S11E11 - Consent: What It Actually Means 13+

Before we start, a quick note. This episode is for young people aged 13 and over. It talks about consent, relationships, pressure, online safety, and some grown-up topics. All of it is very honest and without the drama.

If you're a parent listening first, thank you. This is a good one to share with your teenager, or listen to it together if that works for you.

I say 13-plus; that's kind of the minimum age, but we are generally looking at 14, 15, 16 and older, though it's never too late to have this conversation. Even if they're going off to university this September, it would be a good conversation for them to have.

If you're a young person listening on your own, then this one is for you.

Let's go.

Okay, let's start with the definition of what consent actually is.

Consent means that everyone involved genuinely wants to be there, freely, without pressure, without feeling like they have to, and without worrying about what happens if they say no. That's it. That is the whole consent thing. But let me break it down a little bit more because the details really matter.

Consent has to be freely given. What I mean by that is nobody is being pressured, manipulated, guilted, or worn down. If someone keeps asking after you've said no, or makes you feel bad for saying no, or tells you that everybody else is doing it, or that you would if you really liked them, that's not consent. That's pressure, and pressure is not a yes, even if the person eventually stops saying no.

Consent also has to be informed. What I mean by that is everybody involved understands what they're agreeing to. If someone is tricked, lied to, or not given the full picture, that is not consent, and we're going to have a look at what that looks like in real life.

Consent has to be enthusiastic. This is the one thing that changes everything for me.

Consent is not the absence of no; it's the presence of a yes. A real, "Hell yes, this is what I want." If someone is silent, or goes along with something without really engaging, or seems uncertain, that's not a yes. That's a maybe at best. A maybe is not good enough.

Consent can be withdrawn at any time.

This, for me, is really important. Agreeing to something does not mean agreeing forever. Anyone can change their mind at any point, and when someone says, "Stop," or, "I don't want to anymore,"

that has to be respected immediately. No questions, no negotiations. In fact, if they do, check out that they're okay.

Consent has to be specific. Saying yes to one thing does not mean saying yes to everything. Yes to kissing is not yes to anything else. Yes to something once is not yes to always, every situation, every time.

So, let's have a look at what consent looks and sounds like in real life.

Okay, let's make this real, because knowing the definition is one thing; knowing what it actually looks like in real life is another.

Consent in real life sounds like, "Is this okay? Do you want to? Are you sure? We can stop if you want. I really want to. Do you?"

And it sounds like answers of, "Yes, I want to. I'm not sure. Can we slow down? I don't want to do that. I want to stop. Not right now."

All of those are real answers. All of them need to be heard and respected.

And here is something worth knowing. Consent doesn't always sound like a formal announcement. It's often just a check-in, a moment of actually paying attention to each other, to whether the other person is genuinely okay. Part of understanding consent is learning to read the room, not just listening to the words.

Noticing when someone goes quiet, seems uncomfortable, laughs nervously, or pulls away. None of these are yeses. They're all signals to pause and check in.

The question, "Are you okay?" costs nothing, takes two seconds, and makes a huge difference.

So, let's talk about pressure, because this is where it gets complicated for a lot of people.

Now, as a therapist with over 30 years of experience working with teens, these are the kind of things I hear in the therapy room all the time from boys and girls who are struggling with consent.

Pressure doesn't always look obvious. It does not always sound like someone shouting or demanding. Sometimes it's much quieter than that.

Sometimes it sounds like, "If you really liked me, you would." "Everybody else is doing it." "We've been together long enough." "I thought you were more confident than that." "I won't tell anyone." "You said you would."

Now, these are manipulation tactics. They're designed to make you feel like saying no is the problem, like you're the one being unreasonable.

You're not. The pressure is the problem. The person applying it is the one doing something wrong.

And here's the thing about pressure that I really want you to hear. When someone pressures you into something, when you go along with that something because pressure made saying no feel hard, that's not consent.

Even if you didn't say the word no, even if you eventually went along with it, you were pressured, and that matters. That is not your fault.

People who do that are not thinking about you. They're not thinking about the relationship that you're building. They are solely thinking about the moment and themselves.

So, I want to talk about online consent and spend some real time on this, because this is where a lot of the pressure young people are experiencing right now happens.

There's one thing in particular I want you to make sure you know about, because it's becoming increasingly common, and most young people have never even heard the word for it.

So, let's start with the basics.

Nobody has the right to ask you for intimate images of your body. Not a boyfriend, a girlfriend, not someone you like, not someone who sent you one and says it's only fair. Not anyone. Full stop.

Sending an image does not mean giving permission for it to be shared. If someone shares an intimate image of you without your consent, that is illegal here in the UK.

It is called non-consensual intimate image sharing, and it's a crime. If this has happened to you or happens to you, tell a trusted adult, contact Childline or the Revenge Porn Helpline. You will not be in trouble. The person who shared it is the one who's done something wrong.

Pressure online is still pressure. Someone sending you repeated messages asking you for something, making you feel guilty for saying no, telling you it would prove you trust them—that is all pressure.

The fact that it's happening on a screen doesn't make it different or less serious.

You are allowed to say no.

You are allowed to block them, and you're allowed to tell someone.

Now, I want to talk about something called sextortion. I'm going to explain what it is clearly, because knowing what it is is probably one of the most protective things I can give you in this episode.

Before we just move on to that, I want to say something about images. Now, the thing about the internet is we think that it's secure, and we think that it's a friend that we trust or someone we're really interested in, or maybe we're in a relationship with. Actually, there is nothing saying anyone can't be hacked.

There is nothing saying that person might not share. So my kind of rule of thumb is, if you don't want your granny to see it, maybe don't send it.

Now, I understand there are absolutely times that you might want to share intimate photos with somebody who you love and care for. I would be second-guessing yourself and questioning: can you trust them 100%? Can you trust their friends if they get hold of their phone?

So think about that before you do it. The granny one is a good rule of thumb because that way anything you share is safe for her to see and safe for other people to see, and you're not going to be embarrassed. You absolutely should not be shamed, but you are not going to have to explain this to anybody.

Now, let's talk about sextortion. It's when somebody uses an intimate image, or the threat of sharing one, to try and get something from you, usually money, sometimes more images, sometimes other things.

Here's often how it starts. Somebody contacts you online, on a gaming platform, social media, or in a DM. They seem friendly. They seem interested. The conversation becomes a little flirtatious, and they send you something intimate and encourage you to send it back. Then, once they have an image, everything changes.

They threaten to send this to your friends, to your family, to your school, unless you do what they want.

This is sextortion, and it's happening to more and more young people across the UK every single day. It's not rare. It's not something that only happens to other people, and it's not your fault if it happens to you.

I'm going to tell you a little case study, one of my clients, one of my students, and then I'm going to tell you, if you find yourself in this situation, what you can do.

So we're going to call this person Jacob. That's not his real name.

Jacob had been messaging somebody who he thought was the same age as him. They'd sent a couple of photos, and he then sent one back. Now, what then happened is he was then hacked, and pictures, intimate pictures, and I'll leave that to your imagination to imagine what it was, but intimate pictures were then sent to his granny, who was connected to him on Instagram, his mum and some friends.

Now, what they wanted was for him to send money to them for them to stop. As it happened, it all worked out, and thank goodness his granny or his mum and dad didn't see it, nor did they know about it. It was something that he brought to me, and this is the advice that I gave him.

Now, luckily, he had supportive friends, and he was able to do something about it, but this is the advice I would give you if you ever find yourself in a situation.

Do not pay. I know it feels like that's the safest thing to do, but it isn't. Paying does not make it stop. It almost always makes it worse because now they know you'll pay, and they'll ask for more money.

Don't send more images for the same reason. It doesn't make it stop, and they've just got more evidence.

Don't delete the messages. As hard as it is to look at them, they are evidence, and keep hold of them.

Tell somebody immediately. A parent, trusted adult, a teacher. I know that feels terrifying, and I know you might be scared of what they'll think or what will happen, but in honesty, most teachers, there's lots of people already will have told them, because this is happening in schools and colleges, universities up and down the country.

If you feel like you can speak to your mum and dad about it, and you know what? They were young once. They might not have done this, but they've done something equally daft without thinking or got caught up in something that they thought was genuine.

Because, yes, in hindsight you might think it's a daft decision, but at the time, you're invested in this person and, hopefully, in this relationship. The fact that it's not real or it's somebody trying to take advantage of you is not fair.

Now, in the case of Jacob, it was a team of people that weren't even in this country. That's what they did. They went out to scam people to see how much they could get.

So the people running these operations, and they are an operation, even though it feels personal, even though it feels like it's a girl or a boy, particularly your age, reaching out to you, often it isn't.

They are counting on your silence, and your silence is what gives them power. Telling someone takes that power away.

Report it. That is how Jacob got around it. His friends and me reported it to the platform where it happened. Every major platform has a reporting function for this. That's how big it is.

You can report it to the police. It is a crime. Report it to Revenge Porn Helpline, that's what they're set up for, and CEOP, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command, which deals specifically with this kind of harm. We will put the details in the show notes.

Most important thing, which I really want you to hear: you're not the one that did something wrong.

You were manipulated by someone who does this deliberately to multiple people as a way of making money or gaining control. You're not stupid, you're not daft, you're not to blame. You were targeted by someone who knew exactly what they were doing.

This is why I'm telling you about it. Not to frighten you, but because knowing it exists, knowing what it looks like, and knowing what to do if it happens means you're significantly more protected than if nobody mentioned it to you.

And let's be honest, parents, if you're a parent listening to this, we don't want to think that's going to happen to our kids, so we don't talk about it. But it's really important that we do.

A word to you about who you talk to online. Not everyone online is who they say they are. This is not a reason to be frightened of the internet, but it's a reason to be thoughtful and mindful about it.

Someone who is moving very quickly to intimacy, someone who's asking you for images early on, someone who seems a little too interested too fast, someone whose profile doesn't feel quite right—not many photos, recently created, no real connections that you can see.

And I'm going to be honest, sometimes if they see you as a target, they will befriend friends of yours to try and make sure that you see them as a connection. So reach out to those friends and go, "How do you know these people?"

Trust your gut. Trust your instinct. If something feels slightly wrong, that is worth listening to.

Just be aware. Just pay attention. If someone online asks you for an intimate image, the answer should always be no. Always. Regardless of who they say they are, regardless of what they've sent you, and regardless of how the conversation has gone up to now. No image is worth what can happen next.

One more thing about online content.

If someone sends you an intimate image of another person without that person's consent, even if it's a friend, don't share it. Delete it. It does not matter who sent it or why. Sharing it makes you part of the harm, and depending on the age of the person in the image, sharing it can be a serious criminal offence, and we don't want that for you.

When somebody shared it with you and it's just a laugh, if they take it seriously and take it to the police, you have then become part of it.

Okay. Consent goes both ways.

I want to be really clear about something. This episode is not just about protecting yourself; it's about how you treat other people too.

Consent goes both ways, always.

That means paying attention to whether the people you're with, in any situation, actually want to be there. Check in. Notice. Make it genuinely safe for them to say no without anything bad happening as a result.

It means understanding that someone going along with something is not the same as wanting to be there.

It means knowing that if someone seems uncertain, the right thing to do is pause and ask, not keep hoping for the best and keep going.

It means never pressurising someone, never making someone feel like saying no will cost them the relationship, or your opinion of them, or their reputation.

Because here's the truth: if someone only stays with you because they feel like they have to, that's not a relationship.

That's not real connection. That's just one person having power over another, and that's not really what any of us want.

What we want, what everyone usually wants when they're honest, is to be with people who genuinely want to be there, who choose us, who choose. When they say yes, it means yes, and that's only possible when no is real too.

So make the no real for you and for everyone around you.

If something has already happened, I want to say something before we finish to anyone who's listening to this and thinking about something that's already happened to them.

If something happened to you that you didn't want, if you were pressured or manipulated, or if somebody didn't stop when you wanted them to, or if they're threatening you right now with an image, I want you to hear this clearly.

This was not your fault.

Hear that again. This was not your fault.

Doesn't matter what you were wearing, where you were, whether you had said yes to something before, or whether you froze instead of saying no out loud, whether you sent something you now wish you hadn't. None of that is your fault.

You're allowed to tell someone. A parent, a teacher, a trusted adult. Maybe you have a coach. Maybe you have a dance teacher. Or you can always ring Childline. They are available anytime. It says Childline, but they go right up to uni students. Anytime, for any young person, you'll not be in trouble.

If something has happened, you don't have to carry this all by yourself.

You are not alone.

Okay. So that is consent. That's the real version. Not a list of rules, not a lecture, just a framework for treating yourself and other people well, making sure that everyone involved genuinely wants to be there, and for knowing clearly, specifically, what to do when something online starts to feel wrong.

Here's what I want you to take away from this episode.

You matter. Your yes matters. Your no matters. So does everybody else's.

Check in. Pay attention. Make it safe for people to be honest with you. Make sure you're in situations where you can be honest too. And if anything online starts to feel like pressure, trust that gut feeling.

More than you think, you're capable of getting this right, and the fact that you're here listening to this already tells me something good about you.

Take care of yourself and each other.

Thanks for listening to this one. The next episode is the final one in this season. It's for listeners aged 16 and over and talks honestly and directly about sex. There's clear age guidance at the very start, so you'll know what's in it.

If you're a parent who has listened to this, thank you. The show notes below have resources for young people and for you, and if something in this episode has brought something up for you or your young person, please reach out to the organisations listed.

They are there for exactly this.

Until next time. Bye for now. Lots of love.