

Tips from the Red Zone Committee – Talking to your Student about Consent

Over the summer, you have probably had many conversations with your child preparing them for their first year at college and perhaps their first extended time away from home. You have prepared them for a number of things like doing laundry, time management, managing their money, and even how to cook a quick meal when they do not have the dining services available. One more, important conversation is left and it is not always the most comfortable conversation. Your child needs to understand that when they come to school and begin to have relationships with others they need to respect the other person by getting their consent before they engage in any sexual behaviors. This is not to suggest that your child is going to get to school and have sex. In fact, the conversation may help delay that and could prevent them from being a victim of unwanted sexual contact.

The Student Code of Conduct at WCU states “‘consent’ is an understandable exchange of affirmative words or actions, which indicate a willingness to participate in mutually agreed upon sexual activity. Consent must be informed and freely and actively given. The lack of a negative response is not consent. An individual who is incapacitated by alcohol and/or drugs both voluntarily or involuntarily consumed may not give consent. Past consent for sexual activity does not imply ongoing future consent.” We are asking for your assistance in making sure students understand what consent means so they do not get into situations where they are emotionally or physically harmed. They will hear this from us during many programs and meetings but having you, talk to them as well provides further reinforcement.

I think of consent as being part respect for others. If you respect someone, you will ask for the consent before you borrow their things, eat the last cookie, or even hug or kiss them. If you are uncomfortable talking about sex with your child try to approach the conversation from the aspect of respect for others and themselves. Put the sexual activities into a list of things you would hope your child gets consent from others to do. I am sure you have taught your child not to take things of others. I can remember when I was in college a friend “borrowed” a skirt (one of my favorites) to wear one night while I was out. When she returned it she said “that she figured I wouldn’t mind.” Well I did mind because I believed you should not “borrow” things unless you get consent first. The same is true for sexual activities, after all, our own body is one of our greatest possessions and others cannot “borrow” that without our consent either.

Consent is a two way process though, and students need to be aware of this as well. Someone has to ask for consent and someone else gives it. Asking does not have to be blunt just specific enough that the other person does not get confused. I remember one situation where one of the people said “so when are we having sex?” after going to a dance. That was blunt but gave the other person a chance to say “never, time for you to leave.” The situation ended with the two departing but they both knew where the other stood.

I am not suggesting that consent has to be asked for and given in that way. Consent should be a respectful request and in long- term relationships consent is an on-going conversation. The response needs to be clear as well. The response does not have to be a slap across the face but can be a firm, polite NO. Once no is stated, the relationship does not have to end just the sexual activity that has been

turned down. If someone answers with a shrug that is confusing but should, for safety sake, be taken as a no.

If talking about your child engaging in sexual activities is too much another approach is to talk to them about friends and looking out for their friends. Going to activities with others who are going to help each other, stay away from potentially dangerous situations is a great suggestion you can make.

Having a conversation about consent with your child helps us work to reduce sexual violence on our campus. You become part of a larger campaign we have on campus called “Red Zone.” Research has shown that the first 6-week period is when students—especially those in their first and second years—are more at-risk of unwanted sexual experiences on college campuses. This has been designated the “Red Zone.” To combat this, departments from across campus strive, not only to heighten understanding of sexual violence, but also to create a community culture where violence, of any kind, is not tolerated.

Throughout the Red Zone Campaign, programs highlight the dangers of sexual violence, the red flags in unhealthy relationships, the importance of consent, and the power of using your voice (both individually and collectively). These programs are designed to encourage and empower faculty, staff, and students to develop an open dialogue on the dangers of sexual violence and to speak up when they see violent behavior occurring.

Thank you for working with us to give your child a successful and safe college experience.