

# Too Hard to Ask<sup>14</sup>

“No always means no!”

- Complexity** Level 3
- Group size** 6 to 30
- Time** 60 minutes
- Overview** This activity addresses the way young people are socialised into communicating about sexual activity using brainstorming and discussion techniques.
- Objectives**
- To identify approaches to asking another person to engage in sexual relations that present the intentions of the requester transparently, and which suggest respect for the decision of the other
  - To learn to use different (negative) responses to requests for engaging in sexual relations
  - To understand the dangers which individuals (especially women) regularly face as a result of the non-transparent language of request and refusal in relation to sexual relations that women and men are socialised into
- Materials**
- Flipchart
  - Markers

## Preparation

Many young people have sexual intercourse before they are actually ready for it. This can be caused by the fact that young people remain socially dependent on adults while being at an age when they have an ever-increasing need for self-determination and self-esteem. During this stage in life, young people may feel that one of the only things they control is their own body. Therefore, they might engage in sexual activity to show that they are growing up. Another reason for this is that young people do not always learn to represent their own interests, especially when their needs and intentions differ from somebody's whom they otherwise like.

## Instructions

Introduce the activity by asking participants if they believe that other people in the group are having sexual intercourse regularly? Some participants may answer “Yes”. Point out that some are very likely not engaged in regular intercourse and may still never have engaged in sexual relations. Also point out that some of those who are, may not really want to be,

14 Adapted from “An Introduction to Human Sexuality - A curriculum guide for teachers”, pp. 60-61.

LEVEL: 3



GROUP: 6-30



TIME: 60 MIN.



Don't forget to read the tips for facilitators before running this activity.

but do not know how to say “No” when asked. Furthermore, some may even believe that they are supposed to ask their partner to engage in sexual intercourse to prove they care about them.

#### *Part 1: Brainstorming*

Ask participants to work individually on the following question:

*What are the ways to ask a person to have sexual intercourse with you?*

Point out that you don’t have to have engaged in sexual intercourse to imagine how one can ask someone else to engage in it with you. This is brainstorming and participants should not feel worried that they do not have personal experience on which to base their answers.

Give participants a few minutes to note down their ideas. Ask volunteers from the circle to share their ideas. Note down their suggestions on the flipchart. If similar ideas arise, they do not have to be written down again. You may simply put a mark next to them, each time it is mentioned again.

When they have finished, ask participants to brainstorm examples of how they might refuse these requests. In other words, how would they say “no” if asked? Ask participants to think in terms of assertive answers. Assertive answers are those which formulate a clear refusal without being offensive. Note these down on the flip chart next to the questions they refer to.

#### *Part 2: Acting out*

Once the questions and answers have been formulated, ask participants if there are any volunteers (you need at least 2 volunteers) who would like to role-play scenarios that show how the questions and answers work. Give the volunteer pairs a few minutes to choose and prepare their sketch. To begin with other participants should watch the pairs play out their short dialogue. Then the couple should play it again, and other participants may call out “Freeze” if they want to replace one of the players and move the dialogue on in a different, or (in their opinion) more effective or assertive direction. This is a way for the other participants to actively suggest alternative ways to ask and refuse sexual intercourse. Continue on the one sketch until there are no further suggestions from the audience, or until players have been replaced a maximum of two or three times. To avoid loss of interest, move on to the next volunteer pair and repeat the procedure. Try to offer all participants who wish to act out the opportunity to do so, obviously within the limits of the time available to you. Do not forget that women in the group should also get the opportunity to play one who asks for sex.

#### **Debriefing and evaluation**

Start the discussion by asking participants to share with the rest of the group some things they feel they have learned about asking for and refusing to have sexual intercourse during this exercise.

Emphasise the importance of open verbal communication in relation to requests for and refusals of sex. You can refer to some of the following reasons why speaking openly about whether one is ready, or wants to have sex, is important:

- The body language of people in different roles, certain types of eye contact and whether a meeting between two people is a romantic date or a friendly chat are all very subjective categories, of which we cannot assume others to be fully aware.
- Obvious but non-verbal offers are hard to refuse in an assertive manner. By the time the target of one's desire believes that s/he has understood the intentions of the other, s/he might already feel very intimidated.
- In the cases of date rape or acquaintance rape, most survivors have noted that shortly before the (attempted) rape they had an uncomfortable gut feeling about the situation, but would have found it impolite to react in an assertive manner, or simply were not sure of themselves and did not want to offend the other. These moments of discomfort are indicators for what may happen, and are often the last opportunity to stop the other. Once the true intentions of the other have become clear, it may already be too late to stop them.

Initiate a process related discussion with participants to open up the issue of how people are socialised into non-transparent communication about sex. You can use the following questions as a guideline:

- How did you feel about this exercise?
- Did you feel discomfort about being asked to communicate openly and in front of other people about sex? Why?
- Why else might young people feel discomfort or embarrassment communicating about sex?
- Do young people in different places communicate differently (more or less openly) about sex? Why?
- What about where you live? How is sex communicated?
- What do you think causes young people to feel embarrassed about speaking openly about sex?
- What can be done to help young people communicate openly and transparently about sex?

### ***Tips for facilitators***

Asking participants for their ideas on why requesting sex is a difficult task. Participants may raise verbal and non-verbal metaphorical approaches to asking for sex during the brainstorming. Record these on a separate flip chart and call attention to the original task of finding transparent ways of communication about asking for and refusing sex. You might come back to the metaphors raised if that seems to be useful when drawing participants' attention to the reasons why transparent communication about sex is important.

To check the legal age of consent in different countries you can look on the internet at [www.advert.org/aofconsent.htm](http://www.advert.org/aofconsent.htm)

This is a difficult exercise because communication of this kind is not built into our upbringing. The aim of the exercise is not that at the end all participants will be able to communicate their sexual desires in a transparent way. Rather this exercise helps us to begin thinking about past experiences or present thoughts and to raise awareness of the disadvantages of non-transparent communication that we are socialised into about wanting or not wanting sex. Be aware that discussions that have content relating to sex may cause discomfort to some participants. Participants should be able to make use of their right to pass, in other words, not to express themselves at a given moment. There might be participants who find it very difficult to verbalise such requests or refusals, whatever their reasons. Comments such as “in our community this type of communication would be not possible” do not necessarily mean that the exercise has to stop. In the process related discussion during the debriefing one can address the ways in which different communities deal with issues such as communication about sex. Participants who used their right not to express themselves at another moment may have more to say during this part of the discussion. Encourage them to actively express their feelings about the situation with regard to communication about sex and how they would like to see it change, if at all.

Sometimes the role-plays end up addressing the problem of sexual harassment. While this is a linked issue, be clear about the difference between harassment and situations of explicit communication about sex.

As described here, this activity is for mixed sex groups, but depending on the nature of your group, this might be an exercise to be considered for a boys or girls only activity.

### ***Suggestions for follow-up***

Follow up by using the activity “Let’s talk about sex” from Compass<sup>15</sup> p.156, with the same group.

Related issues include sexual harassment and date / acquaintance rape. You can read more about these forms of gender-based violence in Chapter 2 of this manual.

### ***Ideas for action***

Check if there have been any information campaigns related to sexual rights, sexual violence or date and acquaintance rape in your community / country. Try to get materials (posters, flyers, free-cards) for your school / youth club, or get together and make your own campaign materials. Use the collected materials to initiate a discussion on what kind of campaign to make and how to prepare it. If you make your own local campaign, whether it is about prevention or awareness raising, do not forget that it will be seen by those victims and survivors that attend your school or live in your community. Make sure that you provide information about services (hotlines, drop-in centres) for victims of different forms of sexual abuse or gender-based violence.

<sup>15</sup> [www.coe.int/compass](http://www.coe.int/compass)