

# HOW TO TEACH CONSENT (LESSON 2)



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**C**onsent is suddenly a headliner topic, with the #MeToo campaign sweeping across social media.

Changing our culture to be one that respects, asks, and encourages will take a lot of tiny steps that affect the way we communicate in all kinds of contexts, not only those that become [sexual](http://www.kizombacommunity.com/service-category/stories/).

**Consent is Ongoing**

When we say “yes” to a dance, it doesn’t necessarily entail wanting to be in absolutely any position or do any move. Consider how being seated at a table in the dining room of a restaurant probably means you want food, but it doesn’t mean you’re ready to eat anything on the menu. Even if the chef sends out a free appetizer, it won’t necessarily appeal to you or suit your current dietary restrictions. And coming to a friend’s house and sitting on their couch probably means you want to spend time talking with them, but it doesn’t mean you’re okay with talking about every subject.

We often tell people, “If you don’t like dancing with someone, just say no (<http://socialdancecommunity.com/what-it-means-when-they-say-no/>)! Or if they do something inappropriate, walk away!” I think that absolutely does make sense in certain cases, but it creates an all-or-nothing dichotomy.

I don’t leave the restaurant if they offer a dish I don’t like. I let them know about my nut allergy, I ask for a change or I order something else. I don’t walk out of the house if my friend brings up something touchy or accidentally insults me. I just tell them, “I’d rather not talk about this,” or “That hurt my feelings,” giving us the opportunity to move on from there.



That’s what I’d like to see for our dancing as well!

## Two-Way Communication

Last month I introduced a lesson (<http://socialdancecommunity.com/how-to-teach-consent-starting-now-lesson-1/>) that explores consent in the context of changing positions within a partnered dance. There was some pushback from people who felt I put too much burden on the leaders to somehow guess if the follower was feeling comfortable.

Let me clarify my position. I am encouraging us all to engage in two-way communication. Our dance communities have made a lot of progress towards the shared idea that both partners should have a voice. I’m suggesting we take the next step and encourage both partners to listen as well.

Listening is absolutely a skill. It takes practice. In the beginning it may indeed feel like there’s some guesswork. However, if our partner trusts that we are listening, they may be more confident in asking for a change or suggesting something new. Encouraging that communication makes things easier for everyone.

This month's lesson explores some more opportunities for us to engage in two-way communication with our partners in order to create more enjoyable dances.

## 1. Let's Talk About Comfort

Have your group divide into leaders and followers (more than once if your dancers try both roles) and then pair up.

This will be primarily a talking exercise. Although we thrive on nonverbal communication in dancing, sometimes the simplest and clearest solution to a problem situation is to use our words. That often feels very risky, though, particularly for those among us who are shy, hate conflict, or are socially anxious.



Darcy in Washington shared: "As a follow, I hate having to choose between dancing defensively and risking being judged 'bossy' because I'll tell a lead mid-dance that what he's doing is hurting me. Many are shocked to learn that they are pinching hands, gripping arms, shoving, pulling hands up high, cranking through turns, forcing arm folds, and doing other things that can be painful and even injure their partner."

So it's not just a question of whether you can survive the dance. You also have an opportunity to kindly bring someone's attention to a habit that they might well be unaware of and would be happy to adjust (whether just for your comfort or even for all their partners thereafter).

The best way to get over our reluctance to speak is to practice doing it!

For this exercise, I highly recommend doing some pre-lesson prep and writing up a number of possible situations that your dancers can act out. Some possibilities could include your partner:

- holding your hand too tightly
- holding too closely / not giving enough space
- breathing in your ear
- leaning too far forward or back
- creating too much tension

Announce the situation and say “Leaders do it, followers request an adjustment” or “Followers act it out, leaders ask for a change.” You can have people change partners and try a few times before swapping the agent/speaker or before going to the next situation.

## 2. Safety First

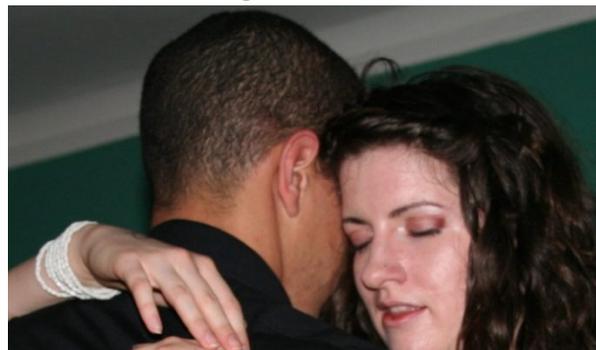
At one point or another, all of us come to dances with less than fully functioning bodies. We all get hurt or overtax our muscles. Some of us have permanent injuries or physical limitations.

For whatever reason, it often feels awkward to have to bring up “Don’ts.” However, it’s clearly good safety practice to have partners verbally explain that they can’t do certain movements because of pain, discomfort, or other limitation.

Plus, it’s really rare for a dancer to have no empathy, as long as they’ve been informed! So there’s no need to suffer in silence.

This is another talking exercise, so a bit of pre-lesson prep can help. Consider suggesting situations like:

- I bruised my arm, so please don’t hold it here.
- I pulled a muscle in my back, so I can’t hold my arm up in closed position.
- I have sensitive ears, so let’s not dance near the speakers
- I am still building up strength after an illness, so we can’t go too fast.
- I have a cracked rib, so please don’t ask for close embrace.
- I have a frozen shoulder, so I can’t lead/follow turns.



Sometimes it’s not suitable to talk specifically about the injury or limitation, so you can also include less specific examples like:

- My hand hurts today, could you please hold it lightly?
- My knees are sore, so let’s not do major level changes.
- I can’t really dance quickly at the moment.
- I don’t want to do multiple turns, please.
- I’d rather not be in close embrace.

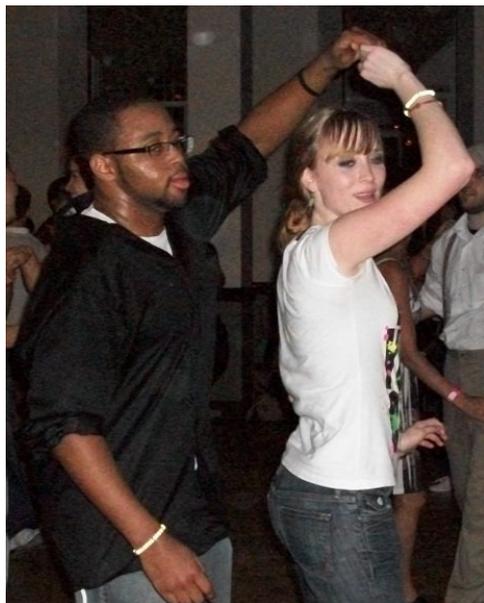
Take turns having leaders or followers communicate the limitation to their partner. The other person should acknowledge them (“OK!” “Sure” “I understand) and then dance 30 seconds with that adaptation in mind. Change partners several times.

### 3. Asking for Turns

We teach beginners how to lead and follow basic turns. However, it's also interesting to create a turn that's an invitation rather than a mandate. (Different partner dances have different dynamics, so this will require adjustment to your context. While this works well for beginners in blues or West Coast Swing, it wouldn't be appropriate at so early a stage for salsa dancers.)

Show the leaders how to clearly prep a simple under-arm turn that will be powered by the follower. Then demonstrate how followers can choose to do the turn using different amounts of momentum or creating a new shape or ending in a different position.

Have the leaders prep this simple turn two or three times for each follower. Encourage the followers to take the opportunity to complete it with the speed, rhythm, and shape they feel inspired to use. Ask the leaders to pay close attention to the follower and consider how they can adjust to this new input in order to continue the dance. Depending on the level, this may also require some demonstration of possible next steps.



Give plenty of time to practice, since this won't work seamlessly from the start! Then ask your dancers to discuss. What transition worked well? When did the turn take too much time? What felt like ignoring the leader? How can we balance creative expression with appreciating what our partner is doing?

Depending on the particularities of your dance, you might also introduce the possibility of followers initiating a turn. Show how followers can ask for a turn by raising up a hand to go under or unrolling from hold.

Practice with leaders paying attention for the request and either going with it or going back to normal frame to say no.

### 4. Making Your Own Exercise

Think back to any moments in your dance experience in which you've been uncomfortable due to a surprise move, felt stuck without a voice, or just pushed into something you didn't really want to do. Make your own consent exercise to address those situations.

For example, I think it's great to practice verbally asking a follower's preferences when it comes to dips or lifts. However, there are also ways to nonverbally check a follower's experience and comfort level by first doing a smaller or easier dip or lift that doesn't hugely impact their balance and ability to step out of it.

To be honest, I think that at a high level all partnered dances have these elements. Very experienced followers can find the windows for creative expression in any dance. They can also dance in a way that firmly defends their boundaries. Advanced leaders adapt to the level of the follower, adjust when a pattern is changed by something the follower does (intentional or not), and leave space for their partner to add to the dance. But I think these are skills that can and should be encouraged much sooner in our learning experience.

Let's be willing to listen and adapt to each other. Let's make room for conversation in our dancing.

*We welcome your stories about conversational dancing and consent! You can also check out more resources related to dancing and consent [here](http://www.kizombacommunity.com/services/consent-safety/)(<http://www.kizombacommunity.com/services/consent-safety/>).*

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