



Healthy Relationships

Discussion Guides for Adults with Disabilities, Family Members & Guardians

Communicating Consent for People with Disabilities

The Importance of Communicating about Consent

Talking about consent is just as important as understanding it. Consent means knowing your boundaries and sharing them clearly and respectfully. When you tell others what makes you comfortable, you feel safer and more in control. Good communication helps build trust and respect in relationships. Learning to set boundaries and talk about them is an important skill for everyone, especially people with disabilities. This guide will help you practice speaking up about your needs.

How to Communicate Consent?

Boundaries are important in every relationship. How you talk about them affects how others understand and respect them. Here are three common ways people communicate:

Shy (Non-Assertive) Communication

- **What it looks like:** Avoiding conflict or not saying what you need.
- **Why it can be a problem:** It might seem easier at first, but it can make you feel unheard or taken advantage of.

Bossy Communication

- **What it looks like:** Being too forceful or demanding.
- **Why it doesn't work:** It can feel scary to others and hurt relationships.

Assertive Communication

- **What it looks like:** Standing up for yourself while respecting others.
- **Why it works:** Being clear and confident helps you share your needs without being mean. It also helps build healthy relationships.

The best way to communicate is **assertively**—speaking up for yourself while also respecting others.

Quick Tip!

Consent should be given freely and clearly every time. Here are some examples of what consent can look like:



Verbal Consent:

Saying "yes" or "I want to do this."



Nonverbal Consent:

Nodding, moving closer, or using a hand signal.



Checking In:

Asking, "Are you comfortable?" or "Is this okay?" throughout any interaction.



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How to Give Consent

Everyone shows consent in different ways. Some people use clear words, while others use hand signals, facial expressions, or other gestures. No matter how you communicate, it's important to be assertive standing up for yourself while respecting others. If you're too shy, others might not understand what you need. If you're too bossy, people might feel pressured or uncomfortable. Being clear and confident helps make sure everyone feels safe and understood.

The Spectrum of Consent

Consent doesn't have to be hard! You can use colors or gestures to show what you're okay with:



Stop (Red):

If you want to stop, say "Red," hold up your hand, or simply say, "Please stop" or "No."



Slow Down (Yellow):

If you need a break or want to go slower, say "Yellow," or try saying, "Please slow down" or "We need to talk."



Good to Go (Green):

If you feel comfortable and okay, say "Green," give a thumbs-up, nod, or move closer.

Make It Your Own:

You and your friends can make up other colors or words. For example, "Blue" might mean "no soft touch" or "Purple" for "just listening, not talking."

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it helpful to use colors or gestures to show your boundaries?
2. How can using assertive communication (clear and respectful) make these signals more effective?
3. What might happen if someone is too shy or too bossy when communicating their boundaries?
4. How would you explain the Red, Yellow, and Green system to someone who hasn't used it before?
5. Can you think of any other signals or words that help show your boundaries?
6. How can you make sure others understand them clearly without being too shy or too bossy?



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Case Study

In this section, we will practice using what you've learned about consent in a real-life situation. The goal is to think about how to use consent in a real scenario.

Background:

Avery is a young adult with autism. They have a hard time getting rid of things, especially items with special meaning. Today, Avery's mom, Linda, is helping them go through their things to decide what to donate or throw away. When they get to an old stuffed animal, Linda says Avery should let it go. But Avery doesn't want to give it up. Linda doesn't understand why Avery is upset. Avery feels uncomfortable but isn't sure how to say it.

Situation:

Linda keeps asking Avery to get rid of the stuffed animal, not realizing how upset Avery feels. Avery starts to feel trapped and anxious but doesn't know how to explain that they're not ready to let it go. Both Avery and Linda are feeling stressed. Avery wishes they could say how they feel.



Discussion Questions:

1. What are some ways Avery could communicate their feelings?
2. How might their response change if they use a shy, bossy, or assertive communication style?
3. If Avery used the Red, Yellow, Green system, how could they signal their feelings?
4. How might Linda react differently based on how Avery communicates?
5. How would she likely respond to a shy approach versus an assertive one?
6. How could recognizing Avery's Red or Yellow signals help Linda respect their boundaries?

Example Dialogue

Sometimes, it's hard to know what good or bad consent looks like in real-life situations. Practicing different examples can help you feel more comfortable asking for consent. Here are a few examples of how to ask for a hug, showing both good and bad ways to communicate.

Healthy Examples



Person A: "Would you like a hug?"

Person B: (Smiles and nods) "Yes, please!"

Person A: (Gives the hug gently and watches for comfort cues.)



Person A: "Would a hug feel okay for you?"

Person B: "Actually, could we just do a high five?"

Person A: "Of course! High five!"



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Unhealthy Examples



Person A: “Come on, just a quick hug!”
(Moves in without waiting for a response.)
Person B: (Looks uncomfortable or pulls back but doesn’t say anything.)



Person A: “You look like you could use a hug!” (Hugs without asking.)
Person B: (Feels uncomfortable but doesn’t know how to stop it.)

Practice! Asking to Borrow Someone’s Phone

Imagine someone asks to borrow your phone. How you feel about saying yes, no, or asking more questions might depend on who is asking—like a friend, a sibling, or a stranger. In this activity, you’ll practice both **asking for consent** and **responding** using the spectrum of consent (red, yellow, or green), while also considering different communication styles (assertive, shy, or bossy).

Take turns practicing these roles:

1. Asking to Borrow a Phone

Try different ways of asking, such as being clear, giving a reason, or asking politely.

Experiment with different communication styles (assertive, shy, or bossy) and see how they affect the response.

2. Responding to the Request

Use the spectrum of consent (Red, Yellow, Green) system to decide what to say:

- **Red (No):** “I’m not comfortable with that.” (Assertive) vs. “Um... I guess not...” (Shy) vs. “No way! Stop asking me.” (Bossy)
- **Yellow (Maybe):** “Why do you need it?” or “Can I stay with you while you use it?”
- **Green (Yes):** “Sure, just be careful with it.”

Pay attention to **how** you say yes, no, or maybe—your tone and clarity can change the way others react.



Discussion Questions:

1. How does your response change depending on if a friend, sibling, or stranger asked?
2. Was it easy or difficult to say no (Red)? Why?
3. What type of communication (assertive, shy, or bossy) did you use when asking or responding?
 - a. How did it affect the other person’s reaction?



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Discussion Questions:

4. How can assertive communication help when setting boundaries?
 - a. What does an assertive Red, Yellow, or Green response sound like?
5. Why is asking follow-up questions (Yellow response) helpful?
 - a. How can it help you make a more informed decision?
6. How can practicing consent—using both clear communication and the Red, Yellow, Green system—help in everyday situations?

Wrapping Up the Conversation

Consent is something we keep learning about. It's not just a lesson you learn once—it's something you practice. It takes time to be clear about your needs, to be kind and assertive, and to set boundaries in a way others can understand. The more you practice, the easier it gets.

Keep talking about consent. If there's ever a time when you feel like your boundaries weren't respected—whether with friends, family, or anyone else—come back to this guide and think about how you could communicate better next time. You can also use things like code words, gestures, or signals to help make it easier to express your boundaries.

Organization	Contact	How They Help
National Adult Protective Services (APS) Association	(202) 370-6292 or visit www.napsa-now.org/help-in-your-area/ and ask for your state APS office	Helps professionals and individuals report and respond to the needs of older adults and adults with disabilities who are the victims of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, and to prevent abuse whenever possible. There is an APS office for each of the 50 states.
National Domestic Violence Hotline	1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or text "START" to 88788	Offers confidential support and guidance for anyone in an unsafe or abusive relationship.
National Sexual Assault Hotline or RAINN mobile app	1-800-656-HOPE (4673) or download the RAINN app	Provides free, confidential support for survivors of sexual assault.
Love is Respect	1-866-331-9474 or text "LOVEIS" to 22522	Specializes in supporting young people experiencing relationship abuse or those unsure if their relationship is healthy.

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