

Sexual consent: the adolescents' point of view

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As part of a survey on the mental health of young people aged 14-19 years in Switzerland and Liechtenstein, participants (N=1197) responded a few questions about sexual consent. The objective of this short report is to describe the results on this topic.

Methods

Data were collected through an online questionnaire disseminated through social media between June and August 2021. The final sample was weighted according to age, gender and region of residence.

First, participants were asked whether *anyone had talked or explained to them the concept of consent related to sexuality* with three possible answers: Yes, and I understood it well (70.6%); Yes, but I did not understand it (2.7%); and No (26.7%) and we compared the characteristics of those who had received the information with those who had not. Second, they were presented with eight situations involving sexual consent and had to answer whether they agreed, disagreed or did not know.

Data were compared by whether sexual consent had been explained or not to them and by gender using chi2 test. Significance level was set at 0.05.

Results

The majority of participants had received information about consent (73.3%) and almost all of them (96.4%) had understood it.

Table 1 shows that both groups are relatively similar with two exceptions. On the one side, while almost all participants in the French and Italian parts of Switzerland had received information about consent, it represented only 61% in the German-speaking part. On the other, those not living in intact families were also more likely to have received this kind of information.

Characteristic	Consent not explained (%)	Consent explained (%)
Gender		
Male	25.7	74.3
Female	29.0	71.0
Other	3.8	96.2
Mean age (±SE)	16.5±0.2	16.5±0.1
Region		
German-speaking	39.0	61.0
French-speaking	5.9	94.1
Italian-speaking	6.0	94.0
Parental situation (together)	80.7	69.3
Socioeconomic status		
Below average	26.2	73.8
Average	26.6	73.4
Above average	28.2	71.8
Current situation		
Studying	24.6	75.4
Working/apprenticeship	32.8	67.2
Other	17.8	82.2

Results presented as row percentages

Significant results (p<.05) are presented in bold

Consent explained include both those that understood it (n=846) and those that did not (n=32)

Table 1 Characteristics of participants depending on whether consent had been explained to them

As can be seen in Table 2, the vast majority of participants chose the correct answer when presented with the situations displaying sexual consent. However, there were two situations where the results were less clearly cut. The first one was *'It is not always easy to know when a person wants to have sex or not'*, where slightly more than half of the sample agreed and one in five did not know. The second one was *'If a person does not want to have sex, s/he must say so clearly'* where close to half of the sample agreed and two out of five disagreed.

Situation	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)
To have any kind of sexual relationship, your partner must give explicit consent (must clearly say YES)	87.0	5.7	7.3
If a person allows to be kissed easily, it is a sign that s/he wants to have sex	2.0	90.3	7.7
If a person dresses in a provocative / sexy way, it is a sign that s/he wants to have sex	2.1	89.9	8.0
If a person doesn't say 'no', it means that s/he wants to have sex	2.4	91.3	6.3
It is not always easy to know when a person wants to have sex or not	50.8	30.2	19.0
If a person does not want to have sex, s/he must say so clearly	46.0	40.2	13.8
To be considered rape, it must involve some form of violence or threats by the author	11.9	78.0	10.1
To be considered rape, the victim must fight to defense her/himself	5.1	86.8	8.1

Results presented as row percentages

Table 2 Level of agreement to situations displaying sexual consent

Table 3 presents the results depending on whether participants had received an explanation about consent or not. Only one situation reached a significant difference between the groups: 'It is not always easy to know when a person wants to have sex or not', where those who had

received explanations about consent were more likely to agree.

	Consent explained						
	Agree (%)	Yes (n=878)			No (n=319)		
		Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)	
To have any kind of sexual relationship, your partner must give explicit consent (must clearly say YES)	84.1	3.5	12.4	88.1	6.5	5.4	
If a person allows to be kissed easily, it is a sign that s/he wants to have sex	1.3	87.2	11.5	2.2	91.5	6.3	
If a person dresses in a provocative / sexy way, it is a sign that s/he wants to have sex	1.8	87.0	11.2	2.2	91.0	6.8	
If a person doesn't say 'no', it means that s/he wants to have sex	1.5	91.4	7.1	2.6	91.3	6.1	
It is not always easy to know when a person wants to have sex or not	59.4	20.0	20.6	47.6	33.9	18.5	
If a person does not want to have sex, s/he must say so clearly	46.2	33.7	20.1	46.0	42.5	11.5	
To be considered rape, it must involve some form of violence or threats by the author	13.0	73.8	13.2	11.5	79.6	8.9	
To be considered rape, the victim must fight to defense her/himself	3.1	87.1	9.8	5.8	86.7	7.5	

Results presented as row percentages

Significant results (p<.05) are presented in bold

Consent explained include both those that understood it (n=846) and those that did not (n=32)

Table 3 Level of agreement to situations displaying sexual consent by consent explanation

When analyzing the results by gender (Table 4), some differences appeared with a similar pattern. In three situations ('If a person allows to be kissed easily, it is a sign that s/he wants to have sex'; 'If a person dresses in a provocative / sexy way, it is a sign that s/he wants to have sex'; and 'To be considered rape, it must involve some form of violence or threats by the author'), males were less likely to disagree than the other genders and about one in eight or nine reported not knowing. Because the group *Other* was small compared to the other two, we repeated the analysis

including only males and females and the results did not change.

Situation	Gender								
	Male (n=586)			Female (n=578)			Other (n=33)		
	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)
To have any kind of sexual relationship, your partner must give explicit consent (must clearly say YES)	85.5	6.0	8.5	88.2	5.4	6.4	92.5	7.4	0.1
If a person allows to be kissed easily, it is a sign that s/he wants to have sex	1.6	87.3	11.1	2.1	93.5	4.4	7.4	88.8	3.8
If a person dresses in a provocative / sexy way, it is a sign that s/he wants to have sex	2.6	85.5	11.9	1.4	94.4	4.2	3.7	92.5	3.8
If a person doesn't say 'no', it means that s/he wants to have sex	2.6	89.9	7.5	1.8	92.7	5.5	7.4	92.5	0.1
It is not always easy to know when a person wants to have sex or not	53.6	28.1	18.3	48.7	32.1	19.2	37.1	33.3	29.6
If a person does not want to have sex, s/he must say so clearly	51.6	35.3	13.1	40.9	44.9	14.2	36.9	44.5	18.6
To be considered rape, it must involve some form of violence or threats by the author	16.1	71.8	12.1	7.9	84.0	8.1	7.5	85.1	7.4
To be considered rape, the victim must fight to defense her/himself	7.2	83.5	9.3	3.3	89.6	7.1	0.1	96.2	3.7

Results presented as row percentages

Significant results ($p < .05$) are presented in bold

Table 4 Level of agreement to situations displaying sexual consent by gender

Discussion

Although some situations presented mixed results, the vast majority of youths in the sample had a correct viewpoint on the subject of sexual consent. Moreover, the fact that sexual consent had been explained to them seems to have little effect on their responses, with only one of the proposed situations showing a significant difference. However, in Switzerland, all the pupils in mandatory school (until 14-15 years) receive sex education lessons in class. Nevertheless, as can be seen in Table 1, those from the German-speaking part of the country are significantly less likely to have received this information. The fact that in that region sexual education is generally given by teachers with, for some, a more biological approach could explain, at least partially, this phenomenon. It could also be hypothesized that some young people did not realize during sexual education that they were receiving information about sexual consent but subconsciously integrated it.

When data are analyzed by gender the situation is a little bit different, with males generally having more difficulties to choose what is correct than both females and other.

Sexual consent is a delicate subject that needs to be discussed with young people, as they are particularly vulnerable during this phase of development. Indeed, they are learning about sexuality, their own boundaries and those of others. In addition, pressure issues may particularly concern them.

This echoes the political debate that is taking place in Switzerland to reform the penal code. Indeed, currently in the Swiss law, sexual coercion (article 189) and rape (article 190) are defined by the presence of violence or threats and not the absence of consent. This reform would allow greater consideration of the unwanted sexual experiences

that are now part of what some call a 'grey area'. An area that does not meet the current definition of rape but which can also lead to harmful consequences for victims.

Additional information

The complete version of the study on the mental health of young people in Switzerland and Liechtenstein is freely downloadable from: <https://www.unisante.ch/fr/formation-recherche/recherche/publications/raisons-sante/raisons-sante-323>
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