

April is nationally recognized as **Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month (SAAM)**. This year's theme is **We Can Build Safe Online Spaces**, as technology becomes a bigger part of our everyday lives.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center says that "Consent should be a part of your interactions with others when you're texting or using social media. Although you aren't talking face-to-face, you should always consider how your actions might make another person feel and ask questions if you don't know". This is known as digital consent.

What is **digital consent**, you ask? There are many kinds and they all can apply to all of us no matter your age, gender identity, or relationship status.

- 1) The more obvious kind of digital consent applies to sexting, or sending sexual photos and/or messages to a partner. In order to make sure this is done freely and safely, we should:
 - Ask if it is okay to text or request photos in a non-aggressive way. Communication throughout any intimate relationship is important, not everyone is comfortable with sexting and that is okay.
 - Ask if it is okay to send a text or photo BEFORE sending it, even if you have shared these in the past. (What if someone else is using their phone?!)
 - Keep all messages and photos private - trust and respect are vital steps to ongoing consent.

NOTE: sexting is against the law in Ohio for anyone under 18. This includes taking, sending, saving, and forwarding sexual photos or messages, if either person is a minor.

- 2) Digital consent is also important for the everyday photos we take and post
 - Ask to take photos, and especially before posting them online or sharing them with others.
 - What is okay to post about your relationship? Are you both on the same page?
 - Avoid posting any photos that you know to be embarrassing or harmful.
 - It can be helpful to change your social media settings so that you have to approve any posts or photos you are tagged in for when others share posts without asking first.

- 3) Everyday conversations can be made more comfortable with digital consent as well.
 - Both socializing and working have moved to more virtual settings - it may be harder to tell the availability of your friend or coworker when not seeing them as often.
 - Ask for the okay to share your personal information or to ask them to take on a new project. Venting our stresses can cause stress for others as well.
 - Send a quick text or email to ask before calling for a long conversation.
 - How much texting is too much? What about during work or school?

This doesn't need to be a drastic life change - just think of what you would want when you are overwhelmed or are choosing to share private information with someone you trust. Showing respect and consideration can go a long way to building trust and supporting others' mental health.

Consent violations - when someone pushes you to do something you are not comfortable with, or does it without permission or against your will.

- If someone chooses not to share photos or messages, don't try to make them change their mind. This can be manipulative and even illegal.
- If they say no or seem unsure, respect their choice and move on. Maybe suggest another way to be close, like an impromptu date instead.
- Sharing private or embarrassing photos can have long term impacts for both people involved: think before you post!
- Be clear about your own needs, especially if someone else is asking you to take on theirs. Be honest about how much work or emotional energy you can take on at this time.

Practicing consent in these small ways can improve your relationships with friends, family, coworkers, and partners. They may feel safer and more comfortable with you, plus you may motivate them to practice everyday consent as well.



For more information, tip sheets, and resources, check out www.nsvrc.org/saam and get involved this month! Here are some hashtags to search and include on your own social media pages:

#SAAM #SAAM2021 #IAsk #DigitalConsent
#EverydayConsent #LetsTalkAboutIt #TellAFriend

- Lisa Huendorf, Community Education Specialist
- Family Planning division of Signature Health
- @RelationshipsIF @RelationshipsInFocus