

TIP SHEET

Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Program

Educate, Support, Prevent: Strategies to Address Sexual Coercion Among Youth

April 2024

Sexual coercion is a form of relationship abuse where a person may use specific tactics or strategies to pressure or force another person into engaging in sexual contact against their will (ACOG, 2022). In other words, sexual coercion can make a person feel—for any reason—that they must concede to sexual contact. Sexual coercion can often occur between romantic partners, but it can also happen in other contexts, such as between friends, family, acquaintances, or strangers. It can happen at school, at a party, or anywhere else. Sexual coercion can take on many different forms and may be difficult to identify given the range of actions that someone might take to coerce another person to engage in sexual activity.

Examples of ways someone might use sexual coercion

- Making frequent and persistent attempts at sex
- Using guilt to pressure someone to have sex
- Creating a sense of fear or intimidation about the consequences of saying no
- Saying that *not* having sex will harm or end the relationship
- Using alcohol or drugs to lower someone's inhibitions
- Attempting to influence someone with excessive displays of affection and attention, typically during the early stages of a relationship—often called “love-bombing”
- Responding negatively with sadness, anger, or resentment if someone refuses or hesitates to agree to something
- Using threats to release explicit images or videos to get someone to send more images or perform sexual acts—often called [sextortion](#)

(FBI, n.d.; Office on Women's Health, 2021; The Hotline, n.d.-a , n.d.-b)



TIPS FOR TEACHING YOUTH ABOUT CONSENT IN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH PROGRAMMING

- [Establish a safe and nonjudgmental space.](#)
- [Emphasize the value and characteristics of healthy relationships.](#)
- [Encourage self-reflection to help youth understand their desires and boundaries.](#)
- [Explore power dynamics.](#)
- [Engage in active and ongoing learning about youth culture to facilitate tailored and accessible conversations on consent.](#)
- [Incorporate learnings about legal consequences for sexual assault and rape.](#)
- [Address intersectionality and inclusivity when discussing sexual coercion and consent.](#)
- [Involve families and other trusted adults in conversations about sexual coercion and consent.](#)

Although it is difficult to obtain precise prevalence rates of sexual coercion among youth, findings from the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey reveal that 11% of adolescents experienced sexual violence in the past year¹ with female adolescents (17.9%) reporting higher rates than male adolescents (4.6%) (Clayton et al., 2023). Furthermore, existing research indicates that youth with historically marginalized identities related to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability experience higher rates of sexual violence and coercion. In comparison to all racial and ethnic groups, American Indian and Alaska Native youth reported the highest rate of sexual violence (15.8%). Among LGBTQIA2S+ youth, nearly one in four experienced sexual violence in the past year, and LGBTQIA2S+ youth were five times more likely than their heterosexual peers to have ever been forced to have sex (Clayton et al., 2023). Adolescents who experience sexual coercion can face a range of sexual and reproductive health outcomes leading to significant physical, emotional, and social consequences, including a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections and having unwanted pregnancies as well as increased risk of experiencing depression and anxiety (Snead & Babcock, 2019).

To support youth in navigating situations and relationships where sexual coercion occurs, it is essential that sexual and reproductive health programs address the topic of consent, because it is a key element to preventing sexual coercion.

¹ In the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, youth were asked the following regarding sexual violence: During the past 12 months, how many times did anyone force you to do sexual things that you did not want to do? (Count such things as kissing, touching, or being physically forced to have sexual intercourse.) Sexual violence is typically defined as any non-consensual sexual activity and involves a wide range of violence, including rape, sexual assault, sexual coercion, or any other unwanted sexual contact or behavior (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2010).

So, what is consent?

Consent is an agreement between partners to engage in sexual activity (RAINN, n.d.). Consent must be clearly and freely communicated (verbally and non-verbally) without the influence of alcohol and drugs and with the understanding that it can be revoked at any time. When talking about consent, it can be as simple as saying “yes” or “no,” but it can also include less straightforward communication such as body language. For example, positive body language, such as leaning in, maintaining eye contact, or smiling might indicate pleasure or willingness to continue, while pulling away, an expressionless face, or tense or stiff body language might indicate anxiety or a desire to stop. Consent requires communication at every step of the way and is a “proactive expression of what partners are comfortable with and want to do together” (Love is Respect, n.d.). Even a situation that starts with consent can turn coercive if one person decides that they no longer want to engage in sexual activity but is coerced to continue.


It is important to note that even if a person appears to give consent, there are laws that specify the minimum age someone must be before they are legally capable of consenting to sex. These laws, which vary by state, are in place to protect minors who may not have the capacity to provide consent. Engaging in sexual activity with someone who is under the age of consent is considered statutory rape (WomensLaw.org, 2021). Some states have laws that specify that it is [illegal for two minors to have sex if one or both are under the age of consent](#). Because it is a crime to engage in sexual activity with someone without their consent, it is important to educate youth about the [age of consent laws in your state](#).



STRATEGIES AND TIPS TO PROMOTE CONSENT AND ADDRESS SEXUAL COERCION IN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH PROGRAMMING


Promoting consent and addressing sexual coercion in adolescent sexual and reproductive health programming requires a comprehensive approach that focuses on **prevention, education, and support**. Conversations around coercion and consent should happen early and often, and there are developmentally appropriate ways to discuss these topics with youth. Here are some strategies with practical examples on how to address sexual coercion and promote consent with youth in sexual and reproductive health programming:

- **Establish a safe and nonjudgmental space.** Many young people might not feel comfortable discussing issues of sexual coercion or consent. Foster an environment of respect, non-judgment, and confidentiality, allowing young people to express their thoughts and experiences openly. Before engaging in discussions with youth about sexual coercion, it is important to clarify mandated reporter laws to ensure they understand what information can remain confidential.

 **Try this:** Create a question box where youth can drop questions or comments anonymously, and address individual concerns in a way where all youth can benefit.


- **Emphasize the value and characteristics of healthy relationships.**

Situate conversations about sexual coercion and consent on the importance of healthy relationships. When youth understand what healthy relationships look like, they can recognize when their boundaries are being violated, identify tactics of coercive behavior, and feel empowered to assert their rights to consent.

 **Try this:** Pull varied examples from TV shows, movies, news, or social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook), and ask youth to identify what actions are healthy and unhealthy.



- **Encourage self-reflection to help youth understand their desires and boundaries.** Through self-reflection, youth can delve into their emotions and thoughts to better understand their desires in relationships, both emotionally and sexually, and define and set their personal boundaries before they encounter situations where they might feel pressured. This process can help build the confidence necessary to navigate relationships with autonomy and assertiveness.

 **Try this:** Create a poster with this acronym, post it in a visible space, and encourage youth to think about what each statement means:

B – Be true to yourself

O – Only say yes when you mean it

U – Understand that not everyone will be pleased to hear your boundaries

N – Never feel guilty for speaking your truth


D – Do not adjust your needs or desires to please others


A – Ask for what you want

R – Remember why you set the boundary in the first place


Y – Your no is your no, your yes is your yes²

- **Explore power dynamics.** Power imbalances can change the dynamics of romantic relationships and experiences, leading to situations where individuals are pressured into engaging in sexual activity. Encourage youth to critically analyze how uneven power dynamics can influence the ability to freely give or withhold consent. For youth, it is particularly important to note that age differences can be a significant factor in creating imbalances, with younger individuals often at higher risk of experiencing sexual coercion.


 **Try this:** Develop a series of scenarios that reflect the realities of power imbalances and ask youth to consider how each scenario influences consent caused by power dynamics.

² Adapted from an acronym created by Nila Cozen, a holistic psychologist in Germany. See her website here: <https://www.aboutthegoodlife.me/> 


- **Engage in active and ongoing learning about youth culture to facilitate tailored and accessible conversations on consent.** Consent can often be or feel complex, particularly when focused on technical definitions. Although it is important to have a clear understanding of the technical aspects of consent, it is equally crucial to ensure that discussions and examples of consent resonate with youth experiences. Staying informed about what youth care about and are engaged in can help you adapt language and examples to be relatable and accessible. See [Let's Talk Consent](#), an infographic you can share with the youth you serve.

 **Try this:** Analyze song lyrics, social media posts, or news stories related to consent and healthy relationships and encourage youth to share their thoughts, experiences, or questions.


- **Incorporate learnings about legal consequences for sexual assault and rape.** Equip youth with a comprehensive understanding of the severe repercussions that non-consensual sexual acts can bring. This can deter youth from engaging in harmful behavior and promote a culture of accountability, consent, and respect, emphasizing the importance of clear and enthusiastic consent in all intimate interactions.

 **Try this:** Host a quiz game where youth answer questions about the legal consequences of sexual assault, rape, and sextortion, followed by discussions on the significance of these consequences.

- **Address intersectionality and inclusivity when discussing sexual coercion and consent.** Recognize and acknowledge that youth with diverse identities, including those related to race, gender, and sexual orientation, experience and navigate sexual coercion and consent differently based on intersecting identities. By actively engaging with and validating diverse experiences, programs can foster a more inclusive and empowering approach to sexual and reproductive health education.

 **Try this:** Ask youth to draw a diagram depicting their intersecting identities and facilitate a group discussion on how such interaction can influence their experiences with sexual coercion and consent.

- **Involve families and other trusted adults in conversations about sexual coercion and consent.** Families and other trusted adults play a significant role in the lives of young people and can serve as essential sources of guidance, protection, and support. Sexual and reproductive health programs can provide information, resources, and training to adults to ensure that they feel comfortable having conversations about sexual coercion and consent with the goal of creating a network of support for youth.

 **Try this:** Provide discussion guides or conversation starters adults can use to initiate conversations about sexual coercion and consent.



Supporting youth to identify and foster healthy relationships includes educating them on the risks of sexual coercion and the importance of consent. By equipping youth with the knowledge and tools to recognize and navigate situations involving sexual coercion as well as promoting consent, your organization can play a key role in empowering youth to make informed decisions about their bodies and relationships.

The topic of sexual coercion and consent can be sensitive and potentially triggering for some youth because of past or current trauma. See this [Creating Safe Spaces facilitator's guide](#) to support your efforts in providing trauma-informed programming.

All grantees and staff working directly with youth are mandated reporters. It is your responsibility to follow state and federal laws on reporting cases of child abuse, neglect, or harm. This includes when a young person has experienced sexual violence or coercion. For more detailed information and support, read [Mandatory Reporting and Keeping Youth Safe](#).

RESOURCES

Family and Youth Services Bureau: [Let's Talk Consent](#)

This infographic is intended to be shared with youth. It explains what consent is and why it is important. The infographic provides resources for youth to learn more and hotlines they can contact to get support if they have been sexually assaulted.

Family and Youth Services Bureau: [Building Healthy Relationships: A Plug and Play Activity for Youth](#)

This interactive lesson on identifying healthy and unhealthy characteristics of relationships is designed for grantees to supplement programming with middle and high school youth.

Family and Youth Services Bureau: [Like, Love, Follow: Understanding Teen Dating Violence In The Digital World](#)

This webinar was hosted on March 23, 2023, for Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grantees to learn about the effects of teen dating violence and its impact on overall well-being. It covered foundational concepts, the role of the digital world in teen dating violence, and prevention strategies.

Family and Youth Services Bureau: [Think Twice About Sexting](#)

This infographic highlights what sexting is, why it is risky, and how teens can protect themselves and others from the harmful effects of sexting.

Loveisrespect.org: [Healthy Relationship High School Educators Toolkit](#)

This toolkit is for educators who work with youth and includes content, discussion guides, and activities specific to building healthy relationships.

GLSEN, Inc.: [Safe Space Kit](#)

This guide provides practical strategies that will help you support LGBTQIA2S+ students, educate about anti-LGBTQIA2S+ bias, and advocate for change.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [Dating Matters Toolkit](#)

This evidence-based toolkit was developed by the CDC and is designed to teach 11- to 14-year-olds healthy relationship skills before they start dating.

National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, VAWnet: [Pregnancy Prevention Resources](#)

This webpage is for pregnancy prevention programs and includes a list of resources that provide guidance on recognizing and responding to dating violence and reproductive coercion.

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN): [How Does Your State Define Consent?](#)

This article describes RAINN's Defining Consent database.

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN): [Consent Laws \(by state\)](#)

State laws regarding consent, including information on age of consent in each state.

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