Kim Ringmar Sylwander July 31st, 2025

Consent in a digital age – rethinking sexting education

Sexting is a part of life for many teenagers. But sexting education still frames consent in an unrealistic binary of clear "yes" or "no", ignoring the nuances of digital communication. ***Kim Ringmar Sylwander*** *makes the case for moving to a a more contextual, emotionally attuned, and rights-based understanding of consent, and argues that education around online safety and the law need to be updated to reflect this rights-based framework.*

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A teenage girl receives a message on Snapchat from a boy she met at a party. At first, he seems nice, but his intentions shift. She isn't interested. Yet instead of explicitly refusing further contact, she sends a photo of the ceiling. These "ceiling pics" are a culturally legible, non-confrontational way of signalling disinterest among youth, without harsh rejection. They're subtle cues. Strategic. But how does this apply if communication has progressed to say nudes or other forms of sexual solicitation? Is ceiling pic then a refusal? Or consent to keep on chatting? Or something else? When I present my research on young people's understandings of sexual consent in digital communication, young people will know exactly what the ceiling pic signifies, whilst adults rarely have a clue.

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more contextual, emotionally attuned, and rights-based understanding of consent.

In the UK and elsewhere, sexting education tends to frame consent as a clear "yes" or "no", expressed emphatically and legibly either verbally or through clear body language. The updated UK "Statutory guidance on relationships education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education" published 15 July 2025, maintains a largely affirmative, binary model of consent, framing consent as saying "yes" or "no." Yet research of young people's lived experiences suggests a far more complex reality. If we want to support youth in navigating their digital sexual lives, we must move beyond binary models and embrace a more contextual, emotionally attuned, and rights-based understanding of consent.

Consent for the digital age

Contemporary sex education and legal discourse often rely on affirmative models of consent which emphasise voluntariness, clarity, capability, and conscious agreement. These frameworks are important but can oversimplify how young people actually experience and negotiate boundaries, especially in digital contexts shaped as much by interface design, algorithms and technological affordances, as the gender and sexual norms that are exacerbated by these digital architectures.

Under UK law, consent is legally defined in Section 74 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 as:

"[…] person consents if they agree by choice, and have the freedom and capacity to make that choice."

This legal framework identifies circumstances under which consent is deemed invalid, such as if it results from coercion, deception, or incapacity. This legal model of sexual consent is the result of a hard-won battle by feminists and legal scholars. Nonetheless, it assumes a rational, independent subject.

By extension it assumes that young people are, or should be, rational, communicative, agentic individuals, capable of clearly negotiating sexual boundaries. Alternatively, youth are positioned as ignorant sexual subjects and consent as a knowledge problem, something that young people have yet to learn. Studies consistently show that young people's as well as adults' sexual encounters rarely fit neatly into existing legal categories, revealing how sexual consent is shaped by heteronormative sexual scripts, which prescribe gendered expectations and pressures, making it

tricky to navigate and hardly ever clear-cut. In digital settings, consent becomes even harder to pin down.

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Adolescents often engage in emotionally complex and socially negotiated forms of digital intimacy. Girls, in particular, may respond in ways that aim to preserve social harmony or avoid confrontation. The result is a consent landscape where refusal isn't always explicit, and agreement isn't always freely given.

How do technologies and platforms shape possibilities for consent?

Studies on teen sexting reveal that girls are more frequently sent unsolicited images such as dick pics and unsolicited nude requests. Boys, meanwhile, were are more likely to be approached by fake accounts linking to graphic content through so called porn bots. These asymmetries reveal how platform design and digital cultures intensify existing gendered norms and affect the conditions and possibilities to negotiate consent in online communication. These forms "digital sexual violence" and the technologies that facilitate their transmission, complicate the idea of consent as a process between two human agents. As young people are managing exposure and harm, consent may feel like an inapplicable concept.

As one girl put it in a group interview *"It's like… dick pics are in your face all the time. It's just there."*

These moments shape how young people experience digital space and their own sexual boundaries. So, what shapes young people's ability to consent online? It's not just about personal agency. It's about the platforms themselves.

Apps like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok don't just host communication, they shape it. Features like disappearing messages, screenshot warnings, and algorithmically curated content create *affective economies*: emotional contexts structured by platform design.

Consent becomes less a clear decision made by a rational agent and more an ongoing, emotional, social and technical process. It's about how people tune into each other through feelings, cues, and the platform's design. This is what Prøitz, Hjorth and Lasén describe as *affective attunement*. It's the way consent happens between people, but also between people and technologies. As Dubrofsky and Levina remind us: "Agency is not independent from a coercive context." In hyper-gendered, sexualized digital spaces, young people's agency is shaped and constrained by the platforms they use.

This transforms consent from a moment of rational decision-making into a process of ongoing negotiation and navigation. "Sextual consent" (a word play on sexual and sexting) involves digital cues, affective attunement, risk assessment, subtle forms of expression and boundary-setting in digital settings.

The problem with the law

UK law, while designed to protect children, has at times criminalised them for consensual image-sharing. Under the Protection of Children Act 1978, it remains illegal for anyone under 18 to create, possess, or share indecent images of a minor, even if they are the subject of the image themselves. Although this is favourably interpreted if the exchange is consensual and between similarly aged peers.

A 2015 case highlights the problematic nature of current UK law: a 14-year-old boy from North East England was placed on the sex offenders register after sending a nude image to a classmate, who subsequently shared it widely. This and similar incidents have drawn widespread criticism, prompting shifts in police guidance to avoid criminalising underage peer-to-peer sexting. Media reports from 2019 nonetheless revealed over 6,000 children under 14 had been investigated by police for sexting, even very young children were labelled as 'suspects' in police records. Such labelling stigmatises youth, undermines their rights, and ignores their evolving capacities. Despite policing guidance aimed at avoiding criminal outcomes where aggravating factors are absent, the law still effectively criminalises consensual, age-appropriate image-sharing among peers, contradicting scholarly consensus that regards this as age-appropriate sexual behaviour.

Fear-based education persists in schools, often emphasising illegality and abstinence over emotional and digital literacy and rights. This approach risks alienating youth, discouraging help-seeking, and ignoring the deeper social and technological factors that shape digital sexual expression. It also absolves platforms of responsibility, failing to interrogate how their design fosters unsafe or non-consensual interactions.

What can a rights-based framework offer?

A better alternative is to adopt a child rights-based approach to sextual consent, as outlined in General comment No. 25 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. This framework emphasises children's rights to:

- Protection from harm,
- Participation in matters that affect them,
- Privacy and data protection,
- The right to freedom of expression and access to appropriate information, consistent with their evolving capacities.

Applied to sexting and digital intimacy, this framework encourages a shift from prohibition to empowerment:

- Embed children's rights into digital platform design (child rights by design) to make environments safer and more respectful by default.
- Support educators and caregivers in discussing digital intimacy in ways that affirm autonomy and agency.
- Engage young people directly in shaping sex education and digital policy that reflect their lived realities.
- Ensure legal proportionality, distinguishing between consensual exploration and harmful exploitation.

From policy to practice

Beyond the UK, other Western countries, such as Sweden and Spain, have made strides in integrating consent and diversity into criminal law and, increasingly, also sex education curricula. But recent political shifts threaten to undo this progress. The current global pendulum swing toward conservative sexual politics highlights the urgency to safeguard rights-based, inclusive, and evidence-led approaches.

While both the previous and newly updated RSE guidance mandate education on consent and online safety, it continues to rely on a simplistic, binary model of consent and a largely risk-focused, fear-based approach to digital literacy, for instance dissuading sexual image-sharing through the threat of criminalisation even when consensual. This framing falls short of addressing the nuanced,

emotionally charged and socially negotiated ways young people navigate intimacy and boundaries online as well as offline. To truly reflect children and young people's lived experiences, media literacy education must move beyond harm avoidance to equip them with skills to critically evaluate digital interactions, assess how platform design shapes online communication, and understand how social norms influence their understanding of consent. Effective consent education must be inclusive, addressing how digital intimacy and consent negotiation differ across diverse identities, orientations, social settings and digital environments.

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Sexual expression among youth, including through digital means, is not inherently harmful, but failing to support young people in navigating it can be. Rather than punishing adolescents for the realities of their digital lives, we must equip them with the tools, space, and support to communicate, care, and protect themselves and others. We must also ensure that tech companies are held accountable when violations of children's rights occur. Crucially, we must also require them to safeguard children's rights *by design and by default.*

Ceiling pics, disappearing messages, and emojis are part of a digital language of interpreting consent. To protect young people's rights and wellbeing, we must tune into their language and co-create educational, legal, and technological frameworks that resonate with children and young people's experiences.

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Dr Kim Ringmar Sylwander is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Digital Futures for Children centre at the London School of Economics. Her previous research has centred on how children and youth navigate technologically mediated environments, including issues related to sexual consent in online contexts, sexualised and racialised hate and young people's consumption of pornography. Her current research focuses on children's rights and the evolving capacities of children in relation to the digital environment, EdTech, and children's experiences of AI.

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