



“Messy Consent”

A Touch&Play framework for
Embodied Relating

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Introduction

Consent is a hot topic propelled to the foreground by the #metoo movement and other social factors. This is inspiring as it has the potential to help heal past trauma and hurt and potentially reduce suffering in the future. The discussion can however easily move from a restorative framework to a more retributive one with public shaming and punishment. The current dialectics also seem to have shifted whereby the term “abuse” previously more associated with physical struggle and the violation of explicit limits now includes situations where non-explicit “No’s” might not have been heard or situations where silent consent is considered invalidated due to a power imbalance between the people involved (e.g. teachers and students).

The Touch&Play Project has been exploring the Relational Body and consent since it’s first festival in Berlin in 2010. Grown from an attempt to question and broaden the Contact Improvisation framework of dancing ‘Physics’ and not ‘Chemistry’ we now organize multiple international festivals on different continents. In all of these the creation of a safer space is central as it allows people to more authentically express themselves and more freely connect with others.

This guide shares some of the thoughts and methods underlying the work used in our community to allow people to effectively communicate their needs, desires and limits and to learn to hear those of others without judgment. We believe that there are many ways to do consent and that finding the right one for you in a given moment requires a culturally savvy evaluation of your own and the others experiences, practicing verbal and non-verbal communication skills and clarity on any structural power imbalances that might exist.

The Dominant Model

In Europe and evermore so in the USA the mainstream thoughts around consent are influenced by the ‘affirmative’ and ‘enthusiastic or radical’ consent models. These can be summarized as follows: Rather than saying “No means No” one says “Yes means Yes” or in the enthusiastic version only “Hell Yes” means Yes”.

These models can be useful as they enforce a higher standard of clarity to establish whether one's actions are welcome or not. Rather than giving or taking in the absence of an explicit “No” one is required to ask permission and obtain an explicit affirmation or enthusiastic affirmation that the proposed actions are welcome. Depending on the setting and the people involved, this model can help those disempowered or new to consent. In edgy situations without an overall feeling of

security this practice can also support people to stay in their comfort zones at all times. While perhaps effective and straight forward in some instances, there might also be some drawbacks to this method.

You might think that interrupting a romantic moment to ask the other(s) if it is okay to kiss them on the cheek, rather than just slowly leaning in, might be one of them. This is, however, parlayed by a response that “consent is sexy” and that the clarity of the explicit “Yes” makes up for any of the awkwardness of having to break the moment and ask the question. How long this affirmative or enthusiastic “Yes” is valid for and whether they need to ask again after 20, 5 or 1 minute if it’s okay to keep kissing is less clear. Likewise one could doubt whether they would have to ask again if they wanted to move their kiss to the person’s neck or mouth and perhaps again if they wanted to open their mouth and then again if they’d like to touch tongues. Taking the model to its extreme, we cannot reasonably obtain an enthusiastic “Yes” prior to any and all of our daily interactions. Furthermore, try as we may every breath, movement and touch is different and we are not always able to describe what we wish to happen or do for the others evaluation and informed consent.

Risk Prevention vs. Harm Reduction

Risk prevention strategies such as the above mentioned models, and just like traffic lights that help avoid the occurrence of accidents, have an important role in our society. Correctly dividing the world into black and white whereby things are either in the “Hell Yes” category or by default the “No Way” one could eliminate any uncertainty and completely mitigate the risk of hurt in our lives. While perhaps a noble attempt, this strategy will at times fail. One certainty of life seems to be that we will all die and that along our journey we will hurt ourselves and also others (if we want to or not). Buddhists know this as one of the four noble truths “Life is/has suffering”.

The, especially, Anglo-Saxon tendency to prioritize prevention, could partly be rooted in the Common Law tradition of the US and UK legal systems. These patriarchal systems tend to externalize responsibility for our safety and well-being and attribute them to the state and other powers. Mishaps thus quickly lead to legal claims to compensate damages, blaming a failure of the external authority to remove or clearly signal any and all possible threats in our surroundings. In response the state and corporations have developed, what a friend of mine calls, a trend of public safety fascism to allay the threat of liability and litigation.

While taping over the cracks in a sidewalk that show even the smallest unevenness might prevent us from tripping, when the faithful moment comes when we do fall are we prepared for the consequences? Babies who, while growing up are insufficiently exposed to microbes because of

their parents' risk reduction strategy (i.e. attempting to kill all germs present in their surroundings) are left worse off with a less tolerant immune system and increased allergies, eczema and asthma rates.

Harm or impact reduction strategies, such as wearing a seat-belt, won't stop you from having an accident but can greatly reduce the chance and severity of bodily harm. Learning how to fall and knowing how to climb back up afterwards, with or without a helping hand, can also reduce the long-term consequences of a traumatic experience. Harm reduction strategies have been successfully applied in the treatment of substance abuse and in sexual health education. They've however received little attention in the realm of human relations and consent. Harm reduction can be provided through intra- and inter-personal and group practices and processes. The creation of safer spaces that help people move from passive to reactive to proactive coping strategies are key to building personal, relational and community resilience.

A T&P Framework

The Touch&Play project is cultivating an embodied consent framework rather than subscribing to the 'affirmative' or 'enthusiastic' models that currently dominate western and especially Anglo-Saxon societies. We believe a perfect method that works for everyone in all instances does not exist and that consent practices are heavily influenced by culture and personal and group identities and past experiences. Consent refers to a person's volition to actively give or allow another person(s) to receive or take from us. Ortmann and Sprott (2013) describe it as "similar to the terms *acquiescence* and *permission*, *consent* is the process by which approval or acceptance of what is planned (often by another) is acceptable or agreeable"

The main aim of our framework is to create a community where everyone feels secure and welcome to be their authentic selves (i.e. connected to and aligned with what is alive inside of them) and to cultivate a deep listening to and compassion for what is alive in the other and the collective. We do this through a combination of embodied prevention and harm reduction strategies and by building up the personal, relational and community resilience of our tribe. T&P events help participants reclaim the autonomy in their well-being. and to provide integral and inclusive tools that provide people with an embodied perspective of their needs, desires and limits as well as effective strategies to communicate them to others.

Our approach is based on a number premises that allow us to do this work effectively:

- We need to embrace a large degree of responsibility for our own well-being.

- We need to find a deep compassion for ourselves and others in that we do not always give and receive what we had wanted.
- We need a clear personal and community commitment to clean up all the messes we make when we hurt ourselves and others.
- We need to accept that increased power and privilege in a relationship comes with and increased responsibility about it's outcome.

Most people are committed to reduce the risk of hurting ourselves and others. Pretending that we know exactly what we want all of the time and are always able to communicate this in a clear and direct manner does, however, not help this. It's possible that at times we only learn what we want after having experienced it's opposite and that something that we thought we wanted becomes an experience we wish we had never had. Acknowledging the inherent messiness of life with the 20 shades of grey that often lie between our black and white support this. We can give room to the doubt we all sometimes feel by adding a category, or two, (e.g. "Maybe" and "Maybe not") to the above mentioned "Hell Yes" and "No way".

As a basis for our messy consent model we use the Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution (4Cs) framework as proposed by the Center for Positive Sexuality. An in depth discussion of this framework can be found [here](#).

Caring refers to a general attitude to cultivate safety, trust and respect and Includes attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and a commitment to see issues from another's perspective. In our community this is partly reflected through our community vow to *"fully attempt to leave any connection I make more beautiful than I found it"*, knowing and accepting that this might not always be possible within the time frame of a given event. We further commit to care for ourselves by agreeing not to share identifiable information to people outside of our community about participants present at the event who, for whatever reason, want to stay anonymous. While guaranteeing anonymity towards the outside we make a communal agreement to cultivate transparency within the group. Compassionate or 'Loving Gossip' and sharing are essential to recreate the complex and liquid relational constellation alive in our tribe at and given moment. This includes people's emotional states, sexual or affectionate relations and interpersonal conflicts. If participants are not able to connect with this loving place we encourage them to find the person whom they wanted to speak about and share their feelings directly with them rather than spreading their discomfort in the group. Finally care refers to the time and energy we spend digesting and if needed composting our shared experiences so that they bring value to all those involved.



Communication is a reference to the essential negotiation of needs, desires, and limits and recognizing all of these may change depending on mood, physical ability, setting, partner, etc. It is also a call to be clear and transparent about who any given interaction is for. This is put into practice through tools such as the [Wheel of Consent](#) and the 9 [BDSM GRACE](#) questions.

Consent deals with clarifying and expressing one's volition in an effective manner on different levels. To achieve this we employ various experiential embodied exercises to clarify and strengthen the direct and indirect connections to our physical, sexual and social limits.

Caution implies a need to be aware of the risks we are taking in showing up authentically and exploring our relational edges and proposes we proceed consciously and carefully;

Just as one cannot learn how to dance Contact Improvisation only through reading a book mastering consent also requires experiential learning. Touch&Play events provide ample opportunities to learn how to embody the 4C's framework. Experimenting situations that are neither white nor black, that a part of us want and another doesn't, can teach us how to deal with relational concerns in real life. By creating safer spaces with a clear commitment to aftercare and the cleaning up of any messes made participants can explore their edges and learn about their internal mental and physical consent patterns and develop the higher level of clarity and confidence when faced with interactions in less controlled circumstances.

Finally our framework employs the tools and theory of Non-Violent Communication (NVC) and contains elements of conflict mediation and restorative processes (e.g. restorative circles, ZEGG Forum) to deal with more serious or complex situations, challenging the typical aggressor – victim paradigm. Clarifying and transmitting the needs and pain alive in the various stakeholders cultivates compassion between the parts and can help to move towards healing and possible reparations. While we request people take the primary responsibility for their actions and consequences the community provides support in addressing outstanding issues that participants were not able to solve by themselves.

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