

**MEDIA EDUCATION**  
**FOUNDATION**  
**STUDY GUIDE**

# **ASKING FOR IT**

The Ethics and Erotics of Sexual Consent

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## NOTE TO EDUCATORS

### **About the material presented in this film**

It is important to understand the potentially highly volatile nature of any discussion regarding the sensitive subjects of sexual assault and sexual consent. Some of your students/participants may have experienced sexual violence in their lives. This video is designed to open up dialogue, and students/participants may speak candidly or passionately about their own experiences and contact with sexual assault and consent. Students should be given permission to share only what they are comfortable sharing. Some students may be uncomfortable discussing the material, perceiving the Affirmative Consent Standard as a personal indictment of their past actions. It is better to stress the universal and positive nature of the principles of the Affirmative Consent Standard rather than focusing on past experiences.

Some students may approach you and reveal experiences to you that require more specialized attention that reach beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Your role should be to facilitate a transition or referral to more appropriate professionals. You should be aware of your school's resources in this area prior to a discussion with students. Please ensure that you are making a referral privately with the individual student rather than in a group setting.

### **About this study guide**

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we've structured the guide to help you stay close to the video's main line of argument as it unfolds:

**Key Points** provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

**Questions for Discussion & Writing** provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for "free-writing" or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

**Assignments** encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

## FILM SYNOPSIS

The line between sexual consent and sexual coercion is not always as clear as it seems – and according to Harry Brod, this is exactly why we should approach our sexual interactions with great care. Brod, a professor of philosophy and leader in the pro-feminist men's movement, offers a unique take on the problem of sexual assault, one that complicates the issue even as it clarifies the bottom-line principle that consent must always be explicitly granted, never simply assumed. In a nonthreatening discussion that ranges from the meanings of "yes" and "no" to the indeterminacy of silence and the way alcohol affects our ethical responsibilities, Brod challenges young people to envision a model of sexual interaction that is most erotic precisely when it is most thoughtful and empathetic.

## PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

- 1) How are “romance” and “sex” portrayed in American culture? How do typical romantic films or novels portray the initiation of activities of sex?
- 2) What does “consent” mean to you? How does one get consent?
- 3) Who is responsible for “how far” a sexual encounter goes? Who is responsible to stop any sexual acts? Why do you think so?
- 4) How does American culture think about sex? Who initiates? Who asks? Who responds?
- 5) Can you think of any examples in movies or TV where sexual activities occur? Describe the scene. How was it handled? What did the characters do? How did others react?
- 6) Have you heard the phrase, “All is fair in love and war?” What do you think this means? Do you agree?
- 7) Think about your own boundaries about sexual activity. What is your “line”? How can you communicate your “line” to sexual partners?

## KEY POINTS

- There are instances when “yes” does not and cannot mean “yes” in a sexual encounter.
- American culture often assumes that silence means “yes.”
- The Affirmative Consent Standard states that consent must never be assumed; rather it must be obtained. This is foundational to creating a safe environment.
- This video focuses primarily on first sexual encounter situations, rather than on long-term relationships. This is due to the high rates of assault and rape during first-time encounters.
- Only a clear, unambiguous “yes” means “yes.”
- Body language is an unreliable indicator, and one cannot assume that body language gives consent.
- Consent is something that must be obtained rather than assumed.
- It is the initiator’s responsibility to take affirmative steps in order to secure the knowledge that consent has been obtained.
- “Asking for consent ruins the mood” is a myth that must be challenged. Gaining consent may lead to encounters that are actually more erotic.
- Anti-sexual assault does not mean anti-sex; rather it means that both parties work to create a safe and comfortable environment.
- Safe environments ultimately lead to more erotic sexual encounters because of the trust and understanding developed between the consenting parties.
- If the consenting parties are mentally and physically on the “same base” at the same time, it can make a sexual encounter more enjoyable because no one is being pulled in a direction in which they don’t want to go.
- Alcohol and drugs impair both parties’ judgment and perceptions and inhibits them as responsible sexual partners.
- Alcohol and drugs inhibit one’s ability to give consent or obtain consent from the other party.
- It is essential not to initiate sex if you are too impaired to know if you’ve gotten consent.
- If you are too impaired to know if you have obtained consent, then when asked if you have ever sexually assaulted someone, the only answer you can honestly give is “I don’t know.”

- We are responsible for changing the basis of sexual assault culture through acts of resistance—through encouraging others to rethink their decisions, talking to others about what consent means, and enacting affirmative consent in our own lives.
- Adopting an Affirmative Consent Standard is one step towards lowering the rates of sexual assault and rape because it challenges us to take full responsibility for our sexual encounters.

## POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING

1. What does “getting consent” mean? According to the video, who is responsible for obtaining consent?
2. How would implementing the Affirmative Consent Standard change how American culture represents sex?
3. Is there anything about “yes” that you still don’t understand?
4. How do the principles of affirmative consent apply to non-heterosexual couples? Do any different or additional principles apply to non-heterosexual couples? If so, why?
5. How do these principles apply to couples in long-standing relationship? Do any different or additional principles apply to couples in long-standing relationship? If so, why?
6. How do these principles apply when there is a significant difference in power or status between the persons involved, for example employer and employee, or significant differences in age or even wealth? Do any different or additional principles apply in such cases? If so, why?
7. Do women and men have equal power or status in our society? In sexual situations are they equally likely to “go along” when they don’t *really* want to, or to keep insisting until they wear down the other person’s resistance? If not, how might this change the idea that these principles apply equally whether it’s a man or a woman wishing to initiate sexual activity in a heterosexual situation?
8. What example does Dr. Brod offer to clarify what he means by our *responsibility to know*? Can you think of another example where we are responsible for knowledge? How does that apply to the video?
9. Dr. Brod addresses the myth that asking for consent ruins the mood. Can you think of similar myths about consent, or about the sexual expectations of men and women? How do these myths perpetuate a culture that is prone to sexual assault?
10. Consent must not only be given, it can also be withdrawn. What obligations do people have to know that consent, even though it was given at one point, has not been withdrawn?

11. What does it mean to be “anti-sexual assault” but not “anti-sex”? How are people who are anti-sexual assault often regarded?
12. What does it mean to be on the “same base” both mentally and physically? How does that make for a safer environment?
13. If all people adopted this standard, how would that change the college party atmosphere? Would it be beneficial beyond the college atmosphere?
14. How does American culture view the consumption of alcohol and drugs in relationship to initiating sexual contact?
15. What phrases or slang have you heard that indicate alcohol and drugs are a legitimate way to initiate sex—e.g. “liquid courage”? How does that type of thinking reflect a culture prone to sexual assault?
16. Realizing the honest answer is “I don’t know” can be very sobering. In what ways does this change how you think about sexual assault? About party culture?
17. How does this relate to the earlier question regarding alcohol and drugs as legitimate ways to initiate sex?
18. Dr. Brod suggests that individuals have the power to change the culture of sexual assault and masculinity through avenues such as discussion of the principles of affirmative consent and personal responsibility. Do you agree? Why or why not? If not, how do you suggest that change happen?
19. In what ways is the Affirmative Consent Standard different from current assault and rape regulations/laws at your school? In your state?
20. How can you create positive changes in regulations/laws if you think these are needed?

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Ask students to record their reactions in a journal, focusing on one specific topic mentioned in the film. Divide students up based upon their chosen topic and allow them to discuss their reactions in small groups.
2. Reflect on the scene you described earlier from a movie or television show (see #5 in Pre-Viewing Questions, above.) How has your perception changed regarding that scene? Does the interaction reflect an Affirmative Consent Standard? If not, rewrite the scene.
3. Ask students to write a short essay with the prompt: Do you think “hookup culture” has changed perceptions about sex and sexual consent? Why or why not?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Also from the Media Education Foundation:

- *The Line: A Personal Exploration About Sexual Assault and Consent*
- *Spin the Bottle: Sex, Lies & Alcohol*
- *Understanding Hookup Culture: What's Really Happening on College Campuses*

Gender violence prevention websites:

- ✓ <http://www.consentissexy.org/>
- ✓ <http://health.columbia.edu/services/svprp/advocacy-outreach>
- ✓ <http://www.thinkb4youspeak.com/ForEducators/>
- ✓ <http://www.saynotoviolence.org/>
- ✓ <http://www.safercampus.org/>
- ✓ <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2010/04/08/who-should-rape-prevention-campaigns-address/>
- ✓ <http://www.jacksonkatz.com/index.html>
- ✓ <http://www.whynotask.org/>
- ✓ <http://www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk/home/>
- ✓ <http://www.michaelkaufman.com/man-talk/>
- ✓ <http://www.canikissyou.com/>
- ✓ [http://www.ncherm.org/pdfs/CREATING PROACTIVE CAMPUS SEXUAL MISCONDUCT POLICY.pdf](http://www.ncherm.org/pdfs/CREATING_PROACTIVE_CAMPUS_SEXUAL_MISCONDUCT_POLICY.pdf)
- ✓ <http://www.alanberkowitz.com/articles/consent.pdf>