

## Strand | Emotional and relational education

### Strand Unit: Relationships

<b>Relevant Key Competencies:</b>	W - Being well AC - Being an active citizen CL - Being a communicator and using language
<b>Focus of this support material:</b>	This support material focuses specifically on the <b>consent</b> dimension of the Learning Outcomes below.

### Learning Outcomes

Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experiences, children should be able to:

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
establish and maintain healthy relationships, recognising the importance of respectful interactions, consent and effective communication and develop strategies to resolve disharmony.	build and maintain healthy relationships, understanding the importance of respectful interactions, consent and effective communication and practise strategies to resolve disharmony with support.	identify and discuss key aspects of healthy relationships such as respectful interactions, consent and effective communication, recognising how healthy relationships contribute to wellbeing.	evaluate key aspects of healthy relationships, such as consent, effective communication, mutual respect and trust, appreciating the importance of healthy relationships for wellbeing.

#### Relevant definitions from the *Wellbeing specification*:

**Consent** - Consent is the giving of permission or agreement for something to happen or to do something. It requires respect and communication from both parties. Consent includes knowledge about, and respect for, their own and others' boundaries (page 54).

**Bodily autonomy** - Bodily autonomy is recognising the right to govern what happens to one's body (page 54).

**Body boundaries** - Body boundaries refer to understanding and respecting personal space and privacy (page 54).

## The focus of learning:

Learning about consent is a vital part of supporting children's safety, wellbeing and relationships. In the *Wellbeing* specification, consent is introduced in a gradual and age appropriate way that reflects children's developmental stages. The focus is on helping children to recognise personal boundaries, communicate clearly, show empathy and seek help when needed. This learning complements the Stay Safe programme, which is mandatory in all primary and special schools, particularly in relation to the topics of 'Feeling Safe and Unsafe' and 'Touches'.

In the early years of primary education, consent is explored through everyday interactions and play. Children learn that they have the right to make choices about their own bodies and personal space. For example, they are encouraged to decide whether they want to give a hug, join a game or share a toy. They learn how to say "yes" and "no" clearly, and to listen and respond when others express their preferences. At this stage, the key messages are simple and empowering: "You are the boss of your own body," "It's okay to say no," and "Always ask before touching someone else or their belongings." Storybooks, role-play and classroom conversations offer safe and supportive opportunities for children to practise these skills.

As children move through the middle stages of primary school, their understanding of consent deepens. They begin to explore the emotional and social aspects of consent, such as recognising non-verbal cues like facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. They learn to read how others might be feeling and to show empathy in their responses. Children are supported to notice when they or others feel unsure or uncomfortable and to understand that it is okay to change their minds. The idea that consent must be freely given, informed and can be withdrawn is introduced in ways that are appropriate for their age and experience.

In the later stages of primary school, consent education becomes more nuanced. Children examine how consent applies across different contexts—among peers, online and in early adolescent relationships. They consider the importance of asking for and receiving clear consent and reflect on how peer pressure or group influence can affect a person's ability to give or withhold consent. These discussions focus on general relationships and interactions rather than sexual behaviour, but they lay a critical foundation for future learning about sexual consent in Junior Cycle. Children also explore the roles that rules and laws play in protecting personal boundaries, including protections against inappropriate physical contact, as part of the abuse prevention programme. Digital safety education may also include aspects of digital consent, such as seeking permission before sharing photos or protecting personal information online.

Throughout the primary years, the emphasis is on building knowledge and skills progressively. At each stage, children are supported to understand their rights, express their choices confidently, respect others' boundaries and know that they can speak to a trusted adult if something feels wrong. By embedding consent education across the curriculum, schools can help children develop the foundations for safe, respectful relationships—both now and in the future.

## Approaches to consider:

- Develop a clear, consistent and shared vocabulary around consent. Create opportunities for the children to practise asking for consent, giving consent and not consenting. Through role play and discussion, help children to practise communicating their needs and boundaries clearly – encourage confident body language and an assertive tone.
- Teach children to name body parts accurately. This builds children's confidence to talk about their bodies and supports them to communicate clearly what they do or do not consent to.
- Develop children's critical thinking skills through exploring stories and scenarios that require or demonstrate consent. Reading stories written from different perspectives can show how people can interpret situations differently. If a character made a poor choice, ask children to rewind and consider alternative actions.
- Support children to recognise emotions and feelings in others. Being mindful of how we make others feel is an important aspect of understanding consent. Use charade-style guessing games and 'teachable moments' to highlight facial expressions and body language.

## Possible questions to explore:

<p><b>Stage 1</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When do we need to ask for permission (e.g. to join a game, give a hug, borrow something)?</li> <li>• What words, signs, gestures, pictures or communication tools can we use to ask for something or to say “yes” or “no”?</li> <li>• What does it feel like when someone says “yes” or “no” to something we ask?</li> <li>• How can we show kindness and respect when someone says “no”?</li> <li>• How can we show what we are feeling using our voices, faces, bodies or other communication tools?</li> <li>• What can we do if someone forgets to ask us first or doesn’t listen when we say “stop”?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stage 2</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we ask someone if they’re okay with what we’re doing (e.g. in games or group work)?</li> <li>• What does “<i>My body belongs to me</i>” or “<i>I am the boss of my body</i>” mean?</li> <li>• How do we show respect for someone’s personal space or choices?</li> <li>• Can someone say “yes” and then change their mind? What should we do if they do?</li> <li>• What are kind and clear ways to say “no” when we don’t want to do something?</li> <li>• How can we tell if someone is unsure or not comfortable, even if they don’t say anything?</li> <li>• Who can help us if we feel confused, uncomfortable, or unsure about a situation?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stage 3</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does a healthy, respectful friendship look like?</li> <li>• What does it mean to respect someone’s boundaries?</li> <li>• What signs or behaviours show that someone is uncomfortable or wants something to stop?</li> <li>• How do we know if someone has changed their mind and how should we respond?</li> <li>• How can we talk about and agree on boundaries with friends or group members?</li> <li>• Why is it important that consent is always asked for, not assumed?</li> <li>• How does practising consent help everyone feel respected and safe?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stage 4</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does clear and respectful consent look, sound or feel like in different situations—offline and online?</li> <li>• Why must consent be freely given, ongoing and reversible?</li> <li>• What should we do before sharing or posting a picture or video of someone else?</li> <li>• How can peer pressure or group dynamics affect someone’s ability to give or refuse consent?</li> <li>• What can we do if we’re unsure about someone’s boundaries—or our own?</li> <li>• How can we support others in upholding their boundaries and making safe choices?</li> </ul>

## How can you explain consent in a child-friendly way?

Consent means asking for permission and waiting for an answer before you do something that involves someone else. It's about making sure everyone feels safe, respected and comfortable, and that everyone agrees with the request or plan.

You are the boss of your own body. That means:

- You can say “yes” or “no” to things like touching, sharing or playing.
- You don't have to do something just because someone else wants you to.
- You can change your mind—even if you said “yes” before, you can say “no” later.

Just like you can say “yes” or “no”, other people can too. It's important to:

- Ask first before you do something with or to someone else.
- Listen to their answer—and stop if they say “no”.
- Look for clues in how they act. If they look unsure or uncomfortable, it's okay to check in or stop.

Examples:

- “Can I play with your toy?” - If your friend says “yes”, go ahead. If they say “no”, you respect their choice.
- “Can I give you a hug?” - If someone says no, you don't hug them.
- “Do you want to keep playing?” - If someone says, “Actually, I don't want to anymore”, that's okay. You stop and do something else.

Consent is about kindness, respect and making sure everyone feels good about what's happening. Asking, listening, and respecting each other's choices helps everyone feel safe.

## Connections across strands and strand units

The Learning Outcomes in the *Wellbeing* specification have been designed to connect and integrate with each other. At times, teachers may focus on a particular aspect of a Learning Outcome. At other times, teachers may draw on aspects of multiple Learning Outcomes. When teaching consent, it is important to make links across strands and strand units. For example:

- **Emotional awareness and expression (page 23)**: recognising and responding to their own and others' emotions and feelings
- **Relationships (page 24)**: learning about unhealthy behaviours in relationships, including inappropriate touch
- **Making choices (page 25)**: supporting children to consider consequences and make responsible choices
- **Human development (page 27)**: learning about the anatomically correct name for body parts, learning about private body areas, body boundaries and learning about sexual intercourse at Stage 4
- **Safety (page 28)**: developing the knowledge, skills and confidence to protect themselves from harm
- **Media and digital wellbeing (page 28)**: learning about safe, ethical and responsible use of digital technologies, which can include learning about digital about consent and image sharing
- **Rights and fairness (page 30)**: understanding their rights, for example, children have a right to privacy, safety and to express their views on matters affecting them.

## Progression in the area of consent

It is important to recognise that consent education begins at birth. Consent is not a one-time topic or lesson, but a lifelong area of learning, shaped by personal, social and cultural influences. Children’s understanding of consent develops in different ways and at different times, depending on their age, experiences and individual needs.

The examples below show what teaching consent might look like at different stages of education. These are not fixed or prescriptive and are just one example of progression at a given stage.

Early Childhood	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Junior Cycle
<p><i>Aistear</i> emphasises that babies, toddlers and young children begin to develop an awareness of their bodies, including concepts such as bodily autonomy and consent. This is developed through everyday experiences that emphasise respectful relationships, agency and communication.</p>	<p>Discussing how personal space, or ‘space bubbles’, might be bigger/smaller (e.g. on a crowded bus) and how this makes them feel.</p> <p>Using picture books, such as <i>Goldilocks and the Three Bears</i>, as a stimulus for discussion e.g. <i>Did Goldilocks ask for permission before touching someone else’s things?</i></p> <p>Using puppets or role-play scenarios to practice asking permission before physical touch and responding, e.g. <i>Can I hold your hand?</i></p>	<p>Practising assertive communication through role-play e.g. <i>Please stop. I don’t like you touching my hair.</i></p> <p>Exploring personal space using different sized hula hoops to recognise they can feel more/less comfortable sharing personal space with different people e.g. <i>Which hula hoop would you be comfortable sharing with a friend?</i></p> <p>Co-creating a classroom charter that includes messages related to respect and consent e.g., In our class we listen when somebody says “no”.</p>	<p>Discussing how people may experience the same situation differently e.g. <i>One person likes a hug, but another finds it uncomfortable.</i></p> <p>Exploring more complex scenarios that involve peer influence within friendships e.g. <i>Everyone is daring John to do something that he is not sure about.</i></p> <p>Using a ‘feelings thermometer’ to explore how situations make people feel comfortable/ unsure/unsafe and discuss appropriate actions to take.</p>	<p>Inviting children to rewind and rewrite a scene to reflect good practice around consent e.g. <i>What could the character do to make sure everyone feels comfortable?</i></p> <p>Exploring digital scenarios that involve consent or privacy, e.g. <i>Do you need permission to share an image of someone in a message or online?</i></p> <p>Introducing more complex scenarios where a person’s ability to consent is impeded due to their age, substance use or due to peer pressure.</p>	<p>In Junior Cycle SPHE, children build on this foundation by exploring the role of consent in sexual relationships.</p> <p>The relevant Junior Cycle Learning Outcome states: “Students should be able to appreciate the importance of seeking, giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships, from the perspective of building caring relationships as well as from a legal perspective.”</p>

## What if children ask about sexual consent when learning about sexual intercourse?

As children will learn about consent from Junior Infants onwards, it is possible that questions about **sexual consent** may arise during later primary years—particularly when children are learning about **sexual intercourse** as part of the Human Development strand unit, in relation to the following Learning Outcome:

- *Name and identify the function of internal and external reproductive organs, and understand sexual intercourse, conception, pregnancy and birth.*

**Sexual consent** refers to a person freely and willingly agreeing—without any pressure, force, or manipulation—to engage in a sexual act with another person. It is against the law to engage in a sexual act with someone who has not given their consent.

In Ireland, the law states that a person must be **17 years of age or older** to legally consent to sexual activity. This legal age of sexual consent exists to protect children and young people from harm and exploitation. The following section is intended to support teachers in responding to **questions about sexual consent** that may emerge during lessons on sexual intercourse, ensuring that answers are age and developmentally appropriate and legally accurate.

If a child raises a question about sexual consent when learning about sexual intercourse, explain that there are some things that children cannot consent to because of their age and that, in Ireland, children under the age of 17 cannot consent to engage in sexual acts:

*“Because some decisions are big and can have long-lasting results, the law says that there are limits to what a child or young person is legally allowed to agree or consent to. For example, you have to be 16 or older to be able to consent to medical treatment and you have to be 17 or older to consent to sexual activity with someone. To protect a young person from pressure to have sex, the law says it is a crime for anyone to have sex with a young person under 17. This means that you are not legally old enough to agree to (or consent to) having sex until you are 17. Many people wait until they are 17 or older, and in a relationship that is important to them, before they have sex for the first time.” (Busy Bodies Booklet, 2023, p. 48)*

Finally, it is important to remind children that nobody is allowed to touch them sexually. Remind children that if anyone tries to touch them sexually or have them touch another person, they should tell a trusted adult (e.g., parent, family member, teacher) immediately. The mandated child abuse prevention programme addresses the topic of touches and will also aid you in discussing inappropriate touches.

*“If anyone wants to touch you sexually or have you touch them, you should tell a trusted adult immediately. You might be asked to keep it a secret. The person might say that what’s happening is your fault or that it’s because they love you but that’s not true. A trusted adult such as a parent, relative, teacher, youth worker, etc. will help you.” (Busy Bodies Booklet, 2023, p. 48)*

Be mindful that given the sensitive nature of this topic, it could lead to a child making a child protection disclosure. For more information about how to report child protection concerns, see: [Child Protection Procedures for Schools 2025](#).

## Top Tip!

Foster a classroom climate that is rooted in kindness, inclusion and mutual respect. Teachers play a vital role in modelling and reinforcing respectful interactions. Use 'teachable moments' to model and reinforce good practice around consent. Be sure to highlight positive examples and correct misconceptions. Empower children to make choices pertaining to them at school and respect their decisions about bodily autonomy. This helps children learn that their voice and opinion is important and should be listened to. For example, ask:

- "Is it ok if I sit beside you?"
- "Would you like help tying your shoes?"
- "Is it ok if I put my hands on your stomach and back to help you do a forward roll?"
- "Would it be ok if I move your wheelchair to a quieter space?"

## References

Department of Education (2023). *Social, Personal & Health Education (SPHE): Short Course Specification for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Government of Ireland (2024). *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Government of Ireland (2025). *Wellbeing Specification for Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: Government Publications

Health Service Executive (2023). *Busy Bodies: A booklet about puberty and adolescence*. Cork-Kerry Community Healthcare: HSE.

MacIntyre, D., & Lawlor, M. (2016). *The Stay Safe Programme: Personal Safety Skills for Primary Schools* (Revised ed.). Child Abuse Prevention Programme.