



ILLUSTRATIONS BY TALLULAH FONTAINE

Why consent matters beyond the bedroom

I'm teaching my kids about consent, not just so they grow up to be better partners—I want them to be better people

BY SYDNEY LONEY

When my daughter Maggie was in kindergarten, her teacher would stand in the doorway of the classroom and insist on shaking the kids' hands as they filed in. Maggie *hated* it. Every morning, she'd try to find a way to dodge him. She'd shove her hands deep in her pockets. Avoid eye contact. Try to dart past. Once she thought she'd outsmart him by pretending to trip, arms pinwheeling like a downed chopper as she careened through the door—all in an attempt to avoid his outstretched hand. Nothing worked.

I was embarrassed. I told her that it was important to be polite. That all the other kids shook his hand. That she didn't want to hurt his feelings, did she? Oh, if only I could go back in time!

In the wake of #metoo there have been many conversations about consent and what it means. At the most basic, dictionary-definition level, it's about giving permission for something to happen, or it's an agreement to do something. But in reality, it's a lot more complex than that.

Even though “no” has meant “no” for

decades, it hasn't really gotten us far when it comes to navigating relationships based on respect, empathy and mutual understanding (you need only flip on the news for the latest outing of a public figure who failed on the consent front to see just how much further we have to go). In fact, the Canadian Women's Foundation released a study in 2018 that found we're still struggling with the overall concept of consent. It revealed that Canadians' understanding of consent has actually decreased over the last three years, with only 28 per cent of Canadians fully understanding what it means to grant it, compared with 33 per cent in 2015.

Although it hasn't exactly solved our consent conundrum, #metoo has at least taught us the importance of speaking up, when the boundaries afforded by consent have been breached. But validating one another's experiences and exposing wrongdoers is only the first step. The next step is to continue the conversation, to take it to the next level, to actually change behaviour.

Four years ago, I wish I'd had a better understanding of consent myself. I should have recognized my daughter's attempt to assert her autonomy. I should have applauded her steadfast resolve not to be cajoled into accepting physical contact she didn't want. I should have told her I was proud of her.

It was a teachable moment about consent for me and, since then, I've begun to see that consent isn't necessarily always about sex, or even physical contact. It's broader and more far-reaching and it speaks to our values as individuals and as a society as a whole. It's about the assumptions we make and the secret, unacknowledged or even unknown biases and prejudices we harbour. Above all, it's about how we move through the world and how we choose to interact with others, whether at school, at work or in our communities, both at home and abroad.

I was recently confronted by this broader understanding of consent when I travelled to Jordan, to work on a story. One afternoon we were in Petra, admiring the magnificent, towering ruins that line the ancient city's cobbled

streets in the company of a myriad of other visitors from all over the world. One woman suddenly broke from our group and approached four women in burqas—she wanted her picture taken with them. They hesitated. She insisted. They graciously acquiesced.

It was an extremely uncomfortable moment, the epitome of disrespectful travel and an example of where our understanding of consent unravels, when we put our needs or desires ahead of others. Just like that, our fellow sightseers suddenly became a novelty, relegated to little more than props that set the scene for an Instagramable moment. Although they gave their consent, it should never have been asked of them in the first place.

That's the direction our collective understanding of consent has to take next. There needs to be a shift in responsibility, one that requires us to take what we want, or think we're entitled to, out of the equation altogether. It's not simply about understanding when we haven't been granted consent in a given moment, it's about not putting other people in a

position where they have to say “no” in the first place.

If you Google “consent,” the search algorithm favours sites centered around teaching the next generation. Rightly so. And, when it comes to teaching the concept of consent to kids, there’s a growing acknowledgment that it isn’t just up to girls and women to make things better. It’s up to all of us as a community.

A few weeks ago, when I talked to my daughter about consent, I began by apologizing for insisting she shake hands with her kindergarten teacher. As for talking to my 12-year-old son, Charlie, I looked to author Laurie Halse Anderson, who wrote a compelling piece for *Time* in January 2019 entitled “I’ve Talked With Teenage Boys About Sexual Assault for 20 years. This is What They Still Don’t Know,” for help.

Halse writes that we need to teach consent from the moment kids are old enough to walk. She writes, “It is time to not just inspire those who have been hurt to tell their stories—but to find our own

courage to have open conversations about these complex subjects.” And, Halse says, we need to talk to our boys. “We need to give them the tools required to navigate relationships in a positive way. Our boys deserve information and guidance. The only way they’ll get it is if we speak up.”

When I asked Charlie what consent means to him, his first response was “Oh Mom, why do we have to talk about this stuff?” I explained why. Eventually, he stopped squirming and grimacing. “It’s about asking permission,” he told me. I pressed him for more. “It’s about consideration and respect,” he added. Bingo.

I think about the mistakes I’ve made myself when navigating issues of consent over the years. When I didn’t speak up about things that had happened to me. When I didn’t speak up on the behalf of others, including my daughter in her kindergarten class. I don’t want my children to make the same mistakes I did, which means our conversations about consent have only just begun. 💖

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