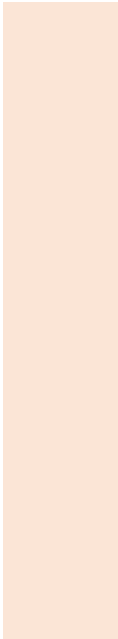




Student Wellbeing Hub

Understanding relationships

Module **3**
Year 9



Teaching resource for
students with autism

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Introduction

This resource is designed to support teachers of students with autism. It aims to help you as a teacher to understand some of the strengths and challenges that this diverse cohort of students brings to the topic. The core audience is teachers who work in mainstream schools rather than special schools.

The resource includes background information, links to resources designed for teacher use and resources that can be used with students.

The main areas that this module covers are:

- Understanding how healthy sexual relationships develop
- Identifying abusive, unhealthy or toxic relationships
- Self-advocacy in the context of friends/relationships
- Consent

Background information

In teaching this module, it is useful to understand the needs, challenges and strengths experienced and expressed by students with autism in terms of relationships. The following resources provide useful background for teachers:



[Peer relationships and social interaction in secondary school for students with an autism spectrum disorder¹](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/supportmaterials.aspx)

[Communication and conversation: How to talk to a student with an autism spectrum disorder²](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/supportmaterials.aspx)

[Organization for Autism Research: Healthy relationships³](https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide-healthy-relationships/#healthyrelationships)

[The protection of children and young people with autism from violence and abuse⁴](https://www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/The-protection-of-children-and-young-people-with-autism-from-violence-and-abuse.pdf)

¹ <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/supportmaterials.aspx>

² <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/supportmaterials.aspx>

³ <https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide-healthy-relationships/#healthyrelationships>

⁴ <https://www.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/The-protection-of-children-and-young-people-with-autism-from-violence-and-abuse.pdf>

Australian Curriculum

[Achievement standard links:](#)

- By the end of Year 10, students critically analyse contextual factors that influence identities, relationships, decisions and behaviours.
- They analyse the impact attitudes and beliefs about diversity have on community connection and wellbeing.
- They evaluate the outcomes of emotional responses to different situations.
- They apply decision-making and problem-solving skills when taking action to enhance their own and others' health, safety and wellbeing.

Understanding how healthy sexual relationships develop

The intention of this section of the module is to assist students to better understand degrees of relationships and to be better able to distinguish between relationships that are healthy and those that are unhealthy. It aims to bolster students' confidence in asserting themselves and in knowing where to seek help if a relationship is unsafe or dangerous.

Introducing the topic

As an introduction to this topic, ask students how they would sort people in their own lives. The criteria that they use may be personal, but the exercise can be a way to start a conversation about distinguishing between relationships.

Teaching activity 1: Friendship pyramid

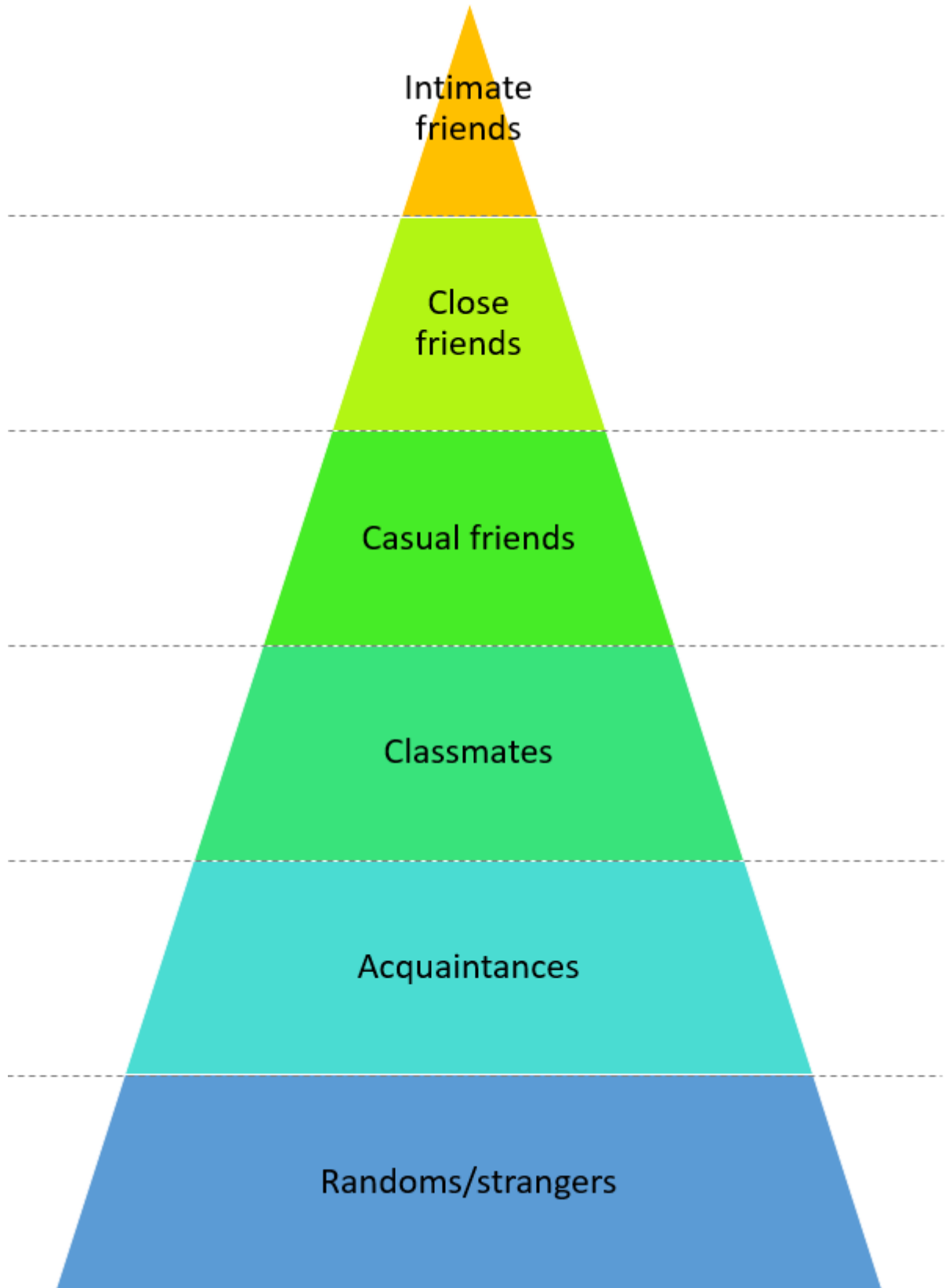
Use the worksheet on the next page to help students explore different types of relationships. This is an individual, private activity. If students need more input here in terms of the diagram, the US-based [Organization for Autism Research](https://researchautism.org/)⁵ includes information about most of these categories on the page: [What are some different types of relationships?](https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide-healthy-relationships/#differenttypesofrelationships)⁶

⁵ <https://researchautism.org/>

⁶ <https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide-healthy-relationships/#differenttypesofrelationships>

Worksheet: The friendship pyramid

Write the names of people you know in the correct places, in terms of their relationships with you. This is private and you do not have to share it with anyone else. Your teacher can help if



Discussion

Once the students have finished the task, ask them to discuss if there were any surprises about who fitted where. If appropriate, facilitate a discussion about these categories and what makes a difference, for example, between a close relationship and an intimate relationship.



Friendships and the word 'friend' can be especially confusing because people in our society use the word friend very often and with very different meanings. You might wish to tease out the difference between 'close friends', 'casual friends' and 'acquaintances'.

In the discussion, note that one definition of an intimate relationship is that it is:

... an interpersonal relationship that involves physical or emotional intimacy. Although an intimate relationship is commonly a sexual relationship, it may also be a non-sexual relationship involving family, friends, or acquaintances. ([Wikipedia](#), May 2020)

Further steps in a relationship

Ask students to think about their diagrams. To what extent have people changed positions as time has passed? Give the examples of friendships changing, or people moving away or when a bad argument can impact a relationship.

Identifying abusive, unhealthy or toxic relationships

This section of the module aims to give students the skills to identify abusive, unhealthy or toxic relationships.

Difficulty in being able to 'read' other people and therefore understand and interpret their intentions makes young people with autism incredibly vulnerable to abuse. Many people with autism desperately want to have friends (as we all do), but may struggle to know the best ways of starting and maintaining friendships.

Teaching students to recognise unhealthy relationship qualities early is important because unhealthy relationships can sometimes become abusive relationships later on.

Healthy and unhealthy relationships

Depending on your students and the content that has previously been covered, it may be useful to use the chart on the web page [Healthy and unhealthy relationships](#)⁷. The chart lists some examples of important qualities in a healthy relationship and compares those qualities to unhealthy and abusive situations.

The web page provides this useful summary of the feelings associated with a shift from healthy to unhealthy to abusive.

Briefly:

- In a healthy relationship, a person is *asked* to do something.
- In an unhealthy relationship, a person is *pressured* to do something.
- In an abusive relationship, a person is *forced* to do something.

Healthy	Unhealthy	Abusive
Communicating: You communicate with each other, whether verbally, in writing or with body language. You're able to express how you feel, and you feel safe doing so. You listen and respect what the other person is saying.	Not communicating: When problems arise, you and your partner fight or don't discuss them at all.	Communicating in a hurtful way: Threatens, insults or demeans the other person verbally, in writing or with body language. Doesn't listen to the other person.

⁷ <https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide-healthy-relationships/#healthyandunhealthy>

Teaching activity 2: Role-play

Pair students up and give each pair a scenario. Ask them to act out the scenario and include what could happen next if the people involved are in a healthy and respectful relationship. Have them role-play both angles – the healthy, then the unhealthy. Debrief afterwards.

Jill and Lara have been dating for six months. Jill wants to go to the movies this weekend but Lara wants to play Dungeons and Dragons because she always plays Dungeons and Dragons on Saturdays.

Art and Lou are arranging their first date. Art has saved up some money from his part-time job after school and wants to take Lou to Comicon. Art is happy to pay for Lou's ticket. Lou has never been to Comicon, but is excited about it. She is worried about what to wear.

Frankie and Holli have been on four dates. Holli's older brother, Ali, came on all of these dates to keep an eye on them. Frankie wants to take Holli on a date without Ali. He is deciding whether to be upfront and honest or try and get Holli to lie to her family.



Teaching activity 3: Interactive Power and Control Wheel

This activity helps students to explore the signs of different types of unhealthy, abusive or toxic relationships. The [Power and Control Wheel](#)⁸ is a tool that helps explain the different ways an abusive partner can use power and control to manipulate a relationship.

Ask students to open the wheel on a PC or device (your browser may ask for permission to allow a Flash object). Alternatively, you might open the wheel on a shared device or smartboard. Each spin of the interactive wheel takes students to a page with a short video that depicts the behaviour, and text describing common 'red flags' and strategies that students can use to protect themselves against a particular type of behaviour. Students can identify what areas they want to know more about, or a different topic can be selected each session by the teacher.

Select one or more of the scenarios to discuss in terms of:

- How can the person in the video change the dynamics?
- What could he/she say to be more assertive?
- Who can s/he get support from?

Identifying characteristics of positive and negative relationships

Extend this activity by focusing on improving student's identification of the characteristics of positive and negative relationships.



Download [Healthy and Unhealthy Relationship Scenarios](#)⁹ (PDF, 3.7 MB)

Follow the directions in the document and work through the scenarios with students, exploring whether self-esteem is being increased or decreased in each case and what effect that might have on their relationship.

⁸ <https://www.loveisrespect.org/is-this-abuse/power-and-control-wheel/>

⁹ https://safersmarterfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/HighSchool_Worksheet_HealthyandUnhealthyRelationshipsScenarios.pdf

Teaching activity 4: Sorting exercise A

Students: Cut-out the statements and sort them into one of two relationships categories: 'healthy' or 'unhealthy'.

Your friend respects your feelings and opinions.	You rarely get to plan what the two of you will do together.
Your friend bullies and makes fun of other kids at school.	You usually feel happy when you are with this person.
Your friend criticises you or people you care about.	Your friend is happy when good things happen to you.
You say that you agree with your friend, even though you really don't. You are afraid they won't be your friend anymore if you disagree.	Your friend talks to you about their feelings.
You and your friend enjoy doing some of the same things or share some interests.	Your friend threatens to hurt you.
Your friend always borrows money from you and doesn't give it back.	Your friend often ignores you when there are other people around.
You are afraid of your friend's temper.	You are nervous that if you tell your friend something personal, they will tell other people at school.



Adapted from [Healthy relationships](#)

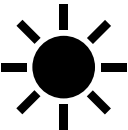

Teaching activity 5: Sorting exercise B

Students: Use the statements from **Sorting exercise A** to apply to each of the concepts below. For example:

You and your friend enjoy doing some of the same things or share some interests.

= **Equality** and/or **Fun**

<p>Equality – partners share roles and responsibilities to make sure this is fair and they compromise when making decisions.</p>	<p>Emotional safety – partners feel safe to express their feelings and emotions and can disagree with each other respectfully.</p>
<p>Disrespect – one partner disrespects the opinions and belongings of the other, e.g. breaking their things or putting them down in front of other people.</p>	<p>Physical abuse – one or both partners hits or otherwise physically hurts or intimidates, often in order to dominate or get their own way.</p>
<p>Sexual respect – partners respect each other and never force or pressure each other to engage in sexual activity.</p>	<p>Respect – Partners treat each other positively, kindly, with compassion and they accept each other’s opinions and friends and listen to each.</p>
<p>Control – one partner tries to control the other, makes all the decisions, e.g not letting them do what they want, telling them what to wear.</p>	<p>Independence – Each partner has their own identity and has friendships outside of their relationship.</p>

<p>Co-dependence – One or both partners feel they can't love without the other, they may make threats about hurting themselves if the relationship ends.</p>	<p>Intimidation – One partner tries to control every aspect of the other's life. They may refuse to let them see their friends or family and threaten or engage in physical violence.</p>
<p>Physical safety – partners treat each other respectfully and feel physically safe in each other's company.</p>	<p>Hostility – One partner is mean and unkind to the other, often upsetting the other partner who can become anxious and fearful.</p>
<p>Sexual abuse – one partner forces or pressures the other to engage in sexual activity when they don't want and have not given consent.</p>	<p>Honesty – partners are open and honest about their dreams, worries, emotions and share information about what is happening in their lives.</p>
<p>Dishonesty – one or both partners are dishonest, e.g. one partner steals from or lies to the other partner.</p>	<p>Fun – both partners enjoy the relationship, they have fun together and when by themselves. They can laugh together.</p>
<p> HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS</p>	<p> UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS</p>

Self-advocacy in the context of friends or relationships

This section of the module explores self-advocacy. We are all different, every human being has skills, strengths and support needs. Some people's support needs are obvious and constant, whilst others are hidden and may change according to the context.

[Module 1 Year 9: Expressing feelings](#) focused on identity. Students explored the different facets of their identity which will be useful to support the development of self-advocacy skills.

Some students are already skilled self-advocates by Year 9, while others have not been introduced to the idea and may not realise that they can self-advocate. At its heart, self-advocacy is understanding yourself and being able to express yourself in ways that enable you to get your support needs met. In Australia, the [Autistic Self Advocacy Network](#) is the largest adult autistic self-advocacy group.

In general, students should be supported to self-advocate and work towards independence by being actively engaged in their lives, including at school. This is particularly important for students with very high support needs, who may not have had much agency within their life to date. There are a range of ways the students can learn to understand themselves and self-advocate in a range of contexts.

In this case, students are going to be focused on self-advocacy in friendships or relationships. Part of this self-advocacy can be exploring their interests through volunteering, part-time or summer jobs. These can lead to new friendships and feelings of competence and confidence outside of school and the home.

Knowing your own likes and dislikes

For teens, a huge part of self-advocacy with friends and in relationships is developing the confidence to express their needs instead of being compliant or highly anxious. Teenagers can want to be a part of a group so much that they suppress their needs and wants in order to fit in; teens with autism are no different in this respect. However, it can be harder for them to fit in and to find people on their 'wavelength'. It can help to work through their likes and dislikes.

Teaching activity 6: Likes and dislikes

Students: Use the template below to explore your likes and dislikes.

Activities I like to do by myself:	Activities I never like:
------------------------------------	--------------------------

Activities I like to do with others:	Activities I only like to do with specific people:
--------------------------------------	--

How I communicate typically:	How I communicate when I am really stressed or anxious:
------------------------------	---

Touch – I am OK with these types of touch from these specific people:	Touch – I don't like any people to touch me in these ways:
---	--

Sensory – I like these sensory experiences:	Sensory – these smells, textures etc are a problem for me:
---	--

Students can then move on to discussing what kinds of foods they like and dislike, sharing why they like or dislike a particular food. This activity helps students to become more aware that different people like and dislike different things in a way that supports them to understand that it is not inherently good or bad to like or dislike particular foods.

Note that sharing personal preferences and opinions can be very difficult for some students who may have been teased about their interests and passions over the years.

If students struggle to share their likes and dislikes, try introducing the topic through games such as ‘What is this part of the photo from?’ For this activity, you can use cut-up photos of [everyday objects](#) and [animals](#). Given part of a photo, students form and give an opinion about what the object might be. It is important that the group agrees to some group norms prior to playing, namely that they will respect each other’s opinions and guesses.



It may be useful to revisit advice about [Establishing a group agreement](#)¹⁰.

The ability to identify their own likes and dislikes gives students the foundation to be able to express what they do and don’t like in a relationship – such as if they do or don’t like holding hands or kissing.

In exercising choice, students become more confident and competent in making choices.

This can be very difficult for young people with autism who have executive functioning issues or who are perfectionists. Note that working with students to reinforce skills leading to positive relationships and skills in identifying unhealthy relationships will take time.

Consciously promoting these generic skills regardless of lesson content will make a difference.

¹⁰ <https://gdhr.wa.gov.au/guides/what-to-teach/establishing-ground-rules>

Consent

This section contains a range of options in relation to the topic of consent in relationships. Use your judgment about the most appropriate resources to use with your cohort of students.

Saying no

All students need to be able to say no or refuse a request. All students can learn and practise these skills, even if they use alternative and/or augmented communication.

Within your lessons, set up a range of opportunities for the students to be able to engage in the following skills:

- gaining access to choice
- making a specific request
- sharing personal preferences and opinions.

For example; ask the students if they want to do a specific activity, and if so, now or later. Respect the responses of 'No' from students and enable them to make real choices.

Consent in relationships

The notion of consent in relationships can be applied to a range of behaviours that may or may not include sexual behaviours. In each instance, the core principles are the same (although the laws in relation to sexual activity do vary from state to state in Australia).

Use the **Consent quiz** on the next page to introduce this topic. However, if you do not wish to focus on sexual behaviours skip to the video following the quiz.

Teaching activity 7: Consent quiz

Students: Circle the correct answers

When should you ask for consent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Before any type of touchb. Only right before sexc. Just the first time you have sex with someoned. When you feel like the moment is right
You should ask for consent before:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Having sexb. Holding handsc. Kissingd. All of the above
Consent only applies to sex.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Falseb. True
When having a conversation about sex, you can talk about:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Protectionb. What you like or don't likec. Previous experiencesd. All of the above
Who should ask for consent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. A couple in a long-term relationshipb. People hooking up for the first timec. Married couplesd. All of the above
Consent is only verbal; body language and tone don't matter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Trueb. False
If a partner responds, 'I guess', or 'If you want to', this could mean:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. They might feel pressured or unsureb. They don't feel comfortable directly saying 'no'.c. They really want to do what you suggestedd. Both a and b

If you ask for consent and your partner says 'No, I don't want to'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Respect their answer and do something elseb. Ask their friends to ask them for youc. Ask them again laterd. Try and convince them to say yes
How do you know someone has given consent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Their tone of voice is positiveb. Their body language is openc. Their words say yesd. All of the above
Even after you have given consent you can:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Tell your partner to stopb. Change your mindc. Take a breakd. All of the above

Adapted from a quiz by the [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)

If you do not wish to focus on sexual behaviour, use examples that focus on behaviours within friendships, for example, a friendship where peer pressure is exerted, or a friendship where one friend is dominant in terms of activities.

Use one or more of the following videos to explore consent concepts with your students.



[Consent, you've all heard of it, here's six simple ways to understand it \(with a sandwich\)](#)¹¹

This video produced in the UK explains the various different ways consent can be given and withdrawn, using the example of being offered a sandwich. Note that it may be confusing for students on the autism spectrum if they are asked to equate consenting to eating a sandwich with consent for intimacy. Your knowledge of your students will help you decide whether it is useful.

At this point, it might be appropriate to facilitate a role-play. Ask students to practise consent conversations. Give some of the students a bar of chocolate to offer the other person and some a tin of sardines. Ensure the students are supported to respond appropriately once consent is received or refused.



[Consent information for teens](#)¹²

This video about sexual consent was developed by the [Murray Mallee Community Legal Service](#). It is intended for teenagers with an intellectual disability or students on the autism spectrum, and there is an accompanying fact sheet. It is relevant to Victorian laws only, but the depiction of various relationship scenarios is of broad usefulness.



[The basics of sexual consent](#)¹³

The video from [Rise Above](#) presents a collage of four teens discussing what consent means by talking about consent to borrow a phone and then consent for sex. It may not be explicit enough for students who are very literal in their language use.

¹¹ <https://youtu.be/SRIgYzN2mw0>

¹² <https://youtu.be/AjpK5OzWL10>

¹³ <https://youtu.be/V5DecVLCJwY>



[Let's talk about consent](#)¹⁴

This video from New York University has a series of young adults talking about why you should ask for consent, how to ask for consent, how to refuse consent and what to do if someone consents or refuses consent. It uses clear language that is accessible for most students and reminds students that it is OK to say no and it is OK to not be having sex.



[Let's talk consent in relationships](#)¹⁵

Another video from [Rise Above](#) explains that many young people are not having sex, even though they say they are. Rise Above shares examples from young adults about how they brought up the issue of consent in their relationships, both initially and on an ongoing basis. The language and examples are accessible and relatable.

¹⁴ <https://youtu.be/TBFceGDVAdQ>

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jasl2q3I26M>



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