



What does consent mean in practice at play parties? Guidelines for community members

About these guidelines

We talk about giving and getting consent, but what does that mean in practice? This set of consent guidelines was developed by a team of experienced event organisers and kink-affirmative therapists / educators (see bottom of the page for more details). The guidelines are not specific to the Summer House Weekend, but we believe that they work within the context of our event.

While these guidelines should be useful for any encounter at any time or place in your life, they are particularly designed for sex parties, playrooms and BDSM/kink events. Importantly the guidelines are aimed at everybody: whatever role you take and however you identify. No matter how experienced, we all encounter (or are responsible for) non-consensual behaviour from time to time. Hopefully these guidelines will help you to understand these areas more fully, as well as giving you some ideas about how best to ensure consensual play.

If you're new to the kink / sex-positive community some of this may seem daunting, but don't be too worried. The idea is to provide "best practice" ideas on how to ensure everyone has the best possible time, understanding that consent is something that takes practice and that we can all improve on.

We hope that the guidelines will help to:

- Increase the amount of freedom, confidence and safety that everybody involved will experience, given that the boundaries are as clear as possible;
- Reduce the possibility that anybody will end up with regrets or complaints.

People often think that consent is as simple as asking somebody if they want to do something, and getting a 'yes' or a 'no'. However, there are a lot of expectations on us when it comes to sex and play, which can make it difficult to be completely sure at all times what we want, and hard always to communicate that to others. These guidelines cover the kinds of practices that you can engage in to maximise consent. Many people find that these practices make their encounters more hot and enjoyable. For example, describing what you're into, hearing somebody's fantasies, or checking in with somebody, can be very exciting practices in themselves.

Before

- Be gentle towards yourself about what you feel capable of doing. Events can have their challenges and problems even for regulars, so if you're new to these environments things might feel all the more overwhelming and strange. Anyone playing with a newbie should take particular care. It's easy in the initial enthusiasm to accidentally overstretch your limits.
- It's always okay to do nothing. It's fine to be at an event and not play. It's also okay to start and then to stop at any time. No-one should ever pressure you to progress beyond your boundaries or shame you for not participating. If you feel pressured then you can either say 'no' or give a safeword, or tell an organiser who will be happy to come and say this on your behalf.



- Consider what kind of state everyone is in. If you or your potential play partner are intoxicated, if you're feeling fragile, or if you're very tired, it's best to get that out in the open. In these circumstances it's a good idea to put limits on activities and to check in often with each other.

Making and receiving approaches

- If you'd like any kind of touch or encounter with somebody, ask the other person once before doing anything or inviting them to participate. Examples: 'Mind if we sit here?' 'May I give you a hug?' 'Would you like to dance?' 'Care to come to the playroom with me?' etc.
- If you're suggesting a kink scene of any kind then make sure you're clear about exactly what it would involve, and how experienced you are, so that the other person can make informed consent.
- Unless you get a fully enthusiastic response such as 'yes please' then say 'no worries' and drop the subject (or move away if the person seems at all uncomfortable). Many people, perhaps the majority, feel uncomfortable saying 'no'.
- Watch out for the many subtle ways of saying no, such as "Not now", "You're not my type", "I like you but", "I'm not sure", "You've/I've been drinking", "Maybe later". If someone looks uncertain, makes an excuse, or says anything that is not an enthusiastic 'yes', take their uncertainty as a no.
- Remember that some people are given different degrees of 'permission' by society to ask for what they want or don't want. So pay attention to the other person when talking about what you do or don't want. Who is doing most of the talking? Is there a sense of enthusiasm? Are they going along with the conversation because they are finding it too awkward?
- The following differences between you might complicate the ease with which someone can feel comfortable saying no: one of you being older or more experienced; one of you being a facilitator or organiser at an event; differences in gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, class, education, language; differences that mean that one of you is generally seen as less culturally 'attractive' and/or differences in levels of self-confidence or mental health struggles.
- When someone does say no, it definitely means no – and this can happen at any time of an encounter. The only exception is where you have both specifically agreed a safeword taking the place of "no" that everyone can use to bring all play to an end.

Negotiating

- Negotiate your boundaries together before playing, having sex or getting into any kind of role. The ideal situation here is a conversation that covers things like: talking about what you're each into and finding the common ground between you; letting each other know your limits and what you don't like; identifying any places that you don't want to be touched; explaining any medical issues; figuring out what it is that you are going to do this time and roughly how long it'll last; determining how you will let each other know if you're not enjoying it any more and want it to stop (including safewords); talking about safer sex practices and STIs; discussing what kind of aftercare you'll each want afterwards (e.g. a cuddle, no contact, a phone call the next day). Above all ensure that you come to a clear, shared understanding.
- For those people who find it difficult to negotiate consent verbally, an alternative is to consciously negotiate as you go. Be sure to start off with a short verbal check-in such as 'tell me if



there's anything you don't like' or 'is there anywhere you don't want to be touched'. From there pay attention to micro-communications such as eye contact, breathing, noises, how bodies move towards or away from each other, facial expressions. Every now and then use short phrases for direction and feedback: 'this okay?' 'faster,' 'bit softer,' 'just like that,' plus non-verbal cues such as eye contact, smiles etc. In kink scenes, some people quote colours, such as green for "I'm enjoying this and you can continue", amber for "be cautious, perhaps slow down or decrease intensity" and red as the safeword meaning "stop".

- Remember that words have different meanings for different people so don't be afraid to clarify what a word means to you. Things like 'beating', 'pain', 'humiliation' and even 'sex' can have multiple interpretations, so it's worth checking e.g. "by not wanting to have sex during the scene do you mean getting naked, touching genitals, some kind of penetration, giving/getting an orgasm, or something else?".
- Pre-negotiation is always an option. You might want to say "no" at an event itself but start a detailed conversation (by text, by email or on the phone) about your desires for a future encounter. There are online questionnaires that are quite in-depth about experience, likes, dislikes, and limits (hard and soft). This can be an exciting way to know each other before playing and for extended, more complicated scenes, these can be useful.

During an encounter

- Even an 'enthusiastic yes' is just the opening gambit. An initial yes is not a carte blanche for anything that might happen later. Consent is an ongoing back-and-forth conversation. Our sense of comfort, safety and enjoyment is always changing. Even if someone said 'yes' five minutes ago, pay attention to how your (or their) body may be saying no five minutes later.
- Play / sex / a scene is not an escalator that needs to progress ever onwards and upwards. Things don't have to happen in a set, predictable order. Just because you start doesn't mean you have to finish. It's fine to re-negotiate boundaries in the midst of a scene, to go back to something you were doing earlier, to slow down, take a break or stop entirely.
- There is nothing wrong with asking a friend or DM (dungeon monitor) to keep an eye out if you are playing with someone unfamiliar to you. They needn't be close enough to invade the scene.

Engaging with other people's encounters

- Don't ask to join other people's scenes after they have started, and don't try to get involved without permission by touching them or lurking on the edge of their scene
- Make sure that you only watch people who have explicitly said that they are happy being watched. There's a difference between looking and staring. Keep a respectful distance, and move away if they look at all uncomfortable, deliberately avoid eye contact or ask you to stop.
- Respect the privacy of other guests by not taking photos, sharing contact details, describing details of a scene or tagging in social media without explicit permission.
- Ask an event organiser about what the etiquette is in any situation you're unsure about.



Be cautious around:

- Situations where anyone is encouraged to do something they don't want to do
- Anything from touching to name-calling that happens without explicit consent
- Playing with people who don't or can't communicate or discuss boundaries
- Failing to hear 'no' or not responding to a request to slow down or pause
- Expressing discomfort about aspects of other peoples' identity or body
- People who claim to know more about others' desires or needs, or how their body works
- Organisers/facilitators/leaders encouraging guests to do something with them
- People with more power or status not taking that into account when negotiating
- Those with less experience or status who might not feel empowered to give accurate feedback

It can be the case that someone who plays under one of the above situations can feel a sense of consent violation afterwards, so it's worth being cautious under those conditions. Remember that it's always okay to arrange to potentially play at a later event when you've had more time to think, to negotiate, and to discuss the idea with mutual friends or people with more experience.

If you experience anything that feels non-consensual or that breaks the agreements of a community, consider doing the following:

- If you feel able to, speak to the person in the moment so they know something is wrong.
- Use phrases such as 'This makes me feel uncomfortable', or 'this doesn't feel okay'. Say 'stop', use a safeword or (if you can) just walk away.
- If you prefer not to directly to the person concerned about what happened, that's okay. You do not have to justify yourself or engage in any kind of debate if you don't want.
- You can get help from people around you, and get support from friends if they are present. If you need to ask friends or other guests to keep you away from a particular person, please do so.
- Talk to an organiser, or ask for a friend/ another guest to get an organiser, as soon as possible. Usually organisers make themselves known with a particular item of dress (e.g. a lanyard, a special t-shirt or an armband) but if not, you can ask bar staff or venue security to get an organiser.

If something happens that you are concerned about

- If you see other people doing anything that you're concerned about, please talk to the organisers. Sometimes the people involved don't feel able to say anything themselves. It can be very valuable when a responsible onlooker alerts an organiser.



- If you see a situation that contravenes an event's values and you wish to step in, do so – but don't ever intervene with physical force. And ensure you don't break the event's rules yourself.
- The organiser should talk to the person concerned about their behaviour – you shouldn't have to (unless you want to do so.) They should also help get community members support if they need it, or help them leave if required.
- Even if the situation is resolved or you don't want to do anything further, it's vitally important to tell the organisers about every incident.

Getting support

- If you need support after the event write in to the event organisers asking for their help, and reach out to friends on the phone or by email/private message. It is usually wise to avoid going onto public social media in the immediate aftermath, until you are happy you have adequate support.
- If you are the person who somebody has complained about, be open to hearing that you've transgressed. If you wish to apologise speak to the person concerned only if they have explicitly stated they are comfortable doing so. (If in doubt, check with an organiser rather than approaching the person directly).
- If you're still struggling with it afterwards, or if you didn't feel able to say anything about it at the time, consider talking to a professional. Pink Therapy can put you in touch with a kink-aware professional who is used to dealing with these matters. They can help you to think about what you'd like to do next – to look after yourself and/or to report the person who was non-consensual. They can also help if you are the one who finds yourself accused of non-consensual behaviour. You could just have a one-off session with the professional, or more ongoing support if you need it.

You might also find it useful to read our guidelines for facilitators, organisers, community leaders and other professionals to see what kinds of behaviour you should expect from them.

About the authors of this document

We've been involved in the kink community for many years some as event organisers others having attended a wide range of events and parties. We're psychologists, psychotherapists, sex educators, clinical sexologists and sexological body workers. Most of us have a minimum of 5 years up to over 30 years experience of working with a wide range of diverse lifestyles and relationship forms. We regularly attend kink oriented CPD.

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