

SAY YES TO CONSENT

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“I firmly believe that by instilling in young minds the importance of affirmative consent and relationships built on love and respect, that we can reduce the sexual violence inflicted on young women” (Silva 2016). Teaching comprehensive affirmative consent is a subject that has all too often been pushed aside for other topics and frowned upon teaching in early childhood classrooms. The reality is that a comprehensive education on consent when children are young leads to a greater understanding of sexual consent, and therefore fewer assaults. In addition, it helps children learn how to say no and have bodily autonomy at a young age, setting them up to know what is right and wrong when they reach secondary education and beyond. The purpose of this policy proposal and research was to prove that teaching consent throughout a student’s life is productive and beneficial to everyone, and to require on the federal level that all states, districts, and schools must integrate lessons of consent in kindergarten through high school graduation.

My proposal is to make the inclusion of comprehensive affirmative consent education mandatory for all states, thus giving students all equal education regardless of their given communities’ political undertones. As summarized in an article from Education Week, “Making understanding and negotiating consent a life skill gives children and adolescents ways to understand and respect both their own desires and those of other people” (Sparks 2019). Not only will teaching children consent support their bodily autonomy and wellbeing as they grow up, but it will teach them the skills to listen to others and be able to understand when something is not right. If given a good understanding in their primary years, it is the hope that students will know what is right and wrong when they grow older and enter secondary education or the workforce, and promote safe and respectful behavior wherever they choose to go.

For many, hesitations can be made when approaching teaching young children about consent, as they see it only relating to sex and sexual assault. Although it can sometimes be a difficult topic to bring up with students in the classroom, there are many resources available to educators to teach about consent to their young students who would find the most success learning about how to say no to hugs, dangerous situations, and the like. It also teaches kids how to respect when their friend or classmate says no. I found several options in my research as to how to incorporate consent education into lessons for young kids.

In an article from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, author Grace Tatter lays out some options on how to talk about consent with young children. Tatter recommends videos which

outline consent and children’s books to share during story time such as “My Body! What I Say Goes!” by Jayneen Sanders, and, “I Said No” by Kimberly King and Zach King. She also offers this advice: “Model consent and empower students. Of course, some of consent is skill-based: learning to simply ask questions about what behavior or actions are appropriate. ‘Would you rather a hug or a high-five?’ Give children agency over what is age-appropriate, like what snack to have, or what to read at story time” (Tatter 2018). The goal of teaching students about consent when they are young is to give them the tools to grow up respectful of each other and themselves and make sure they know what is right and wrong, as well as what is comfortable for them.

In kindergarten, students would ideally learn how to say no and respect when their classmates do not want physical contact. Teachers would read stories about consent and answer questions asked by children about what they are learning. Parents would be kept in the loop and understand what conversations are being had at school so they may continue at home in regards to family members. A first grade classroom would look similar, still reading stories and talking about the importance of bodily autonomy, and adding in an aspect of understanding body parts and what is okay and not okay to touch. In addition to introducing the topic of different body parts and “swimsuit areas,” a conversation could begin both at home and in the classroom about stranger danger and identifying an untrustworthy adult. Second through fifth grade would look similar, still instilling the morals around respecting your body and your friends’ bodies, while bringing in more conversation about potentially dangerous situations. By introducing the topic in elementary school and keeping it consistent in school and at home through the years, children will be effectively instilled with an understanding of affirmative consent, which will then support them as they continue learning about relationships, sexual assault, and other topics to be introduced in middle and high school.

By the time students reach middle school, they are much more aware of their surroundings and those around them. Likely at this point, they are thinking about relationships, but not always in them. Many sexual assaults happen in middle schools due to the ignorance and hormone-filled halls, so it is a good time to begin having more serious conversations with students about consent in regard to sexual assault and harassment. “Emphasize the importance of talking with a trusted adult. At this age, some students think, ‘Well adults just don’t understand,’ Schneider says. ‘I remind my students, though, that for teachers and parents, it’s our job to keep them safe’ and that if they

have an interaction they're uncomfortable with, with either a peer or an adult, they should tell an adult who they trust" (Tatter 2018). This quote from Tatter does a good job of acknowledging the difficulty in asking for help while in middle school and the importance of present trusted adult figures for students to rely on.

A large issue of middle school which directly impacts the proper education of consent is the developmental stage at which most students in middle school are. A mistake often made by educators when attempting to teach students about these topics is bringing them all into an auditorium where it is easier for them to get away with joking with their friends and separating students based on gender. By attempting to give a presentation on an uncomfortable topic with hundreds of middle schoolers packed together, the importance and severity of the topic can be lost (especially if the students have not received education on the topic before). Separating students creates many issues, including needlessly discriminating against transgender and nonbinary students, as well as giving students an unequal education.

Most students take a health class in seventh or eighth grade, and then again in high school, most likely in tenth grade. By the time students have reached high school and their high school sex education class, they are aware of sex and relationships and may be engaging in activities themselves. For these classes, it is important to talk about the effects of alcohol and drugs on consent; for example, if one or both partners are under the influence no matter what, consent cannot be given. Another important topic often skipped over is consent and comfortability in relationships. Especially in high school with high hormones and the excitement of new relationships, conversations of consent can be forgotten. It is important to make sure students are aware that just because they have engaged in an activity before or are dating does not give automatic consent. This is a topic that I have found to be forgotten and disassociated, which can be damaging to youth when navigating what is right and wrong.

For both middle and high schoolers, clear resources should be provided so that they can do reliable research on their own time. Because of the inquisitive nature of teenagers, many may feel the need to look into different topics on their own, and without correct sites and research habits, they can stumble across negative resources which give an inaccurate notion of consent and healthy sex and relationships. For example, Willis et al. (2019) quoted another source saying that "even though young people label pornography as their primary sex education, they identify sexual consent as an area that pornography does not teach them about." Although an uncomfortable topic, it is important that the presence of pornography be covered in classes.

The inclusion of affirmative consent education in health classes and throughout early childhood is severely lacking in the state legislature, and therefore damaging children who do not receive comprehensive lessons elsewhere on the subject. An article from CNN dis-

cussed a study that found that, "as it is, only 24 states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education in public schools.... Of those, only eight states require mention of consent or sexual assault...: California, Hawaii, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and West Virginia" (Maxouris & Ahmed 2018). In another study looked at by Malachi Willis, Kristen N. Jozkowski & Julia Read, the word consent rarely appeared in health class requirements for different states, with it appearing the most in Ohio's legislation three times. According to a study reviewed by NPR, "87 percent of students said that they, personally, would believe someone who reported a sexual assault. But only 51 percent of students thought their peers would believe such a report" (NPR Morning Edition 2018). Looking at these statistics is shocking; students do not believe their peers would believe a reported sexual assault. Included in educating students about consent would be teaching them how to believe and respect victims when they come forward, thus fostering an environment where they felt comfortable sharing their truths. In addition to the #MeToo movement, #WhyIDidntReport has brought attention to various concerns stopping victims from reporting the assault they endured. As good as it is that these issues are being brought forward now, it would be better to be able to avoid this altogether and give survivors a society and environment where they feel safe to report.

With my proposal, the teaching of comprehensive, affirmative consent would be mandatory across the states, beginning as early as kindergarten, with the goal of educating children on consent and respecting themselves as well as others. With this baseline from childhood, we would hope that by the time they reach post-secondary education or the workplace, they have the tools to stand up for themselves and others, understand and accept no as an answer, and give victims of sexual assault a safe environment to be heard and respected. While the topic of consent is often frowned upon in public school discussions (especially with young kids), the root of the issue is about teaching respect and boundaries in a way that will grow and mature with the student.

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