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Reimagining Consent Education in the United States: The Potential of a Children's Book in Helping to Dismantle Rape Culture

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Sexual violence has been and continues to be a global epidemic. While some countries have taken a proactive approach to addressing this issue by mandating consent education as part of sex education programming that begins as early as kindergarten, the United States' sex education system lags far behind, generally leaving consent unaddressed until (at the earliest) high school, and more often until college. These programs fail to recognize child development research that points to attitudes about respect and consent in relationships forming years earlier, in kindergarten-aged children. Using literature relating to rape culture and child development to analyze existing consent education programs, I suggest that a research-informed children's book has great potential to introduce consent education into kindergarten by helping children recognize and respond to ways that rape culture is woven into our societal fabric. Specifically, the children's book should aim to teach children, in a digestible and gentle way, to both recognize and feel empowered to confront instances of sexual misconduct, filling a gap in existing children's literature.

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Abstract

Sexual violence has been and continues to be a global epidemic. While some countries have taken a proactive approach to addressing this issue by mandating consent education as part of sex education programming that begins as early as kindergarten, the United States' sex education system lags far behind, generally leaving consent unaddressed until (at the earliest) high school, and more often until college. These programs fail to recognize child development research that points to attitudes about respect and consent in relationships forming years earlier, in kindergarten-aged children. Using literature relating to rape culture and child development to analyze existing consent education programs, I suggest that a research-informed children's book has great potential to introduce consent education into kindergarten by helping children recognize and respond to ways that rape culture is woven into our societal fabric. Specifically, the children's book should aim to teach children, in a digestible and gentle way, to both recognize and feel empowered to confront instances of sexual misconduct, filling a gap in existing children's literature.

Introduction

Feminist scholars have done extensive research on rape culture, seeking to understand the many, multifaceted ways that sexual violence is perpetuated in today's society, and proposing cultural, political, and educational approaches to eradicating rape culture. However, few recognize the urgency of beginning this work to debunk rape myths with children at young ages, who are just beginning to form ideas about how the world and relationships work. Findings concerning children's attitude development have been documented in the work of child development scholars, yet few have used their findings to suggest interventions targeting rape culture. I see both groups of scholars as missing a significant opportunity to do critical work in dismantling rape culture. Other countries, such as the Netherlands and Sweden, have noted the urgency and prevalence of rape culture and have chosen to approach it through comprehensive sex education programming with a strong emphasis on consent, mandated from early grades. These programs have had positive effects on their students, and, in an ideal world, would make their way into classrooms in the United States. However, the American sex education system suffers from moralized politics based on deeply engrained Judeo-Christian beliefs about sex,

rendering classrooms in the United States inaccessible to consent educators who want to reach children in all schools. Furthermore, the European programs I study are comprehensive and thoughtful, but have no clear grounding in scholarly research. While this doesn't detract from their ability to address rape culture proactively, it points to the need for an intervention deeply grounded in research. Some such research-based approaches exist, but they are limited to secondary or higher education environments, and I see an exciting opportunity to adapt them to an intervention that is appropriate and digestible for children. Children's books provide a method through which to introduce children to these important, research-based concepts while not having to work around educational restrictions that come with anything sex education-related in the United States.

Roadmap

In this essay, I will begin by outlining what rape culture is, and how it functions, especially in regard to sexual scripts and rape myths. I will then review childhood development, research, focusing on the ways that kindergarten-aged children (ages three to six) develop attitudes and identities. I will then review several sex education programs in the Netherlands and Sweden, showing how they invoke, while perhaps not explicitly, childhood development research to create comprehensive sex education programs. I will then give a brief history of sex education in the United States, highlighting the barriers to building a program similar to those in the Netherlands and Sweden. I will then propose the idea of writing a children's book and show how it could be used as a tool to proactively prevent rape culture in a developmentally sound way, without waiting for the American sex education system to change. I will then review existing children's books that have some connection to sex education, in order to see what is

missing and where I could make the biggest impact. Finally, I will summarize my main points and present my own children's book, complete with a parent's guide and suggested reading list.

Scope of Research and Research Questions

Through this capstone, I attempt to answer the following questions:

- I. How can we seek to eradicate rape culture proactively, rather than responding reactively?
- II. How are kindergarteners developing ideas about consent, gender, power, respect, and communication, and how can we take advantage of this understanding to introduce ideas about healthy consent at this age?
- III. How can we restructure how children are thinking about relationships in a way that focuses on respect and consent by staging some sort of intervention in kindergarten?
What would this intervention look like?
- IV. Where are the gaps in existing consent education programming and in existing children's books about consent?
 - i. How would my children's book help to fill these gaps?

Methodology

This project relies on a mix of primary and secondary sources in order to inform my understanding of children's books and how they may help marry research on rape culture with research on child development. I conduct a literature review on secondary sources by scholars of rape culture and child development, and use this review to help inform my analysis of my two camps of primary sources: existing consent education programs and children's books. I also spend time consolidating an account of the history of sex education in the United States.

The second part of my project is an original children's book with a storyline that aims to acknowledge and confront rape culture in a way that is appropriate, comprehensible, compelling, and empowering for kindergarten-aged children. The book will include a parent/teacher guide in order to help supplement the reading with explanations for what is included, as well as suggested questions to engage the child in the reading and the theory.

Finally, I attended regular observations of one particular classroom at Calvin Hill Preschool, where the teachers practice an unofficial form of consent education with their students. Through these observations, I gained valuable insight for my parent/teacher guide by watching a skilled educator supplement her students' understanding of consent.

Literature Review

I. Rape Culture

The United States is in the midst of a cultural and epidemic-level public health crisis, identified by feminist scholars as a 'rape culture' (Henry & Powell, 2014). In this culture, sexual violence is perpetuated and sustained by systems of power operating along intersecting lines of privilege, and overwhelmingly consists of gender-based violence—violence against women (Henry & Powell, 2014). Of course, not all perpetrators are men and not all survivors are women, and it's counterproductive to frame rape culture in sweeping generalizations about genders. However, it's also unwise to discount the "insidious, often subconscious and implicit, culturally embedded... understandings, expectations, value judgements, power relationships and resultant/reinforcing behaviours related to 'masculinity' or 'femininity' that affect all societies" (Fletcher, 2014). Whether we choose to call it 'the patriarchy,' or 'toxic masculinity' or simply 'sexism,' the problem does not operate at an individual, or even at a group level—we cannot

describe rape culture as individual perpetrators being ‘bad guys.’ Instead, we must recognize the issue for what it is: a pervasive *culture* that is perpetuated in the media, in everyday language, in the law, in social systems, and that is so ubiquitous that it can even be found in the structure of some of the campaigns that aim to change this very culture (think victim-blaming rhetoric in PSAs against rape).

Sexual assault, at its core, is about power. This is true at an interpersonal level, where one person is exerting power and thus taking away the other’s; and it’s true at a structural-societal level, where structures of privilege unevenly distribute power in ways that affect norms, laws, attitudes and actions. Researchers conclude that common manifestations of rape culture operate in the form of “rape myths,” which are commonly believed misconceptions about how rape happens. Rape myths weaponize prejudiced stereotypes to inform “sexual scripts,” which are “culturally determined patterns of behavior that [in turn] inform desire and influence sexual behavior,” showing how some of the very ways in which we think about sex individually and as a society have been subconsciously internalized from rape culture (Ryan, 2011; Edwards et al., 2011). In fact, rape myth acceptance is so deeply engrained that it functions “as a cognitive schema,” informing how we process information (Bohner et al., 2009). In practice, this can lead to, among other things, “denial of the scope of the problem,” “lack of support for policies designed to help alleviate the effects of sexual violence,” “beliefs that male coercion forms a natural part of sexual relationships,” and “beliefs that exonerate male perpetrators by blaming the victim” (Bohner et al., 2009). All of these beliefs are based on myths about how rape happens—for example, the myth that ‘women are naturally submissive’ can normalize coercive patterns of behavior during sexual encounters. Rape myth acceptance permeates society outside of individual sexual encounters as well—certain myths are so prevalent that they can change the

very way we think about rape. For example, our culture is told so often that ‘women ask to be raped,’ that we may unknowingly infer information about a certain case that was never there in the first place, such as attributing blame to the victim without knowing what really happened (Bohner et al., 2009).

It's worth taking time to consider just how deeply embedded rape culture is in our society. While the word choice of an advertisement or the message of a long-beloved fairy tale may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, small and large instances of victim-blaming or endorsements of disrespectful behavior add up to deeply embed our culture with skewed ideas about who is allowed to do what to whom. Consider, for example, the lyrics to *Blame it on the Alcohol* by Jamie Foxx. Foxx sings, “I hear you saying what you won't do//But you know we're probably gon' do//What you've been fiendin' deep inside,” acknowledging that he is choosing to interpret a woman's explicit refusal as a front for a deep inner desire to have sex with him (“*Blame It (On The Alcohol)*” lyrics, n.d.). These lyrics highlight a harmful rape myth, that women tend to ‘play hard to get,’ but regardless of what they say, they always want to have sex, and thus any type of refusal can be interpreted as an invitation to keep pursuing her (this is not to mention, of course, that the whole message of the song, apparent in its title, is that getting drunk is an appropriate excuse for engaging in sexual activities that one might not otherwise engage in. The subtext here is that alcohol, not humans, are responsible for sexual misconduct, which is a whole other rape myth that is adhered to especially on college campuses). The implications of this song are especially concerning considering its popularity in the United States, holding the number one spot on the Billboard Hot R&B/Hip Hop Songs List in 2009 (“Chart History: Jamie Foxx,” n.d.). Other songs that hold incredibly strong grips on our culture, such as the holiday classic *Baby it's Cold Outside*, *Blurred Lines* by Robin Thicke, *What do You*

Mean? by Justin Bieber, *I'm Still a Guy* by Brad Paisley, and many, many more, normalize sexual assault to their millions of fans in a dangerous way. Other aspects of pop culture, such as characters in movies, work to normalize and even glorify rape (think of romantic comedies celebrating the scene where the boy finally gets the hard-to-get girl, which is really just a validation of stalking). Or, consider how certain everyday phrases and terms, such as “walk of shame,” or “boys will be boys,” or “she’s/he’s such a tease,” or “she/he asked for it,” add to a culture in which sexual activity is shameful for some and a conquest for others. Finally, consider how language, media, and expectations that perpetuate rape culture enter a person’s life very early on. Girls are taught at a very young age that how they dress is indicative of how they will be treated; fairy tales in which the prince ‘saves’ the princess are romanticized as soon as kids are old enough to read or be read to (‘saves,’ of course, while insulting by itself, is more often a euphemism for something much more sinister: in *Beauty and the Beast*, the beast ‘saves’ Belle by trapping her in his castle; in *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*, each prince ‘saves’ Aurora and Snow White by kissing each without her consent, which is a sexual assault). These various multimedia examples demonstrate how, in many ways, ‘rape culture’ has become synonymous with ‘popular culture.’ I will return to this specific point later in the essay, when I talk about my own children’s book (Phillips, 2016).

Researchers point to important considerations when thinking about addressing rape culture productively. Specifically, scholars show how working at the level of societal norms is a constructive place to start. Flood argues, “we will only make progress in preventing violence against women if we can change the attitudes, identities, and relations among some men, which sustain violence” (Flood, 2011). While this argument is heavily gendered in a way that may be counterproductive, the idea that change must address engrained attitudes, rather than simply

respond to existing cases of sexual violence (by, for instance, reciting rape statistics to students), is an important operational framework. To expand on this idea, Flood and Pease show how in order to be effective, attempts to change attitudes that perpetuate rape culture must not only critique erroneous beliefs but also offer an alternative set of norms to adopt and live by (Flood & Pease, 2009). They also provide suggestions for what settings are best suited for changing norms, arguing that schools and similar institutions play an important role in influencing the attitudes of the people who spend time there. This attitude formation happens through norm adoption in formal ways, such as adherence to rules, and informal ways, such as adherence to peer group norms, both of which provide opportunities to intervene (Flood & Pease, 2009). When considering how deeply intertwined rape myths are in our daily societal norms, as shown in the paragraph above, it's not surprising that small-scale efforts focused on breaking down dangerous myths and building up new schemas would be important in a world where harmful norms are perpetuated in small but numerous ways. However, it's important to understand that for attitudes to actually change, a large-scale, long-term effort is required.

Researchers also suggest that the specific approach matters in sustaining any real change; for example, short workshops that attempt to change attitudes in a few hours by sharing information or practicing skills, even while they may take place at schools, have been shown to be unsuccessful on their own (Carmody & Carrington, 2000). As Carmody and Carrington assert, we must approach rape culture “within a framework that acknowledges the power of cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity and develop multi-level prevention strategies, which promote an alternative cultural landscape of sexual practices and gender norms” (Carmody & Carrington, 2000).

Thus, based on research about how rape culture is actually perpetuated, responses need to address the underlying power relations that allow sexual violence to happen. This cannot be achieved in a one-time workshop, or in a single law that criminalizes acts of violence. Instead, any solutions must address and attempt to break down these systems of power. This is why it is surprising to me that there are not more approaches designed for younger children. Perhaps the idea of rape culture feels too heavy and complex for a child, but research shows that the norms and attitudes that form the rape culture we live in start very young, even before a child is explicitly thinking about sexual activities (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Thus, the most effective approach would acknowledge the way rape culture permeates society for people of all ages, and would integrate child development research to inform an intervention.

II. Childhood Development

Research on how children develop cognitively, socially, behaviorally, emotionally, and physically help to illuminate why kindergarten is the ideal time to stage interventions that will help to proactively dismantle a culture of sexual violence. Indeed, scholars recognize kindergarten as “the time when the foundations for later sexual behavior and relationships are being laid” (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009). Sexuality development in kindergarteners does not generally manifest in behavior that is explicitly sexual, but it does inform the foundational schema that a child builds regarding sexuality, which sticks with them as they age and enter into adult relationships (Chrisman & Couchenour, 2002). This development can inform how these children think, behave, and treat others much later in life, leading to a society that reflects either a rape culture or a culture of respect.

Understanding what these physical, cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of development look like is important in informing how to address consent at this age through

thoughtful interventions. Physical development with regard to sexuality acknowledges that children are developing senses of pleasure in kindergarten, with children as young as three beginning to associate genitals with feelings of pleasure (Fraiberg, 1959); cognitive sexual development for kindergarteners includes showing interest in how babies are created and being able to differentiate between sexes; social sexual development includes attempting to act according to the gender rules the children observe in their families or society at large; emotional sexual development has to do with children developing a sense of self, and relatedly, a sense of self-esteem (Chrisman & Couchenour, 2002).

This identity development is crucial in understanding how children learn to operate in relationships with others. In fact, these two idea formations are closely related, as identity development is not an isolated process—according to child development scholars, “feelings about self” for kindergarten-aged children “are increasingly dependent on children’s success in participation in...relationships outside the home” (Curry & Johnson, 1990). As children are attempting to discover themselves through relationships with others, experimentation with different behaviors manifests itself in “recursive cycles,” where kindergarteners repeat social behaviors that elicit responses, whether the responses are positive or negative (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Relatedly, this is the age at which children both begin to recognize and reckon with power in their relationships. Children in kindergarten begin to gain a sense of status and social hierarchies, which often manifest as uneven power dynamics in relationships, as they sometimes try to find a “sense of power” by becoming “increasingly comparative and competitive in their social judgements” (Curry & Johnson, 1990). However, Curry and Johnson also show that children are able to find this same “sense of power” that comes from comparing themselves to their peers by “directing one’s own behavior, accomplishing one’s goals, and

expanding one's skills" (Curry & Johnson, 1990). This point becomes vital when considering how to foster healthy power dynamics between peers in order to undermine the system that produces and feeds sexual assault. While grappling with power is a natural stage of a child's development, there is a difference between a child grappling with power in an environment that frames empowerment as something to gain in competition with others, as opposed to an environment that encourages self-empowerment. Considering the way behavior manifests itself in recursive cycles at this age, many opportunities present themselves for interventions: research shows that parents and educators are vital in helping children break a negative recursive cycle, as children are unable to do this on their own, and that this strategy is more successful the younger a child is (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Furthermore, children at this age are gaining a heightened sense of responsibility, which could be utilized in helping a child break a negative recursive cycle of behavior, such as disrespecting peers (Curry & Johnson, 1990).

Specifically, there is much potential for interventions that relatively simply, yet thoughtfully, focus on adults modeling and reinforcing positive behaviors in relationships. Feminist research relies on the idea of sexual scripts to describe how individuals, and children especially, rely on their environments in order to build attitudes about sex-related issues, often aiming to repeat "the adult sexual scripts they pick up through observation," sometimes through play (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009; Katz & McClellan, 1997). Indeed, the environment in which a child is developing a sense of sexuality informs the foundational schema that a child will use their whole life to inform behavior in romantic and sexual relationships. Furthermore, children "want and need to learn how to negotiate intimate relationships, how to love and be loved, and, as they get older, how to have sex as part of a caring relationship" (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009). This helps to illuminate why consent education programming for young children can be so

successful: children actively seek out cues from their environment to inform their sexual development, and intentional modeling of behavior and simple positive reinforcement strategies are both effective in helping to shape a child's—and a whole generation of children's—behavior.¹

My time spent observing the kindergarten classroom at Calvin Hill Daycare reinforced the idea that children of this age are receptive to the idea of consent. In one interaction I observed, a three-year-old girl ran up and hugged her teacher while the teacher was talking to another child. The teacher said to the hugger, “I wish you asked if I wanted a hug.” The girl seemed confused, clearly assuming that everyone liked hugs. The teacher continued by explaining that even if the girl was hugging someone because she liked that person, sometimes people wanted their personal space and didn't want a hug, which didn't mean they didn't like her. The girl seemed to understand the message, and I didn't see her hug anyone else that day without asking. This interaction is a great example of how adults can be instrumental in helping to break potentially negative recursive cycles (one could imagine that the girl quickly realized she would get reactions from her peers if she went around hugging them, whether or not they

¹ While this point does not fit neatly into the physical/cognitive/emotional/social development framework used above, I thought it was important to include research on children's development of communication skills. When considering the specifics of what an anti-rape culture would look like, an emphasis on the point that every human has fundamental communicative capabilities, which allows individuals to recognize enthusiasm and rejection and ambiguity in other's responses to our proposals, is essential to rejecting certain rape myths such as ‘rape is the result of miscommunication.’ Accordingly, I'm including research here that shows how humans develop communicative capabilities very early on. Research shows that children even younger than kindergarten-age are able to identify and distinguish facial expressions and the corresponding emotions in the faces of whoever they're interacting with (Gross & Ballif, 1991). An interesting body of work to supplement this finding with is that of Liao et al., who look at how preschoolers use emotional intelligence in conflict resolution, and find that “children's emotion recognition ability was associated with their reconciliation tendency” (Liao, Li & Su, 2013). Camras's study led to a similar conclusion: in general, children are able to recognize others' emotions in conflict situations (Camras, 1980). When put in conversation with feminist scholars' research on rape myths, these findings hold a lot of important implications. If children are able to recognize others emotions at such a young age, and use this nonverbal communication in order to solve conflicts, these skills do not disappear, and in fact, as shown in research, become much more advanced with age (Chen, Fein, Killen & Tam, 2001). While sexual and romantic communication should not be conflated with conflict and conflict resolution, the same skills—empathy, emotional intelligence, nonverbal communication—are used, and thus it is important to recognize that children this age have the capability of recognizing each other's desires. This carries important implications for the work adults can be doing to help make the leap from recognizing each other's desires and respecting each other's boundaries.

were positive reactions). This teacher took the time to separate the idea of validation and indiscriminate physical contact, which seemed to make an impact on the girl's future behavior.

Finally, some research does point to connection between rape prevention and child development. Carmody et al. state,

There is an urgent need for greater community education around gender and violence, gender and sexual ethics and respectful relationships that begins with young children. Providing children with appropriate knowledge of gender and power, sexuality, and understandings of ethical and respectful relationships will build their competencies and resilience and contribute to new cultural norms of non-violence (Carmody et al., 2016). However, few interventions, especially in the United States, address this type of finding, and the authors' suggested intervention of utilizing school settings would face barriers in the United States, as the upcoming section of this paper will show.

III. History of Sex Education in the United States

Before analyzing existing sex education programs, it's worth taking time to understand the current landscape of sex education in the United States more broadly.

Before the 1960s, sex education was actually widely adopted in public schools across America, funded and sanctioned by the federal government (Cornblatt, 2009). Most of this sex education was aimed at educating students on what were seen as the dangers of sex-related activities, such as masturbation, which shifted gears during the sexual revolution of the 1960s, as organizations such as the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) introduced more progressive content into sex education programming (Cornblatt, 2009). With the rise of groups like SIECUS, however, so too rose a right-wing religious opposition movement to sex education. While progressive sex education proponents gained some momentum with the growing need for information about diseases such as AIDs, opponents were able to use public fear about STIs to push a religious agenda through abstinence-only sex

education programs, which contextualize sex as an activity that should only happen in a heterosexual marriage (Cornblatt, 2009). Abstinence-only sex education gained traction in the 1990s, and in 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which included a five-year, \$250 million grant for abstinence-only sex education. Since then, abstinence-only sex education has dominated American sex ed landscape and is still the most common programming in schools today (Calterone Williams, 2011).

These programs are harmful to students for several reasons. First, studies show that abstinence-only curricula do not succeed in their stated goals of reducing teen pregnancy and STIs—in fact, research shows that “increasing emphasis on abstinence education is positively correlated with teenage pregnancy and birth rates,” perhaps because these students are not being taught, for example, how to properly use condoms (Koller, 2012 & Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Furthermore, these programs actively perpetuate dangerous myths about sexual assault, which in turn perpetuate rape culture; an example is when abstinence-only curricula include lessons on how to reject sexual advances, with the goal of helping students save sex for marriage. As one scholar notes, “these ideas signal to both potential victims and society as a whole who is to blame after an assault—the survivor” (Sneen, 2018). Not only do these programs not include consent education—they are at odds with consent education, which teaches, for example, that the responsibility of sexual assault falls on the assaulter.

Consent education itself does not have as much of a history in the United States, as it is a fairly new movement, and because it doesn't fit into the framework of abstinence-only education. The next section will address how, when sex education utilizes lessons on consent starting from a young age, results are overwhelmingly positive for the students receiving this

education. However, without a strong sex education system in place, it's hard to bring consent education into a classroom. The idea of "consent," while applicable outside of the context of sex, becomes inextricably tied into conversations about sexual relationships, and it is necessary to have a sex education system in which sex is talked about in a realistic manner in order to present the idea of consent in a classroom setting.

To understand why an intervention that aims to bring consent education directly into American classrooms may encounter so many barriers as to make it ineffective, one must understand the deeply embedded cultural scripts about sexuality that predominate in the United States and that have informed sex education programs over the last century. Many of these cultural scripts are deeply rooted in Christian tradition, reflecting our country's Judeo-Christian moral framework that allowed abstinence-only proponents to prevail over groups like SEICUS in the late 1900s (Silk, 1984). The idea that sex is associated with shame that is so prominent in abstinence-only programs can be found in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In *Genesis*, Adam and Eve become ashamed in recognizing their nakedness right before they are expelled from Eden, cementing a cultural association between nakedness and sin (Genesis 2:4-3:24, New International Version). A passage in *Romans* shows how this idea persists through the New Testament, stating, "let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immortality and sensuality" (Romans 13:13, English Standard Version). This schema for understanding sex has influenced American sex education for a century now. In the 1920s, a "Manual of Suggestions on Education Related to Sex" instructed boys to be "naturally ashamed of" masturbation (United States Public Health Service, Gruenberg, & U. S. Education, 1922). Fast-forward to modern-day abstinence-only programs, and educational tools include

videos that compare women who have had sex before marriage to “a pair of old, worn-out shoes” (Wilkins, 2016).

Other Judeo-Christian values surrounding sex can be seen in sex education over the last century. In *Genesis*, the account of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife details a story in which a married woman attempts to seduce Joseph, one of her husband’s slaves, and, in getting rejected, falsely accuses him of rape, landing him in prison (Genesis 39, New International Version). This story is a clear perpetration of the myth that women lie about being raped and invokes the image of women as temptresses; parallels can be found in American sex education programming: in the early 1900s, sex education came in the form of warning soldiers to stay away from temptress-like women due to the danger of STIs (Kelly, 2018). Another example of dangerous sexual scripts can be found in *Ephesians*, which commands wives to “submit to [their] own husbands as [they] do to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22-23, New International Version). The way this can work to normalize domestic violence is reflected in abstinence-only programs: because these programs promote the idea that the condition of marriage nullifies the dangers associated with sex such as STIs, unwanted pregnancies, and sexual assault, students then internalize the myth that ‘sexual assault can’t happen between partners.’

Judeo-Christian sexual scripts are also relevant when considering views on the sexuality of children. Piper explores how the “innocent child” has been historically constructed, especially in reference to sexuality in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Specifically, she acknowledges “the conflation of innocence with... lack of knowledge about sex,” stemming again from the story of Adam and Eve, in which sin (eating the apple) and sex (Adam and Eve becoming ashamed of their nakedness) are connected and thus so are innocence and sexlessness (Piper, n.d.). Even outside of religion, the idea of childhood innocence, especially in association with sexuality, has

permeated the work of influential thinkers. Writers like Locke and Rousseau referred to the child as a blank slate who developed solely according to his environment and culture and failed to acknowledge the role that biology plays in the development of a child (Piper, n.d.).

The concepts of purity, shame, and that there is something to “lose” thus are inextricably tied in with the framework upon which our politics operate—as long as Judeo-Christian values continue to shape American culture and politics, American sex education classrooms will continue to be resistant to consent education, especially for young children. It’s wise to look elsewhere to inform interventions that might help to dismantle rape culture.

IV. Existing Sex Education Programs

As mentioned above, of the sex education that exists in the United States, a majority is abstinence-only, which creates a barrier to introducing consent education initiatives into classrooms in the United States. Consequently, most existing sex education programs in the United States which include discussions about consent don’t start until college. Scholars are generally positive in their analysis of existing programs (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Hubach et al., 2019). A university-level program that tackles rape culture remarkably well, using scholarly research to ground its pedagogy, is the consent training run annually by the Yale Communication and Consent Educators for every incoming first year.² Called “The Myth of Miscommunication,” this workshop addresses sexual assault directly through working to not only debunk the miscommunication theory, but also show colleges students, through lighthearted acting scenarios, how all humans have the same ability to communicate, especially in scenarios in which we are asking someone something (Boyd, 2019).³ This program is deeply grounded in

² This is a program that I have been deeply involved in since my first year in college.

³ See footnote 1 to see how this logic traces back to childhood development.

research, and skillfully addresses consent by considering how rape myths can be addressed and debunked.

While research on college consent programs and this program in particular are important, attempts to address consent in college leaves a lot to be desired. Firstly, only about a third of Americans attend four-year colleges, and only a small number of those who do will receive consent education, or good quality consent education, at their college (Lejeune, 2017).

Furthermore, while education may raise awareness about issues of sexual assault in college, research, detailed in the child development literature review, show how our “attitudes, values, and behaviors” about consent and sexual activities are formed much earlier on in life, making interventions during college, no matter how constructive and productive, too late to create systemic change (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). This, combined with the fact that kindergarten-aged children are just beginning to develop ideas of identity, power, gender and sexuality, makes kindergarten a much better time to begin interventions that will help to proactively prevent a culture of sexual violence. For obvious reasons, interventions like the “Myth of Miscommunication” workshop are not appropriate for students younger than college-aged, not to mention as young as kindergarten. It thus falls short in addressing rape culture proactively, as it targets students whose attitudes formed many years before. This is not to say that such programs are unsatisfactory—it is an important approach that more colleges should embrace—but it does leave a need for the content to be adapted for a much younger population.

It is thus necessary to look to other countries in which programming does start early and has already proven to be successful. While the programs might not be directly transferrable into American classrooms, understanding what they’re doing well can help inform other interventions, even if they take place outside of the classroom.

The Netherlands' progressive sex education programming has statistics to verify its success, making it especially useful as a case study. As described by De Melker, while sex education starts in kindergarten for Dutch students, it has little to do with sex at this young age. Instead, "it's about having open, honest discussions about love and relationships" (De Melker, 2015). This is just the earliest stage of programming that develops into classes on subjects like stereotypes, gender roles, and finally, more classic sex ed subjects like contraceptives once students are old enough (De Melker, 2015). And, importantly, research suggests that this type of consent education programming has positive effects on the lives of the students. Not only are teen pregnancy and STI rates much lower in the Netherlands than they are in the U.S., but, importantly, a 2011 study showed that Dutch teenagers were more likely to report "well-timed, wanted, and fun" first sexual experiences, versus American teenagers who overwhelmingly report regretting their first experiences (Willis, 2016; Schalet, 2011). Furthermore, studies run in the Netherlands have shown that students who were educated in these comprehensive sex ed classes exhibited heightened communication skills later on (De Melker, 2015). Beyond numerical statistics, Willis highlights the lack of stigma and shame surrounding the topic in the Netherlands, which, among other benefits, leads to an environment in which there are more resources readily available for students (Willis, 2016). Indeed, other scholars describe this programming as free from "furtiveness, embarrassment, or disapproval." Instead, the curricula is

just basic education about human bodies, sexual feelings, and sexual behavior—and how to communicate clearly, making sure that such behavior is intentional, safe, pleasurable, and respectful of others, and results in pregnancy only when pregnancy is wanted. This education also takes on issues of gender, rights, and how to relate confidently to romantic and sexual partners—and everyone else (Kaidbey & Engelman, 2017).

Another study concludes that when children are given non-sexualized consent education, they "are much better equipped to make intentional and respectful choices about when and how to

engage in sex” (Schalet, 2011). These results directly correlate to child development research that shows how children are internalizing explicit or implicit lessons about sexuality from a very young age. What the Dutch programming does so well is that it provides children with a positive framework for sexuality that prioritizes respect, which benefits the individual children as well as the society as a whole as the children grow older.

It’s encouraging to see such positive statistics correlated with Dutch sex education programming. In fact, the data that links consent education programming with experiences of wanted sex, allows (cautious) conjecture that successful consent education programming is not only lowering rates of STIs and pregnancy, but is also working to eradicate rape culture. While it’s important to acknowledge that the Netherlands and the U.S. are hard to compare directly due to their many differences in population size, education systems, and much more, it’s worth looking at elements of Dutch programming to see where we could be better serving our students and society at large.

Another example of a successful, progressive program abroad can be found in Sweden. To paint a picture of how different the sex education landscape is in Sweden as opposed to the United States, it’s worth highlighting that Sweden, too, has had its fair share of controversy surrounding the topic. However, in contrast to debates about whether we should teach students real facts about sex-related issues versus simply advocating for abstinence, the debates in Sweden start with an acknowledgement of the necessity of comprehensive sex education. These debates discuss, for example, how to approach the topic of homosexuality in a way that welcomes homosexuality as normal, rather than otherizes gay students (Lamb & Gilbert, 2019). Compared to the United States, in which homosexuality is still mostly demonized by sex education programs, it’s worth exploring what sex education in Sweden looks like in order to

reimagine the topic in a more ideal condition. It makes sense that Swedish sex education would look extremely different from the topic in the U.S., due to Sweden's extensive welfare and "liberal views on sexuality and gender equality" (Lamb & Gilbert, 2019). One unique and fascinating aspect of the Swedish sex education system is its interdisciplinary nature: rather than viewed as a separate subject, Swedish schools treat sex education as a "theme that should be integrated across different school subjects," which might include a lesson of body parts in biology class, a discussion about abortion policy in history, and incorporating STI statistics into a math class (Lamb & Gilbert, 2019). Within these lessons, Swedish sex educators take on a "norm-critical pedagogy," in which they acknowledge that "norms shape the identities and lived experiences of different groups of people rewarding some expressions and life scripts over others," and try to counteract these script reinforcements among their students (Lamb & Gilbert, 2019). This approach aligns with research discussed earlier by scholars such as Flood and Pease, who emphasize the importance of addressing norms to change rape culture.

Again, while the United States would not be able to adopt similar programming without some major revisions to how sex education functions in our schools, it is helpful to look at the Netherlands and Sweden to see what has been successful. From the Netherlands, we learn that a comprehensive approach to sex education doesn't only have positive effects on physical sexual health, but could have positive effects in dismantling rape culture through empowering students to respect their partner's and their own desires. From Sweden, we see how sex education does not have to be a shame-filled, uncomfortable topic.

Why A Children's Book?

I've now established that, in order to approach rape culture proactively, we must start intervening as early as kindergarten. I've further established that, while other countries have

programs that are developmentally appropriate for children while responding to rape culture in an effective way, the United States' sex education system is in no state to take on such a task. It is thus worth looking outside of the classroom to imagine a productive intervention.

Child development research, as shown earlier in this paper, can help to show why a children's book has potential as a form of intervention. The research points to how "children use the information their environment provides to build their ideas about sex and sex-related issues" (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009). This information often comes in the form of children's books; as studies show, children's books "can and do have profound effects on children's affective and cognitive development" (Peterson & Lach, 1990). For example, a study on the effects of negative gender stereotypes, such as female characters being characterized as "submissive and dependent" in children's books showed that "they may significantly alter the child's cognitive development, presenting them with an inaccurate and potentially destructive world-view" (Harlin & Morgan, 2009; Peterson & Lach, 1990). This shows how children's books can have serious effects on children's sexuality development, affecting them and their peers for years, and continuing to perpetuate rape culture. This research suggests that on the flip side, there is potential for positively affecting children's sexuality development by thoughtfully including content in children's books that works to dismantle rape culture by, for instance, avoiding negative gender stereotypes.

Moreover, research about how children process information further substantiates the positive potential of children's books in helping children develop schemas that are anti-rape culture. Kindergarten-aged children "tend to focus only on what they can see," and are "drawn to information that is visible and concrete, unfamiliar, [and] dramatic" (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009). This research suggests that a children's book that tells a narrative, exciting, yet straightforward

story that promotes positive behavior has real potential as an intervention to help dismantle rape culture.

Existing Children's Books

There is an existing body of children's books that include ideas of consent. To ensure my book would be adding something new to the literature, I read through many of the existing books to get a sense of what might be missing from the current selection available to children.

A majority of books seem to focus on consent through the idea of boundary setting (Sanders, 2015; King & King, 2008). While empowering children to be able to say "no" is important, this approach can be dangerous, as it can actually perpetuate victim-blaming narratives, or alternatively, can send the message that the burden of preventing sexual assault is on the survivor, rather than the assaulter. In her children's book "No Means No!" author Jayneen Sanders tells the story of a young girl who is empowered by her ability to set boundaries (Sanders, 2015). This book is an important acknowledgement of how essential it is that we approach topics related to consent with children at a young age, however, the emphasis on reactive boundary setting rather than proactive respect highlights a problem with the way consent is sometimes framed. As shown above, children use the world around them to learn about relationships, and if they are learning through the framework of having to set clear boundaries, it implies that the onus is on them not to get sexually assaulted, and if they experience sexual misconduct, they are to blame for not saying "no" clearly enough. I want my book to help create the belief that individuals are responsible for treating others with respect, thus creating a culture of respect, rather than perpetuating the belief that individuals are responsible for getting treated with respect.

Another class of children's books regarding consent education uses storylines having to do with sexual abuse (Starishevsky, 2009; Hunter, 2014; Isham, 2016; McEwan, 2018). While there are some good lessons to take away from certain books, such as the importance of not blaming oneself for being abused in "My Body Belongs To Me" by Jill Starishevsky, they do not fulfill my goal of utilizing aspects consent education in order to address rape culture (Starishevsky, 2009). First, it's triggering for anyone who's experienced sexual abuse. Furthermore, even for those who haven't experienced abuse, it sends the message that sexual abuse *will* happen, and what's important is how we respond. While resources that suggest how to respond to these experiences in supportive ways are extremely important, my book aims to suggest ways to be proactive about consent. Introducing examples of ways to respond to abuse without first emphasizing the message that people shouldn't be sexually abusing others in the first place is counterproductive to my goal.

Other books treat consent more proactively, however, these books tend to be more informative than narrative, which may be less successful at engaging children in a way that child development shows helps children retain information (Sanders, 2018; Rockwell, 2019; Morrison, 2018). The message in these books reflect what I am trying to do, however, and so I will include their titles and a short description in the back of my children's books for parents who might be looking for extra resources.

My Proposed Children's Book

As for the actual content of the book, I want to put forth the idea for children that not only is consent an important standard to hold oneself to, but also that children should be empowered to be attune and responsive to aspects of our culture that aren't living up to that standard. In this way, I want my story to emphasize self- and community-accountability.

My story follows the plot of an older cousin reading to her two younger cousins, Kent and Amy. They've chosen *Sleeping Beauty* to read, and while my book doesn't give a full recap of the original fairy tale, much of it will be shown in the illustrations, and the main points are covered. As soon as they reach the part where the prince is about to kiss Sleeping Beauty, Kent and Amy stop their older cousin, because they are both concerned with the idea of waking someone up by kissing them. They spend some time discussing why they don't like that storyline, and then decide to write their own alternative ending to the fairy tale in which they reimagine ways the prince could have woken the princess up respectfully and without abusing her inability to give consent. Instead of reading what they wrote, the last page will be a full-spread illustration of Kent and Amy with many different thought bubbles containing all of the different options that they came up with, such as bringing a rooster into the room, or bringing the Princess hot breakfast in bed. There will be several thought bubbles that are left blank, and the parent's guide will encourage the readers to come up with their own ideas. Throughout the story, there will be a parent's guide with explanations, guiding questions, and suggestions.

The logic behind my storyline stems from the research I have presented throughout this paper. First, feminist research suggests that norm-based interventions that focus on changing attitudes are the most productive in dismantling rape culture. Specifically, effective strategies call attention to problematic norms or myths and offer ways to dismantle said norm or myth (manifested in the Swedish sex education system). I believe my storyline takes this approach by using Kent and Amy's characters to call attention to the problematic norm (the normalization of sexual assault by passing off the prince's assault as romance) and offering alternative norms in its place (the normalization of always treating others as autonomous beings and with respect). By doing so, I acknowledge child development research on how easily children internalize sexual

scripts. Furthermore, my earlier finding that children actively seek out examples of how to behave from their environments and that adults can help promote positive recursive cycles informs the plot of an older family member encouraging Kent and Amy, as well as serves as the basis for my inclusion of a parent's guide in the book. My story also acknowledges the ways in which children develop of ideas about power, and helps young readers develop a negative association concerning unequal power dynamics as they learn to feel discomfort with the prince's exertion of power over the sleeping princess. In this way, I combine feminist research on rape culture and research on child development to inform my intervention.

My choice to write a story that incorporates an already-existing fairy tale into the storyline was also rooted in research. *Sleeping Beauty* came to mind when I was first thinking about children's stories that grapple with the issue of consent. Of course, *Sleeping Beauty* depicts an interaction that is non-consensual, which is the opposite of the interactions I'm aiming to promote to kindergarteners. However, I was intrigued by the cultural value that *Sleeping Beauty* and other explicitly problematic pop culture works still hold. In *Should We Burn Babar? Essays on Children's Literature and the Power of Stories*, Herbert Kohl grapples with a similar tension as he contemplates the emotional hold *The Story of Babar: The Little Elephant* still has on him from his childhood, and yet, acknowledging the threads of colonialism, racism, and sexism that tie the story together, he maintains that he would not want his children reading the story (Kohl, 1995). Kohl asks, "should children be protected from many of the classics of children's literature if these works seem to celebrate oppression, embody racism, or provide images of women as subordinate to men?" (Kohl, 1995). He concludes that, while he would not buy a copy of *The Story of Babar* now, because "there is no way to avoid having your children exposed to many objectionable or problematic aspects of our culture," the story should be used as a learning tool,

rather than mindlessly read to further generations of children (Kohl, 1995). He emphasizes the adult's role in helping to foster a sensibility in children, which is “critical of aspects of the culture that denigrate or humiliate them or anyone else” (or that normalize a culture of sexual misconduct) (Kohl, 1995). Importantly, Kohl contends that, if trusted and helped by adults to “come to sensible and humane judgments,” children will feel empowered to be critical of things that don't seem right, and that they were derive joy from this feeling of empowerment (Kohl, 1995).

In my book, I aim to acknowledge that there are certain aspects of our culture that, while they perpetuate rape culture, won't go away any time soon. I hope to provide an example of how we can grapple with such cultural staples in a proactive and joyful way. Specifically, in my story, I acknowledge that *Sleeping Beauty* is a cultural staple that won't simply disappear (despite concerted efforts to make it do just that—see footnote), and to empower children to not only recognize the sexual assault in the book, as well as the broader gender and power dynamics at play, but moreover to change what they don't like by literally rewriting the story.⁴

Conclusion

I've spent seven semesters plus a summer of my college career—including seven different forty-hour trainings, countless workshops educating thousands of students, and long hours spent planning community-specific interventions—into consent education in college. It's been an empowering mission to be a part of, but it's also opened my eyes to the areas in which we are failing students, especially at younger ages. It's important to me that I carry on the mission to

⁴ A 2017 article details a British woman's efforts to remove a modern adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty* from her son's classrooms, due to the “specific issue in the...story about sexual behaviour and consent” (Wright, 2017).

eradicate rape culture into my career as a teacher, but I didn't want to wait until I graduate to further this goal.

While other projects might attempt to imagine a consent education curriculum for kindergarteners in the United States, based off of existing programs such as those in the Netherlands, I chose not to do this for several reasons. Firstly, schools in the United States have no systemized sex education mandate, even in higher-level schooling, meaning there is no platform off of which to build successful consent education programming. Furthermore, the research I've done on existing consent education programs for kindergarteners leads me to believe that many of the lessons are feasible on a smaller scale, such as a conversation between a child and parent, or between a teacher and students informally. A children's book with a parent/teacher guide is an effective way to encourage these conversations in a way that is digestible for and appealing to kindergarteners.

I hope that soon we will arrive at a place as a society where we can provide consent education for every student in the United States, starting in kindergarten, and building on that base through high school and college. However, our society is in a vicious cycle: we won't standardize consent education until we eradicate certain myths and scripts that justify and perpetuate rape culture; at the same time, we won't eradicate these myths and scripts without some form of consent education. I hope that this children's book works to break up that cycle by introducing an educational tool into our society that frames consent education as essential and accessible.

Appendix

I. Story With Parent's Guide in Red

Dear Parents, Guardians, Teachers, Older Cousins, and all of the others who care so deeply about the children you are reading to,

This children's book is one approach to teaching children about consent. While consent is often criticized as an inappropriate topic for children, this book, like most consent education, has nothing to do with encouraging children to be sexual, or with sex in particular. Instead, it has everything to do with encouraging children to be respectful to others, and to expect respect from others. When you break it down, that's what consent is—mutual respect. That's why it's so vital that we begin talking about consent with our children at a young age. When we provide a framework for them to think about consent from an early age in a broad and low-stakes way, not only will it be easier to approach the topic when they are ready to be in romantic relationships, but moreover, it will have normalized respectful behaviors in all kinds of human interactions that will have positive effects on society at many different levels.

Recently, the #MeToo movement has brought attention to what feminist scholars call a rape culture, a culture in which sexual violence is perpetuated and sustained by systems of power. By not only teaching children about what consent and respect mean, but also by encouraging them to recognize and respond to the ways that rape culture is woven into our societal fabric, I hope that this book can play a part in the effort to dismantle rape culture from the bottom up.

Throughout the book, there are marked opportunities to stop reading the story, and to ask your child questions about the choices the characters are making. While there are short replies accompanying each question, these are merely suggestions. These questions could turn into longer conversations that include your child considering the ways in which they would approach a given situation, or thinking about how these ideas play into their own lives and relationships.

While this book is only one piece in the puzzle that is aiming to end rape culture, I hope that it proves helpful in beginning conversations with your children about a topic that has historically been made more convoluted, taboo, and intimidating than it ever had to be. If rape culture is a culture in which people feel disempowered by the normalization of sexual violence, I hope that this book helps us reimagine a culture in which people feel empowered by the normalization of respect. Let's work together to create a culture where everyone feels as though their needs are being considered and taken seriously, and where everyone feels as though they have the tools to do the same to others.

Sincerely,
Jane

“Wake Up, Sleeping Beauty!”

The rain drummed down—pitter patter, pitter patter—on the roof, and Kent and Amy were happy to be inside, cozy and warm, reading with their older cousin.

Kent had chosen “Sleeping Beauty,” because he liked to sleep, and he was excited that his second favorite activity, after drawing, had made it into a book.

The three readers settled down on the floor—Kent plopped down on his stomach, with his chin in his hands, and Amy asked her cousin if she could climb into her lap to read along. The cousin was happy to have Amy in her lap, and so they were ready to start reading.

Why did Amy ask her cousin if it was okay to climb into her lap? Even though they are family members and love each other, sometimes people need their personal space, and it's always good to ask someone if they are comfortable! This shows that we love and respect them. Even if they say no, that does not mean they don't love you.

As their older cousin read aloud, the words seemed to float off the page and into Kent's and Amy's imaginations, and they watched as...

Here, I imagine the illustrations would show the cousin reading to Kent and Amy at the bottom of the page, with their imagination depicted above, maybe in some kind of thought bubble? Each short descriptive sentence would be a new illustration of what's happening in the original story, with a lot of detail so that if someone doesn't know the story it all makes sense.

...the Queen and King joyfully welcomed their new baby into the world...

...as the Evil Fairy cursed the young Princess, and said she would prick her finger on a spindle and die on her 18th birthday!...

...as the Good Fairy changed the Princess's fate to a deep sleep...

Kent and Amy watched in awe as...

... the King rushed to destroy every spindle in the kingdom...

...as the Evil Fairy still led the Princess to a spindle on her 18th birthday, and how the Princess pricked her finger and promptly fell, along with everyone in the castle, into a deeeeeeeep sleeeeeeeep...

And Kent and Amy watched as

One hundred

Years

Passed

Kent and Amy then watched as a curious Prince set off to see if the stories they told about “Sleeping Beauty” were true.

They saw how the thorns that had grown up around the castle gave way for the Prince and his horse, and how he finally found the Princess sleeping in her room.

They then saw how he knelt down to give her a kiss to wake her up, and—

The illustration goes back to just Kent, Amy, and their cousin

“Wait.” Amy snapped out of her imaginary story world. “*That’s* how he woke her up?! That is *not* what I was imagining.”

“Me neither,” agreed Kent. “That’s a really weird way to wake someone up. He doesn’t even know her!”

“And even if he did,” added Amy, “that still makes me uncomfortable.”

Their older cousin had stopped reading from the book. “Those are some great points,” she said. “What do you think would have been a better way to wake the Princess up? How do you like to be woken up?”

Pause before turning the page and ask your child this same question—how do they like to be woken up? Why do you think Amy and Kent feel uncomfortable with the way the Prince woke her up?

Kent and Amy thought for a minute. “Well,” Kent said, “I have a hard time waking up in the morning, so I usually need a bunch of alarms.”

Amy giggled. “It’s true,” she said. “And I like it when my Mom gives me a back rub to help me wake up. But I don’t think I’d like that from someone I don’t know.”

“This kind of ruins the story for me,” said Kent, sadly. “I don’t think the prince was acting like a very good person.”

“Me neither,” said Amy. “My head is full with ideas of how he could have woken her up instead.”

“Me too, Amy!” said Kent. “What if we wrote our own version of Sleeping Beauty?”

Their older cousin smiled. “That is an excellent idea,” she said. “I’ll go grab a pen and paper!”

Before turning the page, ask your child what ideas they have!

The last page of the book is just a page with an illustration of Kent and Amy each talking as their cousin writes, and above them are many different speech/thought bubbles with drawings of all of the different options they’re coming up with. Instead of a prince, it’s Kent and Amy who are there to wake the Princess up. Some of the ways they’re waking her up:

- *Holding roosters*
- *Holding alarm clocks*
- *With a string quartet*
- *With breakfast in bed*
- *With a boombox*
- *With a barking dog*

Some of the speech bubbles are left blank on purpose, allowing the readers a chance to fill in their ideas

Ask your child, What would you add to what Kent and Amy have? Some speech bubbles are left blank intentionally, allowing your child to either literally fill in the blank with words or drawings if it's your copy, or just to talk through ideas.

THE END

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTIONS/ANSWERS:

Here are some extra questions you can ask before, during, and after reading! I've also copied the questions that are already in the text, and provided some extra commentary, in case either you or your child has questions about it, or in case your child answers in a way you weren't expecting.

What is consent?

Consent is defined as positive, unambiguous, voluntary, and ongoing agreement.

To children, you can explain consent as permission, and emphasize the importance of both giving and getting permission.

How do you know when someone is respecting your boundaries or not?

Trust your instincts! You know what feels good and what doesn't.

If someone touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, that is never okay. You should express your discomfort if you can and tell a trusted adult.

How do I know if I'm respecting someone else's boundaries?

Always ask first, and don't be afraid to continue checking in if you are unsure.

“Why did Amy ask her cousin if it was okay to climb into her lap?”

Q: What if I don't ask my child to do that—is this hypocritical?

A: No, that's totally okay! Focus on you specifically—it's not something they have to ask you, but other people would appreciate the question, just to make sure.

“Pause before turning the page and ask your child this same question—how do they like to be woken up? Why do you think Amy and Kent feel uncomfortable with the way the Prince woke her up?”

Q: What if my child is not uncomfortable with this? What if they think it's romantic?

A: It's okay for people to have different boundaries and different definitions of romance! I might suggest asking your child if they really think they'd feel comfortable with a stranger kissing them to wake them up, or whether that might make them feel uncomfortable/scared. If they still think they'd like this, then put it in terms of other people—say, “that's totally okay for you to be comfortable with something like that, but other people might not be. We all have different boundaries! It's important to be clear about what makes us comfortable, and to ask other people what makes them comfortable.”

II. Primary Source analysis

Dear readers, I know this topic is a charged one, and I wanted to put forth my reading suggestions if you and your child feel the need or the interest to explore more. I gathered this list of books while I was doing research to write my own, so please see below if you are looking for supplemental materials!

***How Do You Feel?* by Lizzy Rockwell**

This book follows children around the playground, describing their emotions and feelings. It does a really nice job of teaching children to be aware of feelings and body language, and the author has several books that similarly focus on positive messages for children. You can find her book on Amazon.com.

***C is For Consent* by Eleanor Morrison**

This book walks through several different scenarios in which a young boy practices consent, both by setting his own boundaries and by actively asking others what they're comfortable with, with friends and family members. A really nice aspect of this book is that his parents are supporting him along the way, which sends a positive message to children that practicing active consent as well as boundary setting are tools that are supported by others. There are also

beautiful illustrations with a diverse representation of people, showing many different ages, genders, races, abilities and sexualities.

Let's Talk About Boundaries, Consent and Respect by Janeen Sanders

This book is similar to shows several scenarios where kids practice giving and receiving consent.

There are really great suggested questions that go along with the book, like “how did you know she was uncomfortable?” which I think are really essential in allowing children to engage with the concepts presented. Similarly to Rockwell’s book, the illustrations show many different kinds of diversity.

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