

Conversations on Consent Through Play

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Sexuality is an integral part of human life. The earliest impressions relating to sex are usually formed during early childhood, often before a child is able to speak. There are various stages crucial to sexual development, such as the stages when young children observe the presence of their parents and other adults around them, when they are being toilet trained, and when they discover and show interest in their genitals. The caregivers' attitude and approach toward these interests guide the psychosexual development of children. As children continue to develop and their curiosity grows, they ask various questions related to sex, procreation and birth. During this phase of rapid growth and development, children experience and learn about their bodies. They observe gender roles and construct self-identity.

Some of us may believe that discussing sex-related matters will deprive children of their 'innocence'. Sexual awareness is important for all of us, including children. It will not corrupt their innocent minds but will guard them against physical and emotional threats. It is the manner in which children's questions are answered that contributes to the kind of attitudes they will develop towards sexuality. So, it is important that their curiosities are addressed constructively, in an age-appropriate manner.

Concepts of consent and agency

Comprehensive sex education involves providing scientifically accurate, non-judgmental, age-appropriate and complete information on sexual matters from the beginning of formal schooling. Children learn about the cognitive, socio-emotional, interactive and physical aspects of sexuality which empowers them with information, skills and positive values to have safe and fulfilling relationships. When children learn about equality and respect in relationships, they are able to recognise abusive persons and situations, which makes it easier for them to take care of their own and other people's well-being.

In building safe and respectful relationships, the value of consent cannot be overestimated. Consent is a concept that we respect each other's boundaries, taking care of the safety and dignity of ourselves and others, thus building physically and emotionally healthy relationships. Teaching young children about consent not only protects them from predators but also lays the foundation for emotionally and physically safe relationships in later stages of their lives. It also ensures a secure learning environment in the classroom by fostering healthy interpersonal relationships among children. They learn the basic concept of body, space, touch and boundaries. They understand their own and others' emotions better, which empowers them with skills to practice their agency over age-appropriate issues.

Teachers understand the importance of such learning experiences in children's lives and often think of ways in which to create a conducive environment for children to learn and practice these values. Play and activity-based learning in a democratic environment can be the best way to introduce these ideas to young children. There is a set of activities given below which helps children learn the concept of safety and agency in a fun way. Teachers can design many other activities like these with different learning objectives relevant to the sex education for young children.

Activity: Bubble of safety

Day 1: Story

Ask students to 'free walk' in a large circle. After three minutes, ask them to return to settle down. Now, while discussing the experience of this activity with them, discuss the difficulties encountered during this activity. Ask them what their thoughts were during the free walk; if they were afraid of going too close and bumping into their classmates; if yes, why?

Direct the discussion by showing a picture (like the one on the next page) and asking students about their observations/experiences related to bubbles.



After this, introduce the story of the safety bubble.

Story: Safety Bubble

All of you must have seen bubbles. My name is *Safety Bubble* and I will tell you about myself. I am not an ordinary bubble; I am a special bubble. Everyone in the world carries me around themselves – you, your parents, friends, grandparents, even babies (like in the picture below). But my special quality is that I am not visible and I just do my work without being seen.



Now you must be wondering if a bubble does any work, and that too, a safety bubble. So let me tell you that my work is also hidden in my name. Can you imagine what could be the task of a safety bubble? (Give the children a chance to guess and answer.)

My job is to take care of every person in such a way that no one goes near his or her body or touches it without permission. All my safety bubble friends, like me, are always trying to keep ourselves away from each other and not bump into each other. But many times, people forget about us completely and go so close to each other without permission that we burst. People forget to look around and

run into their friends while playing, they pull their friends' clothes to call them, they hit them or touch their belongings without permission. When this happens, people do not feel comfortable in their safety bubbles and their friendships also weaken. That is why I have come to your class/group today to ask all of you for help. Can you think of some ways in which you can take care of your and other people's safety bubbles? (Give the children a chance to guess and answer.)

Discussion: After telling the story, discuss the following questions with the children:

- What is the function of the safety bubble?
- What are the reasons that can lead to the damage/bursting of your own and other people's safety bubble?
- Why is it important to take care of your and others' safety bubbles?
- How would you feel if someone does not take care of your safety bubble?
- How can you take care of your own safety bubble and those of people around you?

Once again, ask the children to 'free walk' for two minutes in a circle in the classroom/playground. This time, encourage them to take care of their and others' safety bubbles. Now ask students the difference between their experience of free walking before and after the story and why according to them did they feel this difference.

Help the children come to the conclusion through free walk and story that we should take care of the invisible bubbles around us and always try to protect these. We should not enter other people's safety bubbles without permission. With the help of these activities, draw the children's attention to how no one likes to be touched without their permission and therefore, we should always imagine that there is an invisible bubble around everyone that we should not burst.

Day 2: Game

The following day, discuss the story of the Safety Bubble with the children. Then, in an open space, play the game *Simon Says* with them. Explain the rules of the game, that is, they must do what 'Simon' instructs them to do, but at the same time, they must also take care of their own and everyone else's safety bubble.

Play this game for 10 minutes and then, bring the children back to class. Discuss their experience of

playing the game and what would happen if they did not have a safety bubble (distance between themselves) while playing. Follow this up with a role-play. Aditi and Vivek are two friends who decide to play Simon Says. Two teachers assume the roles of Aditi and Vivek and the children watch.

Aditi: Simon says, clap.

(Vivek claps)

Aditi: Simon says, hands up.

(Vivek puts his hands up)

Aditi: Now, your turn.

Vivek: Simon says, sit down.

(Aditi sits down.)

Vivek: Simon says, hold your friend's nose.

(Then he laughs and touches Aditi's nose. Aditi backs off and walks away)

Vivek: What happened, Aditi?

Aditi: I won't play.

Vivek: But what happened?

Aditi: Keep your hands to yourself! (*Apne haath apne tak*). Even while playing.

Vivek: Your hands to yourselves? What is that?

Aditi: Yesterday, during the lunch break, Rinky and I were playing 'rabbits and monkeys'. We were having a lot of fun but when Rinky said, 'Monkeys like to tickle' and she tickled me, I didn't like it. I didn't want her to tickle me. And later, in class, she touched my hairband without asking me; I did not like that either. Then, while playing in the sand outside, she took the lid of my bottle from my hand and did not even ask me. She does not keep her hands to herself and repeatedly comes into my safety bubble without asking.

Vivek: Oh! Then what did you do?

Aditi: I talked to Rinky and told her that she does not keep her hands to herself and gets into my safety bubble without asking. It breaks my bubble and I do not like it at all. I also told her that it is not a good thing that we touch someone or take their stuff without asking them. It may upset them. That's why 'keep your hands to yourself'. Remember that before touching someone, we must take their consent and if they say no, we should not do it.

Vivek: It is a good thing that you talked to Rinky. Did Rinky understand this?

Aditi: Yes, she told me that she did not want to upset me, she was just playing. She promised me that she will always ask before touching and taking others' stuff. She made a 'pinky-promise' by locking her little finger with mine but even before that she first asked for my permission, and I happily said 'yes'.

Vivek: Now I understand what is meant by 'your hands to yourself'. Thank you, Aditi. Do you want to play 'Simon says' with me again?

Aditi: Yes, of course. But your hands to yourself (*apne haath apne tak*)

Vivek: Unless your friend says so (*dost na kahe tab tak*)

Aditi: Careful! The bubble should not burst (*dekho bulbula na toote!*)

Vivek: No friend should get upset (*dost koi na roothe*).

(Aditi and Vivek start playing their favourite game again.)

Discuss the conversation between Aditi and Vivek with the children. Ask them the following questions:

- Why did Aditi refuse to play with Vivek in the middle of the game?
- What had upset Aditi?
- If your friend comes into your safety bubble without asking you, what will happen and how will you feel?
- If this happens, what and how will you convey the message of 'consent' to your friend?
- Just as Aditi told Vivek the rule of 'your hands to yourself', in the same way, would you like to make this rule for your class?

By discussing the conversation of Aditi and Vivek, help the children to come to the conclusion that we should all take care of the safety bubble around us and ensure that no one gets into it without first asking us. If a classmate or a friend is stepping into another's bubble, then we can gently tell them about this rule because by following it our friendship will also remain strong.

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Image Sources

<https://images.agoramedia.com/wte3.0/gcms/Toddler-play-with-bubbles-722x406.jpg?width=574>

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A core tenet of games is shared learning – participants work together as they try to solve a puzzle, break a code or track a path out of a maze. During this time, they are learning from their own mistakes or successes as well as from their peers. Games should allow for this learning and have time built in to reflect on this learning after the game is over.

Shambhavi Naik, Games for the Science Classroom, p 77.