



# **Let's Talk Consent and Healthy Relationships**

**By Marissa Kokkoros**

**A**cross the globe, women and girls face inequality, discrimination, violence and exploitation. Human trafficking in the sex trade is one of the most extreme forms of gender-based violence and disproportionately affects women and girls, although boys and men can also be exploited.

Traffickers and abusers exploit vulnerabilities created by sexism, racism, colonialism, gender inequality, poverty and more. Systemic inequities and social marginalization have created intergenerationally marginalized communities that are targeted by exploiters. If there is a “crack” in the surface, they will find it. Racialized girls, especially Indigenous youth, experience added layers of discrimination and barriers to support, as well as youth in care, LGBTQ2S youth, disabled youth and youth with mental health issues. These marginalized youth often lack social supports, leaving room for exploitation under the guise of love, community and a better life.

Discussing consent with youth is an important way to help them recognize unhealthy relationships. It can also empower them to protect themselves from sexual violence, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

It is important to dispel the myths about human trafficking – what it looks like, who is trafficked and how it is done. Many Canadians still think that all human trafficking involves crossing international borders, kidnapping and forcible confinement, but most cases of domestic human trafficking in Canada look very different.



Don't think Hollywood. Forget about the movie 'Taken.'

Right now, Aura Freedom and other Toronto grassroots groups are seeing 16 and 17-year-old boys trafficking their classmates for money, notoriety and as a way to validate their masculinity. We are also seeing young women getting involved in the recruitment of those trafficked into the sex trade as a way to escape their own exploitation.

Social media is increasingly used to target, recruit and groom young women and girls, and ultimately exploit them. Indeed, many of the trafficking survivors Aura Freedom has supported were targeted and groomed online. During the luring and grooming stage, a trafficking situation can start out looking a lot like a romantic relationship or a friendship. Youth get a glimpse of a “dream life” before the rug is ripped out and the exploitation begins.

Many of the youth we have worked with have told us that they felt they were at fault for their abuse and exploitation because they never actually said “No.” The truth is, their exploitation was a slow process of coercion, manipulation, violence and blackmail, and they never had a choice.

This is exactly why education on consent and healthy relationships is so important. It can save lives.

## So, what is consent?

Personal boundaries must be respected by both parties and practising consent is a part of any healthy relationship. Aura Freedom borrows the I LOVE FRIES acronym as an easy way to teach just about anyone about consent.



**F**reely Given  
**R**eversible  
**I**nformed  
**E**nthusiastic  
**S**pecific

**Freely given:** Consenting is a choice you make without pressure, manipulation, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

**Reversible:** Anyone can change their mind about what they feel like doing, anytime.

**Informed:** You can only consent to something if you have the full story. You cannot consent to something which you have not been fully informed of!

**Enthusiastic:** You should only do stuff you WANT to do, not things that you feel you're expected to do.

**Specific:** Saying yes to one thing doesn't mean you've said yes to others.

## What consent IS:

- The presence of a YES – without coercion!
- Clear, communicated, enthusiastic
- The responsibility of the initiator
- Can be changed or withheld at any time
- Ongoing

## What consent IS NOT:

- The absence of a NO – “Well, she didn't say no” is NOT an excuse!
- Silence
- Made automatic by the relationship status
- A free pass – consent must be given for everything you do
- Given by someone else other than YOU – Only you can speak for yourself. Consent is never connected to the clothes you wear, your behaviour, where you hang out or who you hang out with. It is nothing other than YOUR CHOICE.

Consent given under coercion is NOT consent. This is especially important to highlight with youth as coercion is often used to obtain consent in situations of human trafficking – but this consent is not legal.



## What is coercion in the context of human trafficking?

- Manipulating someone until they give in to a sexual act (this is sexual assault!)
- Can involve blackmailing, pressuring, guilt, intimidating, threatening or physically harming someone into a sexual act
- Not being able to give consent on your own terms
- Not being given the space or opportunity to freely say “no”



## Healthy relationships

There is so much to say and so much to ‘unlearn’ due to harmful gender norms and other issues. The term “healthy relationships” does not just refer to romantic ones, but also friends, work relationships, friendships and family members.

The major components to a healthy relationship are:

- Communication
- Boundaries
- Safety
- Honesty
- Trust
- Enjoyment
- Separate identities

If these major components are present, then the relationship usually has a good foundation to be a healthy one. Abusive relationships revolve around control, fear and lack of respect, with one partner usually having control. This can involve threats, name calling, blaming, guilt-tripping, jealous questioning and physical violence.

## Consent in relationships

Consent is an absolutely necessary part of a healthy relationship. Consent in a dating relationship should

be practised. Just because you are in a relationship with someone does not give them the right to abuse or violate you in any way.

## Consent is always needed

Sometimes it helps for youth to affirm the rights they have to have safety, dignity and enjoyment in a relationship. The RELATIONSHIP BILL OF RIGHTS by Wellness Reproduction and Publishing is another great tool for teachers and students.



### THE RELATIONSHIP BILL OF RIGHTS

I hereby declare that I have the following rights in my intimate relationships. I also recognize and respect that all other people are entitled to the same rights at all times.

1. To have and express my own feelings and opinions, whether or not others agree.
2. To make decisions about myself, and to have equal decision-making power in my relationships.
3. To say "no" to physical closeness or any other act that makes me uncomfortable, at any time.
4. To refuse a date at any time.
5. To choose my own friends, and to maintain relationships with those friends.
6. To participate in activities that do not include my boyfriend or girlfriend.
7. To control my own money and other possessions.
8. To live free from fear and abuse.
9. To end a relationship.

We all have the right to feel safe and loved in any relationship and to have agency over our own bodies. Having conversations about consent and healthy relationships is one way to empower youth and prevent exploitation. [CP](#)

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**Aura Freedom** is a grassroots women's organization that works to eradicate gender-based violence and human trafficking through equity-advancing education and advocacy. Through education, advocacy, research, training and partnership building, Aura Freedom has implemented sustainable projects preventing and addressing gender-based violence and human trafficking in both Canada and South Asia. Our work has advanced gender equity, empowered marginalized women and given survivors anti-oppressive access to crucial services.

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