

INSIGHTS

The hard conversation about sex and consent



Note to readers: The content of this Parenting Ideas Insights article contains strong sexual themes.

In February 2021, Chanel Contos posted an Instagram story to her account asking followers if they or someone close to them had been sexually assaulted by someone when they were at school. At this point, Ms Contos was not an “influencer”, and her account was just like all the other Instagram accounts run by emerging adults. Nothing special... except that question ignited a firestorm.

Within 24 hours, over 200 people replied ‘yes’.

Overwhelmed, but unsurprised by the response, Chanel launched a petition calling for more holistic and earlier consent education in Australia, as well as teachusconsent.com, a platform where people can share anonymous testimonies of sexual assault. Since the website’s launch, over 45,000 Australians have signed the petition, with more than 6,700 people sharing their stories of sexual assault on the website.

According to [2020 research](#) from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1 in 6 women (17%, or 1.6 million) and 1 in 25 men (4.3%, or 385,000) have experienced at least 1 sexual assault since the age of 15. During 2018–19, nearly all (97%) of sexual assault offenders recorded by police were male.

Males aged 15–19 had the highest offender rates.

Let me be breathtakingly clear: I regularly hear stories of boys hassling girls for nudes, begging them for sex, demanding oral sex, pushing girls’ heads down to their groins, plying girls with alcohol and taking advantage of them sexually, inviting their mates to join them in group sex, and more.

And lest you think that this is a beat up on boys, I hear far too many stories of girls threatening boys with false cries of assault *unless* the boy acquiesces to sexual activity he is not wanting to consent to.

In the [6th National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health](#) (conducted in 2018 out of Latrobe University) which involved 6327 Australian school children in grades 10-12 (females = 3469), researchers asked all students to indicate whether or not they had engaged in any of eight different sexual behaviours. Results are shown for five of those behaviours in the table below:

Grade	Deep Kissing	Touching Genitals	Oral Sex	Anal Sex	Vaginal Sex
10	66.3%	55%	39.1%	8.4%	32.8%
11	74.4%	65%	51.6%	11.9%	44%
12	80%	72.5%	61.7%	16.3%	52.9%

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When asked if they had participated in unwanted sex, 15.9% of males said that they had. For females, that percentage increased to 36.8%. The reasons for unwanted sex included too drunk (34.2%), too high (13.7%), my partner thought I should (52%), my friends thought I should (9%), and I was frightened (31.4%).

We have a consent problem. And the problem is due to a wide range of factors, many of which we don't have space to discuss here. But let's review a few so we, as parents, know how to help our children.

Have the conversations

Too many of us are not having the hard conversations. The kids are resistant. We're uncomfortable. There's no time. We don't know what to say.

None of that is going to be enough when your child becomes either a victim or a perpetrator. The conversations matter. Just start. (In my home we have a family "sex" talk on the first Sunday of every month. The kids know it's happening and are expected to be there and participate. We have treats. And we talk about what they're hearing at school.)

Consent is not enough

We need to teach more than consent. Consent, by definition, is voluntary agreement to participate in something – and not being unable to consent due to incapacity (such as alcohol consumption or being asleep). But this is such a low bar.

Do you want your daughter to merely consent? Do you want your son to shrug his shoulders and say, "Sure, sounds fine to me I guess."

We will do well to teach our children that intimacy is always going to be best when we are patient, and when we choose to be intimate with the right person in the right place in the right time for the right reason. Too much research highlights that missing one of these "right" elements casts long and painful shadows through many people's lives.

Safe and Healthy

When we talk with our children about consent, keep the focus on safe and healthy decisions rather than right and wrong decisions. Discussions of right and wrong – or good and bad – can often end up going sideways. Sometimes our kids will disagree with us on what's right and good or what's wrong and bad. But safe and healthy are pretty clear. They get it, and morality doesn't play as big a part in the discussion. (This has positive and negative effects, but for now, it seems we get further in our conversations using this process.)

Invite them to step up

In a recent conversation with Mia Freedman, she shared how she encourages her kids to be the best kids in the room. If they're at a party and someone looks like they're going to be taken advantage of, she asks her kids, "who do you want to be? Do you want to be the one taking advantage, or the one helping?"

As we invite our children to live the highest version of themselves, and to remember that consent means knowing what you want, knowing what the other person wants, and sticking with what you both want, they'll make safer, healthier, and wiser decisions. And hopefully we can help prevent all of them from becoming one more victim or one more perpetrator.

To have Dr Justin Coulson present his essential "Sex, Consent, and Staying Safe" keynote for parents, teachers, and students at your school (live or via webinar) get in touch with our office today via caroline@happyfamilies.com.au.



Dr Justin Coulson

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel 9's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families podcast. He has written 6 books about families and parenting. For further details visit www.happyfamilies.com.au.