. Revisiting the broad scenarios outlined above, visual depictions could be generated that position the direct individuals in the middle and then the pressures and expectations that surround them (e.g., through concentric circles):

- What pressures may exist for the people in the scenario?
- What may they be expecting from the other person, or feel is expected of them?
- Where does this pressure come from?
    - Who (types of people, maybe groups or individuals) is creating the pressure?
    - Is it always obvious or direct?
    - May it come from outside the room, the relationship or the situation?
    - What is the role of space and place to the pressures and expectations (e.g., is it different being in a bedroom, park, in a group, alone with a partner (Lloyd, 2022)?)

Zooming out to encompass the more distal pressures and expectations that affect specific situations enables pressures and expectations to be understood as social and cultural. In other words, just because someone is not being directly forced or pressured by their partner, does not mean that they don't feel pressure. The boys in the workshop wanted educational interventions to help them identify how they can create cultures whereby people are able to be themselves and make their own choices without being judged, pressured or shamed by others. This includes for them as boys – they wanted to **go beyond masculinity cultures that just celebrate sexual accomplishment and in which they feel pressure to have sex that they don't always want.**

The 'ecosystem' of pressure and expectation can also be contradictory – for example, the boys in the workshop spoke about how parents may pressure their children not to have sex or to have a relationship with a certain *type* of person, while peers may pressure each other to be indiscriminately sexually active. The feeling of being pressured may unfold dynamically across time and space – when with peers, a boy may feel like they want sex and may be motivated to pursue it, but then 'in the situation' with a partner they may feel differently and that it isn't 'as they expected' or what they really want. What would consent look like in that context? What is needed for the boy to recognise the pressure and be able to make informed choices?

In the workshop, we did not identify a solution to the complexities of pressure and the constraints on free choice. Instead, the boys valued **a space to be able to talk about their feelings and for recognition to be given that pushing back and taking a different path won't necessarily be easy.**

"It [resisting pressure] takes a lot of confidence, to be able to either go back into parents, or go against your friends. They just, instead of thinking about it like that, just go for whatever you want. The actual having the confidence to do that is something that takes a long while to gain."

the boys valued a space to be able to talk about their feelings

There was some optimism that **as individuals start to shift the normative terrains of pressure and expectations, then others will follow, and small changes may lead to big changes. It is an ongoing conversation and effort – boys don't need to make a big noise about it but can enact small shifts in how they interact and behave.** Educators can help them think about ways they can do this and what they would like to achieve. Importantly, boys should be enabled to see that while adhering to norms and pressure may look like the easier option, it doesn't always lead to happiness or fulfillment overall. They can be encouraged to think critically about what is depicted as aspirational and 'normal' and instead to develop their own values and goals.

"It's important to actually ask yourself... if you will always want that or if it's because of what your friends have told you, or what was covered on social media... taking a moment to think, am I just doing this for the sake of it... am I actually going to not regret this tomorrow?"

5 COMMUNICATING WITH PARTNERS

While sexual interactions may not always be characterised by direct verbal communication, the boys felt that it is important to strengthen people's ability to communicate. **They did not necessarily mean to engage in 'do you want this, yes or no' style communication, but instead openness about feelings, wants, likes and dislikes together.** It is, therefore, not just about 'communication skills' but, as outlined in sub-section 7, socio-emotional literacy, skills and the willingness to be vulnerable that are entailed in such interactions.

"I think generally, there's just not enough communication."

The uncertainties and confusion about consent can then start to be resolved through relationships and intimate interpersonal interactions. There was some belief that **consent is not just about agreement but about a process of making sense of what you and the other person wants and exploring that together – through verbal communication but also through non-verbal communication involving close attention to how each other responds and engages within a given intimate interaction.**

The boys were averse to interacting in staccato and unnatural ways: "hold on a minute, can we stop – are you consenting to this?" **They did not want consent to be a logistical exercise guided by a set of "rules" but something that is shaped by those involved in a flexible and fluid way.**

But – what feels possible and what represents a safe way of doing this?

It is important to be honest that **everyone – young and old – can feel awkward about speaking openly and honestly about what feels good, what they like and don't like, what they want to try, what they are in 'the mood' for, what they feel comfortable with and what crosses a boundary for them.** These feelings may shift and evolve over time, including within a given situation and within and between relationships.

openness about feelings, wants, likes and dislikes together

Educators need to help boys think about **what is required to create a space for checking in with their partner (and with themselves) about how the interaction is unfolding** – on some level, there may need to be more caution with a new partner where it may not always be possible to fully know what they (or ourselves) are thinking or feeling but also so too in longer-term relationships where assumptions made be made about consent particularly where sexual activity has already taken place.

Rather than consent being 'stop-start', it can become about small pauses, eye contact, giving enough space for the person to pull back and slow down, and, even, asking what feels good and what *would* feel good and what is not feeling okay.

"The quicker you go the more likely that you make an irrational decision"

As well as being attuned and generally interested in how the other person is feeling, it is also important to have the self-awareness to know how personal thoughts and feelings are changing across the situation and what that means for one's own consent and the ability to recognise the other person's consent (or lack of). It may involve personally slowing down and checking in with oneself and the other person.

"...there's no point rushing. The quicker you go the more likely that you make an irrational decision with it... instead, get a gauge of how they're feeling about it... and how you yourself is feeling about it."

Educators should explore how: **The (perceived) 'moment of consent' may not be at the time that sexual activity is starting or is happening and may have come before,** for example when someone asks someone to 'go upstairs' or to 'come over because they have a free house'.

Anticipation and excitement for sexual activity may be okay, but there needs to also be a space and a check-in point for consent. **An action or response may *indicate willingness or interest* but there is a difference between this and an *obligation or entitlement* to sex**. The indication may be exciting, but it doesn't represent consent in and of itself.

Questions to explore:

- What are the different possible 'moments of consent'?
- Are these always actually consent itself or may they just indicate that someone may be interested in sexual activity?
- What are some of the norms or expectations that shape what is interpreted as a moment of consent?
- What else needs to take place to know it's consensual?
- How may it differ e.g., between boys and girls, same-sex partners, casual and committed relationships, at a party or when alone with a partner?

Finally, it can be explored how **without slowing down, taking stock and checking in, it may be possible that sexual activity takes place that one or both parties didn't really want**, but they felt unable or unwilling to actually say that to each other because of what they thought the other person wanted or expected.

6 GIVING AND RECEIVING REJECTION

Throughout education on consent, it is necessary to explore what it feels like to give and receive 'rejection' because 'saying no' or 'withdrawing' consent involves (or can feel like) rejection.

In the workshop, the boys distinguished between how it may be emotionally hard to accept rejection but that does not justify entitlement or abuse. There was a belief that "taking rejection is harder than giving it" and they wanted to explore what being rejected feels like and how to sit with and move past those feelings. **Coping with rejection is not a mandate but is a skill that can be developed over time.**

Developing this skill involves thinking critically about the difference between the feeling and acting on the feeling. **Boys need to be supported to recognise and accept their feelings without responding to them in a harmful way (either toward themselves or others).** Abusive responses to being rejected can be about deflecting shame – here, it is important to explore why rejection can feel shameful and where that comes from. What are the links with masculinity norms? Can we make space for feelings other than entitlement and defensiveness? Can we just say, as one boy in the workshop did, "oh, that sucks and isn't what we wanted and we feel a bit gutted... but that feeling won't last and so I can just accept it and move on."

In turn, dealing with rejection may become easier over time but it requires pushing back on the masculine norm of 'not showing any emotion' and, instead, creating spaces to talk about pain and vulnerability.

Important to recognise is that **certain social norms may create patterns in who does and doesn't get rejected.** It relates back to the status dynamics outlined above – high status individuals (according to social norms) may seem to get rejected less than low status. Boys can be encouraged to critique these hierarchies but then not internalise them. Several boys in the workshop said that while these patterns in rejection may exist, on an interpersonal level people have very different wants for relationships and so while it may be painful to be rejected, it does not mean the person is never going to find someone.

difference between the feeling and acting on the feeling

7 BECOMING EMOTIONALLY LITERATE BEFORE AND DURING OUR RELATIONSHIPS

A thread running throughout this guidance is that consent requires socio-emotional literacy, self-knowledge and intra-personal (as well as inter-personal) skills. At essence, **boys must understand and have a healthy relationship with themselves, and indeed their peers** (with Andrew Hampton outlining how to equip boys to have healthy peer cultures in his book '**Working with Boys**') **and to have identified their own wants, needs and goals before they move on to have intimate relationships with others**. Yet, self-knowledge and emotional literacy are lifelong endeavours and so can be supported by intimate relationships rather than needing to be entirely perfect before commencing a relationship. **It involves being sufficiently self-aware to be able to recognise how pressures and power dynamics may be affecting free and informed choice and, in turn, to feel able and willing to create and participate in safe spaces characterised by openness and honesty.**

It is important to support boys to think about how they can recognise and cope with their feelings, and exercise self-regulation and mindful decision-making. Here, it may help to identify and discuss the skills in terms of different categories:

- What awareness, skills and outlooks do I need as an individual?
- What do I need within my intimate relationships?
- What do I need within my peer relationships and friendships?
- What do I need within the wider social environments and cultures I inhabit?

An individual boy will not be able to make all of the above happen by himself but by identifying what is needed they can start to think about their own role and responsibilities beyond taken-for-granted dominant framings of teenage masculinity. Without thinking about the pressures that they may be experiencing or the norms they may be acting up to, it will be impossible to identify that in others – they can start with thinking about what the individual is striving for and then move on to how that may affect how they treat people and act in their relationships.

A question to ask could be: ***how might boys seeking inclusion with other boys end up potentially harming a girl because they are more attuned to the peer demands entailed in competitive masculinity plays than the feelings or needs of the girl?*** Here, the boy may himself be feeling disempowered and under pressure, but that creates, or risks creating, harm for another person.

Emotional intelligence is also about being able to read people (including oneself) and the situation at hand. Going back to the above themes, it's about **recognising the constraints on people and within situations and the actions that could be taken to address these constraints.** It is not about 'mind reading' but being able to identify when and what types of communication are required to make sure that consent is present. The examples outlined above could be used to explore matters such as: what constraints on free choice may exist here? Where do they come from? What can be done about them? What types of communication would help?

"It's about having the confidence to come forth and read your partner the best you can and be open with your partner – whether they're short term or long term – according to both of your personalities. Whereas otherwise, we feel like there's like one type of relationship out there that's being spread, and everybody's trying to fit in that box, when that's not the case... just as long as it's consensual and fair and balanced. So, I think all the conversations are about just having confidence, come to the middle of the table, and read your person, understand and have conversations with your person and form the correct relationship [for you]."

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

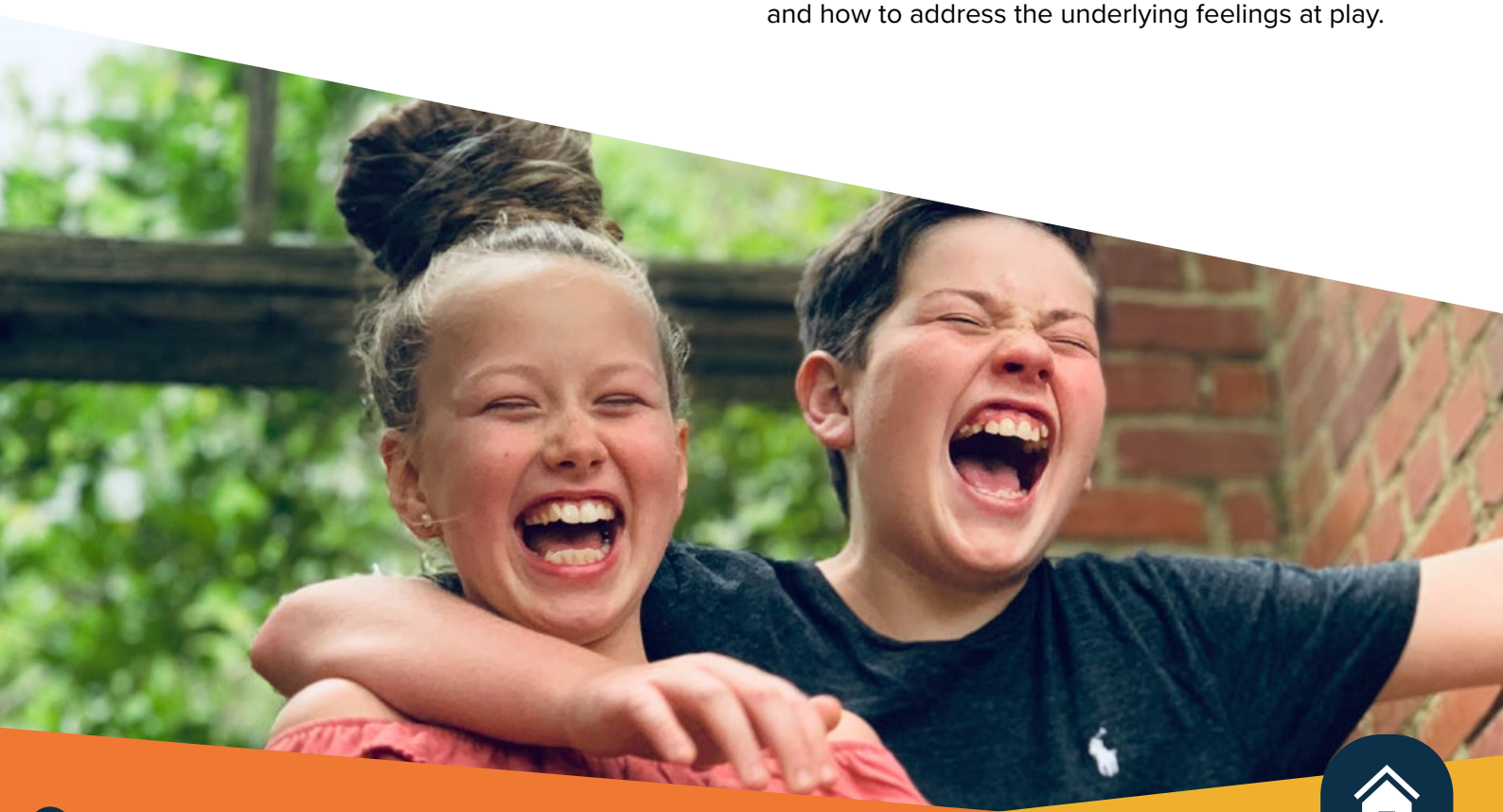
Educating about consent does not begin and end with consent. It is everything that goes on around consent – identity, norms, pressures, expectations, communication, rejection, intimacy, pleasure, and so on.

In the workshops, the boys wanted to talk about all of these things:

> *"When we talk about concepts [of consent], you're not really taught how to deal with rejection, how to understand body language – all of the stuff which are not really talked about. This means you have to learn the stuff yourself, so the mistakes you make the first time possibly just comes from whatever you happen to have seen already in your life."*

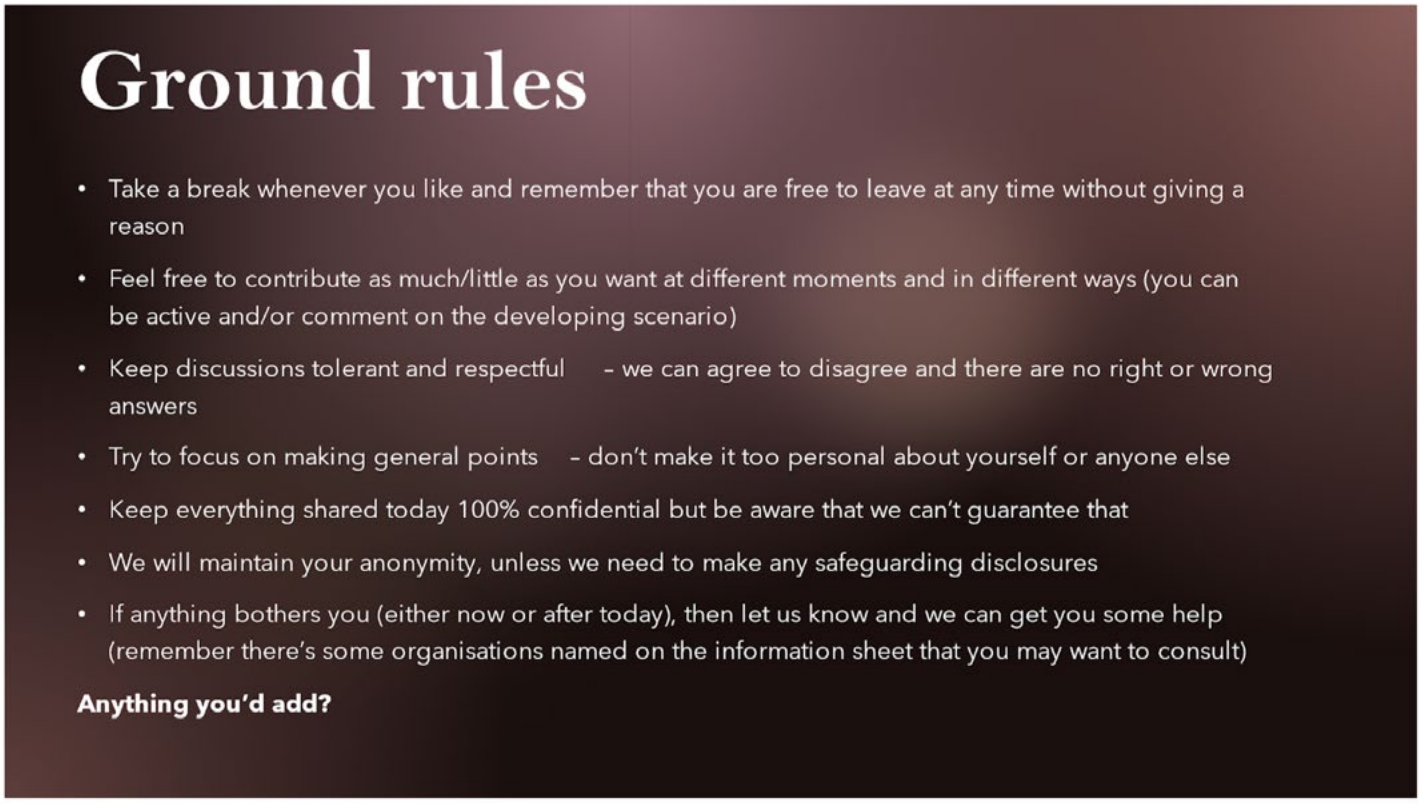
The purpose of consent education should, therefore, be about bringing together all these components – it involves co-identifying with boys what they think the components are and then helping them reflect and think about how to address the complexities. **It may not result in fast and firm solutions to the challenges they face, but the very process of reflecting and thinking critically is an important intra- and inter-personal skill that can aid them in developing positive and healthy relationships.**

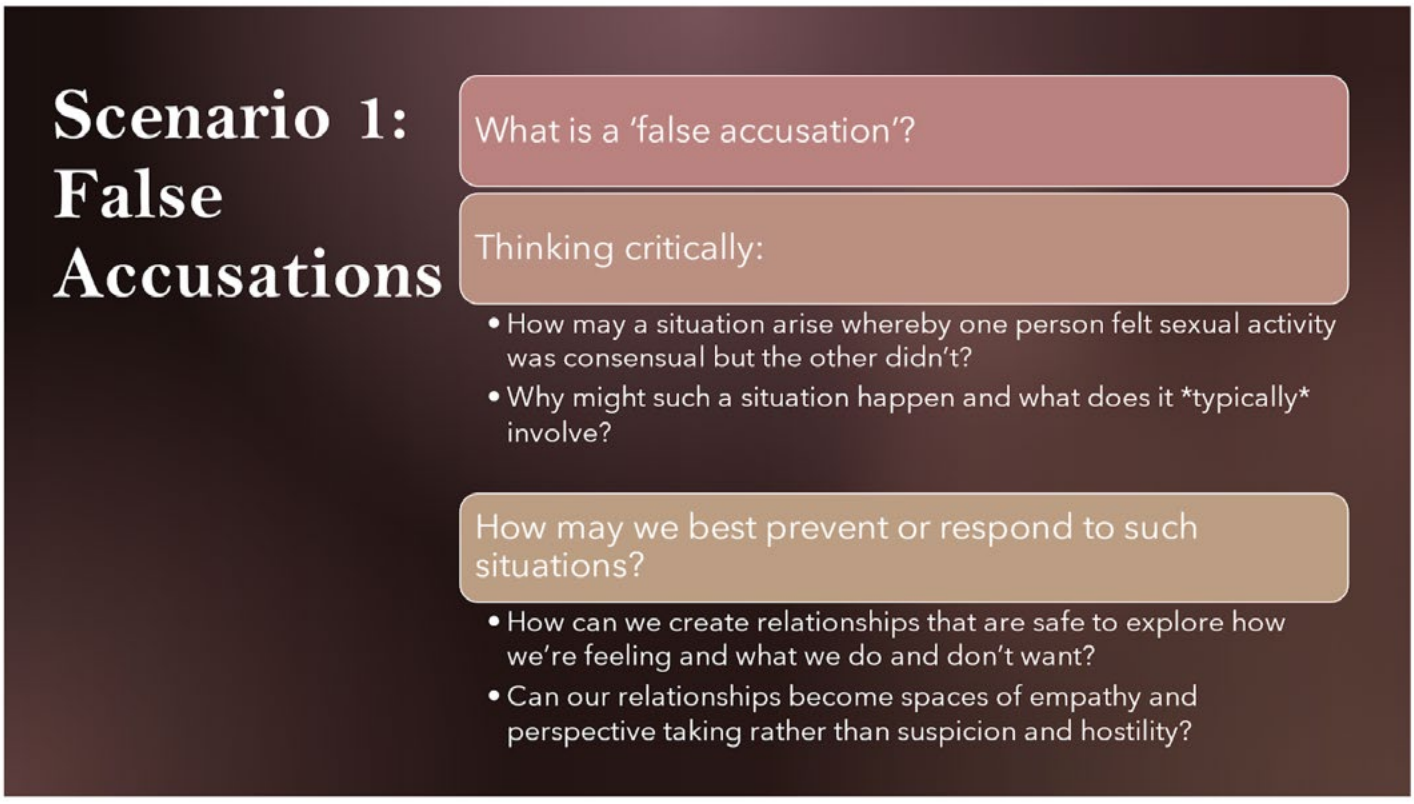
It is not just about the individual; discussing these issues with groups of boys can help them to participate in collective dialogue. The boys who participated in the research and the co-design workshop enjoyed airing their perspectives and hearing about how each other felt about the different issues. As facilitators, we were mindful of ensuring they felt safe to express feelings of confusion, powerlessness and alienation – **the very idea that it is okay to be different and the fact they were able to talk to one another about that was a powerful outcome of the process and something that can be supported by educators who want to help boys safely and constructively share their perspectives without being immediately shut down or blamed.** They also sometimes wanted to joke around and be playful in how they expressed particular points; we permitted this, in line with ground rules that prohibited any personally abusive statements or contributions. Educators need not tolerate or justify any abuse or hostility but can nevertheless dig deeper into what boys' perspectives may represent and how to address the underlying feelings at play.



APPENDIX I

Stimulus used in the workshop (can be freely adapted and applied for use):





Scenario 2: Pressure and consent

What pressures exist that may shape how people act and the choices they make in sexual interactions?

Thinking critically:

- Are these pressures always 'visible' and 'explicit'?
- What about invisible pressures or pressures that may come from beyond the people directly involved in the sexual interaction?
- May sexual activity happen even though both people were unsure or didn't want it?
- Why is it hard to 'reject' someone or say no?
- Is sex consensual vs. nonconsensual, or are there 'grey areas' where sex may be unwanted but complied with or agreed to?

How can we create 'safe spaces' to give, refuse and withdraw consent?

Does the law have all the answers, or do we need to think ourselves about what is ethical and responsible?

Scenario 3: Power and consent

What does power look like in sexual interactions?

- Who has the power? Girls? Boys? What about samesex couples?
- What other dynamics of power are there? Status, age, popularity, intoxication…?
- How might people exercise power in relationships and sexual interactions?

Do we always *feel* power?

- What's the difference between the power you're told you have (e.g., 'masculinity') and the power you do or don't feel dayto-day as individuals and in your relationships?
- Or – do all boys have the same types and amount of power?

How can we deal with power in our relationships and in sexual interactions?

- This might be our intimate relationships but maybe also our peer relationships and friendships too

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