

Consent and Protecting Against Sexual Abuse

OUR POSITION:

Bravehearts believes that protecting children from sexual abuse requires proactive education and supportive environments, advocating for:

- **Age-Appropriate Consent Education:** Introducing concepts of personal boundaries and bodily autonomy.
- **Normalising Open Communication:** Where children feel comfortable discussing feelings, boundaries, and concerns
- **Training and Supporting Adults:** Providing professional development for adults on discussing and safety in age-appropriate ways.
- **Integrating Policies and Curricula:** Include consent, personal safety, and healthy relationships.
- **Strengthening Protective Factors:** Teaching children assertiveness and self-advocacy skills.
- **Dispelling Misconceptions About Consent:** Educating children and adults.

Background

Although children cannot legally or developmentally give valid consent to sexual activity, it is nonetheless essential to engage them in discussions about consent as part of child sexual abuse prevention and education. Providing age-appropriate guidance on personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, and the right to refuse unwanted touch equips children with the knowledge and vocabulary to recognise uncomfortable situations, identify inappropriate behaviours, and seek help when necessary. These conversations also reinforce the societal principle that abuse is never the child's fault and that adults bear full responsibility for respecting consent.

By fostering open dialogue about consent from an early age, caregivers, educators, and professionals can empower children, enhance protective factors, and create safe environments in which children feel confident to report violations, thereby supporting both preventive and responsive safeguarding measures.

Understanding Consent in the Context of Children

Children's incapacity to consent to sexual activity is both a legal and developmental reality. Legally, the age of consent varies across jurisdictions, but it universally acknowledges that minors cannot legally agree to sexual acts (Balter & van Rhijn, 2024). Developmentally, children lack the cognitive and emotional maturity to understand the complexities of sexual relationships, making them vulnerable to manipulation and coercion (Mythen & Weston, 2023; Summers & Van Camp, 2022).

Therefore, discussions about consent with children are not about granting them agency over sexual decisions but about empowering them with knowledge and language to recognise and report inappropriate behaviour (Bicket, 2023). These conversations focus on teaching children about personal

boundaries, the importance of saying "no," and the right to seek help if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

The Role of Consent Education in Prevention

Consent education plays a crucial role in preventing child sexual abuse by fostering mutual respect, empowering individuals to establish personal boundaries, and creating safer environments (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021)). Comprehensive consent education equips children with the knowledge to uphold their boundaries and respect others, fostering a culture of mutual understanding and communication (Bicket, 2023). Whether initiated through open conversations with caregivers or structured programs in institutions, the significance of consent education is prevalent across different aspects of life, contributing to a safer and more respectful society (Balter & van Rhijn, 2024).

Introducing age-appropriate conversations about personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, and the right to refuse unwanted touch helps children develop awareness and language to articulate discomfort, recognise inappropriate behaviours, and seek help when needed (Wurtele & Kenny, 2010). Moreover, these discussions shift societal understanding, emphasising that abuse is never the child's responsibility and that consent is an absolute requirement for adults. By normalising dialogue about consent from an early age, caregivers, educators, and professionals can empower children, strengthen protective factors, and foster environments in which children feel safe to report violations, thereby reinforcing both prevention and responsive safeguarding strategies (Aussie Childcare Network, 2025).

Challenges and Misconceptions

Despite its importance, discussing consent with children faces several challenges. Cultural taboos and societal discomfort with discussing sexuality often hinder open conversations (Bicket, 2023). Additionally, misconceptions about consent, such as the belief that silence implies consent or that previous consent applies to future situations, can lead to harmful behaviours (Goodin, 2024). Overcoming these challenges requires a concerted effort from parents, educators, and policymakers to create environments where open and honest discussions about consent are encouraged and normalised (Balter & van Rhijn, 2023; Balter & van Rhijn, 2024; Johnson & McDonald, 2025). This includes providing training for adults on how to have age-appropriate conversations with children and implementing policies that support comprehensive consent education in schools and communities (Balter & van Rhijn, 2024).

While children cannot legally or developmentally provide sexual consent, discussing the concept of consent is vital in preventing child sexual abuse. By educating children about personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, and the importance of saying "no," we empower them to recognise and report inappropriate behaviour. These discussions also shift societal understanding, emphasising that abuse is never the child's responsibility and that consent is an absolute requirement for adults.

Bravehearts Position

Protecting children from sexual abuse requires proactive education and supportive environments. Age-appropriate consent education (teaching children about boundaries, bodily autonomy, and the

right to refuse unwanted touch) empowers them to recognise and respond to unsafe situations. Combined with trained adults, clear policies, and community support, these strategies strengthen protective factors and create safe spaces for children to speak up. Consent education is preventive, not just responsive. Bravehearts advocates for:

- **Age-Appropriate Consent Education:** Introducing concepts of personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, and the right to refuse unwanted touch from an early age; the use of interactive activities (storytelling, role-play, games) to reinforce learning; and progressively introducing more complex concepts about relationships and consent as children age.
- **Normalising Open Communication:** This can be achieved through creating safe spaces where children feel comfortable discussing feelings, boundaries, and concerns, encouraging caregivers and educators to actively listen without judgment.
- **Training and Supporting Adults:** Providing professional development for educators, childcare staff, and community workers, as well as information to parents and guardians, on how to discuss consent and sexual safety in age-appropriate ways, recognising signs of abuse, responding appropriately to disclosures, and modelling of respectful behaviour and reinforcement of children's boundaries.
- **Integrating Policies and Curricula:** Include consent, personal safety, and healthy relationships in school and community programs, and ensuring programs are evidence-based, culturally sensitive, inclusive, and regularly updated.
- **Strengthening Protective Factors:** Teaching children assertiveness and self-advocacy skills and engaging communities in awareness campaigns to normalise respect and accountability.
- **Dispelling Misconceptions About Consent:** Educating children and adults that silence, hesitation, or past consent does not imply ongoing consent, reinforce that consent must be clear, enthusiastic, and continuous, and provide realistic examples and scenarios to practice recognising and asserting boundaries.

References

- Atreya, P. (2024). Teaching children consent skills through the lens of personal boundaries and bodily autonomy. University of the Pacific Theses and Dissertations. Retrieved from https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/4270 (25/08/2025)
- Aussie Childcare Network. (2025, July 28). *Teaching consent to toddlers and preschoolers*. Retrieved from <https://aussiechildcarenetwork.com.au/articles/teaching-children/teaching-consent-to-toddlers-and-preschoolers> (28/08/2025)
- Balter, A.-S., & van Rhijn, T. (2023). Sexuality education and early childhood educators in Ontario, Canada: A Foucauldian exploration of constraints and possibilities. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 24(4), 394–410. doi: 10.1177/14639491211060787
- Balter, A.-S., & van Rhijn, T. (2024). Child sexual abuse prevention. In L. Allen and ML. Rasmussen [Eds.] *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Sexuality Education* (pp. 118–128). Springer.
- Bicket, C. (2023, July 22). Consent education and its role in preventing sexual violence. Girls Human Rights Hub. <https://www.ghrh.org/blog/consent-education-and-its-role-in-preventing-sexual-violence>

- Goldfarb, E. S., & Lieberman, L. D. (2021). Teaching relationships education to prevent sexual abuse. *Journal of Family Violence*, 36(4), 391–402. doi: 10.1007/s10896-020-00212-3
- Goodin, R. E. (2024). *Consent Matters*. Oxford University Press
- Johnson, O. V., & McDonald, S. (2025). Empowering narratives: Understanding consent, personal boundaries, and bodily autonomy in U.S. children's picture books. *Journal of Children and Media*. doi: 10.1080/17482798.2025.2536265
- Mythen, G., & Weston, S. (2023). Educating young people about vulnerability to sexual exploitation: Safeguarding practitioners' standpoints at the intersections of gender, sexuality and risk. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 54(1), 363–380. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcad201
- Summers, M., & Van Camp, T. (2022). Maybe we should destigmatize it: Young adults' perceptions about instruction on sexual consent and sexual coercion during adolescence. *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Resilience*, 9(1), 1–18. doi: 10.7202/1099361ar
- Wurtele, S. K., & Kenny, M. C. (2010). Preventing online sexual victimization of youth. *The Journal of Behavior Analysis of Offender and Victim Treatment and Prevention*, 1(2), 39–47. doi: 10.1037/h0100232

Bravehearts Foundation Limited
ABN: 41 496 913 890 ACN: 607 315 917
PO Box 575, Arundel BC, Qld 4214
Phone 07 5552 3000 Email research@bravehearts.org.au
Information & Support Line 1800 272 831
bravehearts.org.au