

## Consent as more than yes or no

**Guest: Justin Hancock**

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**Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]**

Welcome back to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am very pleased to be welcoming Justin Hancock. Welcome, Justin.

**Justin Hancock**

Hello. Thanks for having me.

**Jaia Bristow**

Justin Hancock is a sex and relationships educator. His latest book came out in January 2021 and is called *Can We Talk About Consent?*, a book about freedom, choices and agreement. He is the co-author of *A Practical Guide to Sex* with Meg-John Baker, who is another one of our speakers on this conference. So don't forget to check out their talk as well.

And he also created BISH, one of the leading relationships and sex education websites for young people, [bishuk.com](http://bishuk.com)

Justin also hosts a podcast for adults called *Culture, Sex, Relationships*.

So I'm really happy to have you on board, Justin, because I think consent is such an important topic when we are talking about relationships. And to start off, let's talk about how should we define consent and what is wrong with how we talk about it at the moment?

**Justin Hancock**

Yeah. I think that we have a really narrow understanding of consent at the moment, which is very legalistic. It kind of has a crime being committed, has, and what I think is an unhelpful binary of, was there consent, was there not consent?

And I think that is useful for legalistic framing of consent, but it's not useful in how we might think about consent in our everyday lives and in our relationships. I think that it's more important to reframe consent as being about the freedom to choose.

So even actually, in the legal definition of consent, they talk about consent as the freedom to choose to agree and having the capacity to make those choices.

So actually, they're very big topics, freedom, choices, agreement, capacity. And I think if we start to look at consent in that way, then we can really broaden the topic and open it up. Because then when we're talking about freedom and choices and agreement, then we can always have more of those. Consent becomes something which we can always have more of.

There's always more that we can be doing in every aspect of our lives, from the very small decisions we make for ourselves, to the decisions we make with other people, to the broader work that we do in any social justice work and politics, more broadly, which is what we'll talk about.#

So that's the kind of framing for the book. A lot of people think that consent is just this narrow thing of you shouldn't do things to other people without their permission, and you should always give your permission before someone does something to you. And that's useful, that's a bit useful, but not as useful as it could be, I think.

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:03:01]**

Right. And also, I guess often people think about consent as just related to sex, whereas consent is important in all areas of life. Do you want to say a few words about that?

### **Justin Hancock**

Yeah. Big time. I mean, I talk about lots of different scenarios in my book, both as a way of illuminating where we can bring in more consent in our day-to-day lives, but also as an analogy for sex.

So I start off with talking about how when I found out that I was going to write this book that I went off to choose a pizza, I went off to eat a pizza, in fact. And when I was choosing the pizza, I was thinking, well, to what extent are my choices being narrowed here around the should stories, or the common sense narrative of what a pizza should be? In what way am I being constrained here by not wanting to offend the staff by asking for pineapple on my pizza, or not having a topping on my pizza? A sauce on my pizza? There are very strong stories about even what counts as a pizza.

So, yeah, I think we need to be thinking, and we'll talk more about this, but we need to be thinking about just how we relate to ourselves, how we do self-care, how we greet other people, how we choose to do things with other people. Even something as simple as watching something on TV with someone. How can we bring more consent in there?

As well as this broader topic of understanding that people have different levels of freedoms in society. So society is structured in a way where some people get more freedom to choose than others. And that has to be an important part of our politics as well to think, well, how do we address these on an interpersonal level? But also, how can we restructure society radically in order to give more people more choices?

So I think that it is something that we don't really talk about enough. I think it is the most important topic, and it's certainly the most important topic, I think, in sex. But it's also just a massively important topic in relationships more broadly as well.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And you talked about our relationship with one self when talking about consent. So let's talk a little bit about self-consent.

### **Justin Hancock**

Yeah. So one of the difficulties for consent, and a lot of people have pointed this out. Katherine Angel's book on this is really, really good, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*. So the way that we currently talk about consent is that it's predicated, we'll know exactly what it is we want, and that we all feel sufficiently confident in articulating what is that we want. We don't. We just don't.

One of the difficulties for self-consent, and Sophia, I'm sure, we'll talk more about this in another one of the talks, is that it's very difficult for us to tune into what we want because of all the should stories that surround us.

So in my example of the pizza, if I go to an authentic Italian pizzeria, I can't have barbecue sauce and pineapple, for example, because they'll be like, that's not a pizza, get out kind of thing. And they'd be right, I think. But I'm also like that about pizza. But we're constantly surrounded by should stories about how I should look, how I should dress, what kind of relationships are okay, what kind of sex we should be having.

And so, I call them should stories in the book, but we could also call them common sense ideas, or hegemonic ideas. Foucault would have a lot to say about this as well, about we have these very narrow understandings of what is normal and how that can be used to weaponize, can be weaponized and used to control people.

So that makes it very difficult for us to really, both tune into what we want, but also to be ourselves. If we are constantly being faced with stories about how we should be, it's very difficult to really find an authentic self and find an authentic choice for ourselves.

Like, am I doing this for someone else? Am I doing this to please someone else? Am I doing this because it's normal? Are all things that we're often all thinking about quite a lot of the time when we're making choices.

So self-consent is the ability to acknowledge all of that in society and to be able to slow down, which I need to do right now, to be able to just slow down and think, okay, what is it I really, actually want or need right now?

And so if it's like watching something on TV, it's like, okay, well, the feeling that I want to have at the end of watching this show is I want to feel relaxed. I want a bit of lightness. I've had a long, hard day. I don't want to watch a really difficult documentary that's going to make me upset. Today I just want to watch something silly. I want to watch something which feels very familiar and comforting, and I want these feelings at the end of it.

And so that ability to just slow down and really listen to our bodies and tune into ourselves is the first way of doing self-consent work. And that's really, really important because we can't navigate our wants and needs and desires with other people if we can't even begin to articulate them for ourselves.

And that's not to say that even if we do that work, we're always going to be able to confidently articulate what we want and need and desire. But it should be a start because all of this has to allow for our wants and needs and desires to become.

So it's good to always have a starting point to slow down and think, okay, well, where am I at the moment? And where might be beneficial for me to go? And so I think that this is a really, well this is one of the many things missing from consent discourse, this idea that when we start along a journey, we've become. And so I think consent needs to allow for that becoming in a way which feels safe and nurturing, but also has that flexibility to allow us to, I'm going to repeat the word again, to become. I just think it's a really important word.

Yeah. So that's self-consent, I think.

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:09:10]**

I love that. I really resonate with a lot of what you're saying. And I think it's so crucial with what you're saying at the very beginning that most of the time when we talk about consent, we assume we're going off the basis that people know what they want and know how to express that.

And so often that's not true. And as you say, especially with power dynamics in the world, whether that's in all kinds of ways, I lead workshops on systemic power, privilege and prejudice so I know how complicated that can be.

And as you said, Sophia Graham is doing an interview where she talks more about self-consent, so I encourage people to check that out.

And so, with all that in mind then, how can we do consent with others in a way that not only respects our individual choices, as you talk about, but also creates the possibility for something greater than the sum of its parts?

**Justin Hancock - [00:10:01]**

Yeah. I think the answer to that is in the question really, it's that, I think when people again, when people have this narrow framing of consent, they think, well, okay, it's about how do two people have their wants and needs met by the other person? And that there is always going to be a sense of compromise.

And that feels like, well, I'm not guessing exactly what I want. And so some people might think, well, if I'm not going to get exactly what I want, why should I do things with other people? And that's fair enough.

So if people are doing the work of self-consent and thinking, I like to watch TV in exactly these circumstances, or I like my pizza just so, or I want to play a video game by myself because I just much more prefer it that way. That's fine. But what it does is to miss out on the potential for collective agency. It misses out on the potential for that feeling that you get when you're both agreeing to do something together. And that feeling of co-creating a moment, like co-creating an experience.

And so that's the work of consent is that it allows you to start to begin the processors of co-creating a potentially lovely experience that it wouldn't be possible for you to have by yourself. And for you to be able to do this for another person.

So rather than seeing consent as well, I've got a list of things that I want to do here, and I've got a list of things that I want to do here. Let's see which of these things we can both do for each other. I mean, that is one way of looking at consent. But another way of looking at it is, well, how can we make this a win win? How can I be doing some of the things that I would choose to do as an individual? But how can I get even more from this joining forces with someone else to create something that, a very special romantic or memorable or joyous moment or series of moments or collection of many years of moments? So I think that's the kind of work.

And so what that means is being able to articulate as much as we can about what it is that we want and need and what our boundaries are and the things that we can't do. Also being able to encourage the other person to do the same, rather than second guessing what each other wants and trying to give the other person what you think they might want. I think it's really good to bring yourself as much as you can to this, but then to allow for those processes to allow for this broader process of becoming, like I was saying before. Like what might happen in an experience.

Because we don't always know what's going to happen. We can't go into any scenario that we do, we don't know exactly how it's going to happen. We might have an idea, and it might be nice to have quite a clear idea of what's going to happen, but we don't know what feelings it's going to bring us. We don't know where it might lead to. And so this is the work of ongoing consent, which we'll talk about in a bit, that we also need to pay attention to.

But I think first and foremost, we've got to see consent has been a win-win where we are doing something that we feel happy and comfortable with. We get a win-win from knowing the other person feels the same way about us. So we get that kind of mutuality. But then we also have the possibility of the extra level of collective joy that we might get from both doing something together that we wouldn't be able to do otherwise.

And so that really is crucial in relationships generally as well. I think that this is a very good definition of love, really. It's paying attention to the processes wherein joy can happen and romance can happen and memories can happen and feelings can happen. You can both feel a feeling together.

And so consent is like a really big part of that. And that involves having these quite nitty, gritty conversations about things you wouldn't want to see happen. Things you might want to see happen. Things you might definitely want to see happen.

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:13:55]**

So yeah, in a very practical way, you've spoken just towards the end there about having nitty gritty conversations. But in a very practical way, how does one implement this? How does one check in with consent, whether it's to do with sex or with love or with watching TV or with ordering pizza? How do we do that?

### **Justin Hancock**

Well, I think the first thing to do is to check what the should story is. There is inevitably a should story. So it's about checking, it's about acknowledging, yeah, there is a should story here so we could always just, you hold the remote and flick through the channels until we see something we want to watch. And you have the remote because you live here and it's your TV and I'm in your house. And so the should story is it's the person who comes round does the flicking until the other person says, oh, I'd like to watch that. So you could first of all, acknowledge the should story.

But then getting away from that, the way to move away from should stores is to ask really good questions. So, if we're going to ask for something, it's really important that we give the other person an abundance of options. So I think the freedom to choose is not just about choosing to do a thing or not do a thing. If we've given someone only the option of doing something or not doing something, we've not given them enough freedom to choose, it's not potential enough. And that means if someone saying, no, you've not given them enough options.

So it's about giving at least 3 options about how people might do something, but also at least 3 options about what you might do together, but also different options for how you might do it. And then when you start thinking in this much broader way, you can start to really think about there being almost an infinite number of things.

For example, in my book, I talk about pizzas. So if you can have 3 or 4 different kinds of bases and 6 or 7 or 8 different kinds of sauces and then any kind of topping whatsoever, then suddenly you're at infinite pizza, you can have loads and loads and loads of different things. Tuning into what kind of pizza you might want might be the really difficult piece of work. But at least we're giving people different options.

And this is extremely relevant when come to sex. So the should story that we have for sex is that it's like, (sexual content coming up), but the should story for sex is that it's meant to be a man and a woman, which obviously excludes anyone who, it excludes non-straight couples, it excludes anyone who isn't a man or a woman who wants to have sex with each other.

And that, if we imagine a sex scene then what we might imagine is a man on top of a woman with an erect penis, with a penis inside a vagina, that's what sex is. So if we were to say to someone, would you like to have sex or not? And that's what sex means, then our response can only be yes or no.

But if sex is thousands, potentially millions of different activities that can be done in various different ways and you literally write them all down or just think of as many as you can, then suddenly your world has completely transformed and you can be like, well, I might choose to do this and this and this and this or I don't want to do that, I'm semi interested in this. People who do kink or BDSM are very used to this idea of having yes, no, maybe lists and I think it's something that we could all do in sex more broadly but just also with everything more broadly.

And then you start to have, when you have this abundant view of the different things that we might do and different ways that we might do it, you have an abundant view of consent. So it brings in when you have more choice, you have more consent.

That's another thing that we could start doing. So that means rejecting the should story and approaching this abundant view of there being lots of different choices.

But also then crucially, it's really important to be able to tune into your experience and to tune into what's happening during it in order to have this ongoing consent, which is another thing which is not really talked about enough in consent education.

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:18:09]**

Absolutely. I think that's so vital what you're talking about, about those different options. And I know for myself, for example, I've had someone once ask me, can I kiss you? And it was a bit jarring because it was, A, I felt like I should, I was on a date with that person. I wasn't particularly attracted to that person. And so in that moment, I was kind of just like, yeah, I guess because saying no felt complicated and there wasn't those options.

And I know for myself, for example, if I go on a date with someone at the end of the date, I'll often ask them, would you like to hug goodbye or kiss goodbye or wave goodbye? And it's what you're talking about it's giving those options, and it feels a lot easier to select an option than to just say yes or no, especially when we're socialized to find it difficult to say yes and no.

### **Justin Hancock**

Yeah. You're bringing a really important thing in there as well which is about power. So there is inevitably going to be an imbalance of power when we do things with other people.

So my example before of going around to our friends to watch TV or playing games. If they own the TV and it's their space, they have more power because they have everything. And so they have the gift of actively being able to give you choices. And sadly, what happens is that choices aren't really given in that situation, instead people kind of follow a script.

So in things like dates instead of, on dates instead of just saying, would you like a kiss and your only possible response to being yes or no. And also feeling like you can't really say no because of the social story and the script around having a date, which is a gendered script as well, which we need to get to. A better thing to do in that case would say, well, how do you feel about these? Or I would like a kiss, how would you feel about that? So someone expressing their needs or their wants or desires and then giving the other person the opportunity.

There are lots of different ways of asking where we can increase the other person's capacity to choose. So only asking once, not pleading with someone, giving more than three options, ideally, three or more options, asking once and giving people time and space to figure out whether it's something they want to do or not and asking in a way that recognizes the awkwardness of the situation and recognizes the potential for people not being able to tune into what it is that they want.

And we also have to ask in ways where it's quite clear that to not do something is absolutely fine. And in order to be consensual and to bring more consent into our lives, we'll have to embrace the idea of doing a lot less. Because if consent is the most important thing, that means often we really could just not do things.

So in my book, I've got a chapter called, *Meh, let's not*, and I think it's just really important to give everyone permission to not do things. And for that to be okay. It might be disappointing, it might be a tiny little bit awkward, but really we don't want people to be doing things just because we pressure them to do things, ideally, I don't think. We certainly shouldn't be doing that deliberately. We shouldn't be committing violence against each other. But we should also be recognizing that there is always

power there and for many people, they might feel that they have no choice but to say no. So that means you have to give people different options.

The other thing about no, of course, and yes and no is that people rarely say yes or no in any situation at all. People might shrunk their shoulders or turn their head or go, I don't know or, I'm a bit tired or, maybe. And that's usually what people say.

But some researchers looked into this, and the same researchers found that even though people often don't say yes or no. People can certainly read a yes or no. So yes's and no's can be articulated by our bodies and by words other than yes or no. And that's really, really important.

And this is another reason why it's really important to get away from this binary thinking of consent as being about yes or no. Because the absence of a no doesn't mean a yes. And people might not say no for many, many reasons, as we've just been talking about. That's where this becomes a very complicated topic, and that's where we need to be paying attention not just to the actual words that people saying or trying to pin people down to an agreement, but we have to pay attention to people's overall effects, including things like body language, but also what power dynamics, what power relations are at play at any given moment. Which is technical and tricky to do.

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:23:11]**

Yeah, it is and yet it's so vital. And I think there's a few really crucial things in what you've just mentioned. Number one, it's again, talking about what you were saying at the beginning, that the legal definition of consent and actual everyday use of consent is very different, and that the absence of a no isn't a yes is really important.

I think you mentioned as well when you were listing the different ways of asking, before that you were just talking about sometimes just expressing how you feel without actually making a request, saying like, oh, I would like to kiss you or I can feel a desire or something without actually putting that as pressure on the other person is also really important.

And for myself, when it comes to yes or no, I've done lots of nonviolent communication courses, and one of the things we've learned is to think of no, not as a negation or a rejection of you or the other person, but as an affirmation of the person's needs. So if I'm saying no to you, it's not because I want to reject you, it's because I have different needs in this moment and I want to look after myself. And if you are saying no to me, then same thing. It's not you rejecting me. And so seeing it as grateful that you can affirm your needs rather than feeling rejected and trying to plead or insist or change someone's mind.

### **Justin Hancock**

Sure. And saying no to them as a yes to you, which is, I was taught years ago by someone, I can't remember who that came from, but I just also think that a lot of this is to do with a lot of the problems that people run into around consent is that people can't rid themselves of the normative scripts in which they're in.

A much more consensual way of kissing someone on a date would be talking about it before the date even begins. So being able to put it in text form or creating a Google Doc making it clear what kind of date it is. How many people have been on dates when they're not quite sure what the vibe is? Is it a kind of friend date? Is it a potential romance date? Is it a hookup date? Is it, I'd like to get to know someone or find out more about someone kind of date?

People often, I think someone calls this a date, where it's the uncertainty date. So I think what a lot of people find challenging about this stuff is that it requires us to be quite blunt, and it requires us sometimes to be quite awkward, and that feels wrong. And it feels strange. But there's a huge amount of privilege in people who can go from A to B and just read someone's body language and understand the situation.

You have to be pretty neurotypical to be able to understand some of these very complex social scripts going on, and not everyone is able to do that. And so I think we could just bear in mind that. One of the bits of advice I give at my website is that, if you're not finding sex and relationships at least a bit awkward, you're probably doing it wrong, and you're probably overriding someone else's consent somehow. Someone else is doing a lot of work to please you and to look after your needs without you realizing, if you find everything really plain sailing and you never have ruptures in trust or never have awkward silences, or you never have a situation where you're not quite sure what's going on.

And as I keep saying, there's a huge amount of privilege that comes with that. If you are someone who is often in social situations where you are given the most freedom to choose, you have the most power there. And so this might not be something that you ever really experience. If you find the whole idea of thinking carefully about pizza you might want to choose, then think about how much money you have, how much pizza you've eaten in your life, how much is at stake for you if you eat a pizza and it's not quite what you want, but it's okay, there's always more pizza. Compared to someone for whom going out for pizza is actually a pretty expensive special occasion and so there's a lot more at stake there.

I talk about pizza a lot, but it's a nice kind of, you know, ended on a nice analogy I think. I also just really like pizza. I've had it twice this week, I should probably stop.

But that thing about embracing the awkwardness, I think is really important. It's something that a colleague of mine has written about and done research about, Elsie Whittington. And it's just really important just to notice when things are awkward and by like, yeah, we are doing a fundamentally awkward and complex thing. So let's just lean into that a little bit and both admit that it's awkward and when you can lean into something and both admit that something is awkward and tricky and difficult, that in and of itself is romantic, lovely, joyful.

So this is where I think consent is often just seen as a real pain and like a thing that, consent is seen as something we just need to do once and get out of the way and then never have to think about it again. Actually, I just think we all need to do more of it all of the time and then leaning into that trickiness allows for other things to unfold as well.

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:28:41]**

And I guess part of it is also cultural. Us Brits are particularly awkward and find blunt, direct conversations not socially normal. So I think there's also that element.

But I'm curious because you talked about, for example, texting the person before but how does that then work with ongoing consent? Let's talk a little bit about ongoing consent because it's come up a few times. And I'm curious, yeah what your thoughts are around that? And how to keep that going? Because, again, it's sort of become normalized, this idea that you can say no at any moment, it sounds like consent is, what you're referring to as ongoing consent, is a lot more than that.

### **Justin Hancock**

Yeah. I think it has to be a really, I think we need to think about consent that's happening at all levels and in all parts of our bodies. And we have to think about how complex communication is and during sex, again, also during anything, and how we can extract meanings of consent and how we can understand consent and how can see consent, but also how we can feel consent in our bodies during sex.

So this means that we are just paying attention to things like eye contact and whether someone is actively engaging with you and looking into your eyes or just kind of, like, not so sure about this really. But again, eye contact has different meanings for different people. Some people might kind of be closing their eyes because they're an absolute bliss, they're in their own head space and this feels wonderful, they might feel deeply relaxed and they're really enjoying what's going on.



### [00:30:30]

Others might be because they want it to be over quite quickly, or they can't bear to look at the other person or that they are going into one of the four F's, so one of the trauma responses that people often have flight, fight, freeze or fawn.

So it's tricky with eye contact, but then there are lots of different ways, there are also lots of other different forms of body language. So there's how people are breathing. You might get that sense of if there's a sharp intake of breath from someone, you might have done something that was a bit close to the edge of non-consensual or you could bring in more consent there. If someone is giving a big, relaxed sigh, or you might feel that their heart rate is slowly increasing in a way that might feel pleasurable. That's a sign of consent.

But then people sometimes say, well, visible signs of arousal, people sometimes mistake that for consent, but actually, sometimes people can be physically aroused, and that is not consensual. I'm getting into very complicated territories here. Things like hand movements and hand gestures. So if someone puts their hand on your chest and pushes you back gently it might mean slow down a little bit or just give me a pause, or I just need to stop.

If someone's pulling you towards them, it might mean that they want more. If someone's moving your hand in a different place, it might mean your hand is in the wrong place, or they want your hand in the right place. If you're getting tapped on the shoulder, it might mean, okay, I've had enough. Or it might mean, if someone's placing their hand on your shoulder, it might mean that's absolutely just the right thing. Carry on doing that.

I'm trying to say all of this in the least sexy way possible. I'm trying to make this the opposite of sexual. So there are lots of things that we can be paying attention to during a sexual encounter. But the way I teach this is by thinking about consensual greetings. So thinking about how we can greet people consensually. So we can greet people, so, again, with greetings, there are very strong social scripts about how we're supposed to do a greeting.

So in the U.K. we have the handshake, which is the most conventional greeting that you suppose you should do. It's right hand, up and down, medium firmness, 2 to 3 seconds, minimal eye contact and you're done. That's what you should do for a handshake. That's the script for a handshake. Some people happen to like that. For some people who happen to like that kind of handshake, it's fine. For others, it might not feel that great. It might feel too firm. Or it might feel a bit too formal or it's not what they really want from a greeting.

But also, if you're paying attention to the script rather than the other person, what are you really doing? You're doing something scripted. You're not tuning into yourself or the other person, it's less consensual.

But then a more consensual way of doing a greeting, like you were saying before might be to say, okay, well, what kind of greeting are you up for? I do this just to annoy people but a handshake, a fist bump, elbow bump as we are all doing now, or a foot bump or a non-contact greeting, and then talking about how you want to do each of those things.

So for a handshake, do you want to dry your hands first? Do you want to go left, hand or right hand if they're available to you? How firm do you want it to be on a scale of 0 is the least firm possible handshake, like the wet fish, and 10 is bone crushingly hard. How long do you want it to last for? How much eye contact do we want?

And so that is one way of doing consensual handshakes, too. Bringing in more choice, more abundance of different choices, giving each other the freedom to choose. But sometimes that might feel very tricky. We don't have the vocabulary to negotiate. We might not know exactly what we want. Some people say it kills the mood, or it's just too awkward.

So the third approach that I talk about in the book, like the third handshaker's approach, third handshake approach is to consider both of these. To consider the script we have for greetings, but also to consider picking up some information from the other person about what they might not want, for example, from a greeting. And then slowing down and really paying attention to everything that happens during a greeting.

So as your hand connects, are you adjusting for the firmness before the hand even connects? Are you noticing which hand comes out and how it's coming out? Is a hand coming out with an open hand or in the shape of a fist bump? Is it the left or the right hand, if they're available to you? How hard is the initial connection? How do you adjust to the firmness that the other person might want? How do you know when to disconnect? Does the other person let go before you do? Are they smiling? Are they emitting other signs, such as, nice to meet you or this feels good, kind of thing?

And so we can do that with greetings. And this is the thing that I teach young people and adults, too, is that we are able to do with greetings. We have to rely on quite a lot of things going on. We have to really understand that there's a lot going on in that moment, but to slow everything down and to really pay attention to all of this and to pay attention to what's going on to you, the other person, and the power relations that you have with each other. And also all the scripts that exist around the thing that you're doing is the key to enable more consent to happen.

As you can see, it's pretty complex. Consent is a lot more than just yes or no. And the reason why I want to complicate it like this, and obviously I've written about, my book is for teenagers, so it's written in much more simple language than I'm using at the moment. But the reason why is that young people are sick of being told about how consent is really important, but never being given any informational skills about how to actually do it. Or even any practice at what consent might feel like.

And so that's the thing that really frustrates young people. They're just being lectured that it's really important that they should do it, but they're not being empowered to do any of it by being given any skills or practice. So that's the kind of motivation for all of this and why I'm trying to complicate it in this way and trying to get into the nitty gritty of how we might practice consent with others.

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:36:55]**

Well, that answers the question I was about to ask you about complication, but it's interesting as well that you're talking about greetings and consent, because I guess with COVID, I live in France. So in France, a traditional greeting is cheek to cheek, kiss on each cheek. Cheek to cheek twice in the area I'm in but different parts of France is a different number and that's a whole other question. And people sometimes get awkward or don't know which cheek to start with. Or some people kiss with their lips on the cheek, which can feel uncomfortable. So it's a whole complicated world, la bise, as it's known.

But with COVID, that's changed and I'm seeing how people are automatically implementing a lot of what you're talking about. So it sounds very complicated what you're saying. And I'd love to hear what you have to say to people who are like, this all sounds way too complicated. What's the point in all of that? But I'm noticing how when people greet now, when I meet people for the first time in a while or for the first time ever, there's much more tentativeness, checking in with each other, like, what are we doing?

And as you say, it's a mixture of verbal and nonverbal communication. When someone arrives and is leaning away from you and waving at you straight away, you're not going to run up to them and embrace them. But sometimes it's a checking, often it's a what are we doing? It's how it's initiated.

So, again, it's like you're talking about, it's that collective consent rather than one person saying, this is what we're doing or what do you want to do? It's like, what are we doing? Are we giving each other la bise, the kiss on each cheek? Are we shaking hands? Are we hugging? Are we not touching? You know, and it makes sense when there's, because of the pandemic, but it's interesting that that was never considered before.

So what do you have to say to people who are saying, listening and thinking, this just sounds like a lot of effort and is really complicated. And where do I even begin? And what's the point?

### **Justin Hancock - [00:38:57]**

Well, first of all, you should buy my book. *Can We Talk About Consent?*, people love it, it's very clear, but it's complicated and it's challenging. And I think that's good.

But the thing you're articulating there is a very, very good example of what I'm talking about. We're all doing this all of the time. We're all doing consensual practices or trying to figure out consensual practices.

Like how many of us, with someone else, sat on the sofa and looked at Netflix and been massively overwhelmed with all of your choices? And what do you do, what kind of questions do you ask each other about what it is you're going to choose to watch on TV?

It's like comedy, so you follow the categories comedy, drama, thriller, documentary. Which of those do we fancy? Okay. Are there any of these people in any of these films you really don't want to see? Anyone that you've canceled or anyone you just don't like? Or is there a film that you want to go back and see again? Or do you want to see something brand new?

We're able to do this for some things. And your example of post COVID greetings is another one. It's that there is a recognition that, okay, wow, that has been a social script for this all this time. It does feel like there's this powerful urge to greet someone. It really feels like we should do it. We could also ask ourselves, where's that coming from? Why do we have that? What's at stake here? Where have we learned this from? Why can't we just not have a greeting?

So there is this kind of thing of, we have to do something normal, but we don't know what this normal is. We have to establish a new normal of doing a different kind of greeting. I think what people have been trying to do is to find a new script that they can do where they then can agree on a script and then no longer have to talk about it.

So these are the kinds of interactions that we're doing anyway. I think the job for me is to be able to point these things out and say, look, if you can do it for choosing what to watch on TV, you can do it for sex, or you can do it for what relationship models you might want to have. Or you can do it for how you, any other aspects of your life.

But also, I think the crucial thing as well is that we also have to be able to do this, this is not just about kind of, the way I've been talking so far is that this is being about individuals making choices to do things with other individuals, as if these individuals don't exist in society and culture. And we all have different levels of freedoms to choose.

And so we have to really take this into account, too. To further complicate everything that I'm saying is that, yeah, the freedom to choose isn't fairly distributed. So this is the other thing that we have to bring into all of this, too.

### **Jaia Bristow**

So is this when you're talking about consent in terms of, for example, social justice and political environments?

And do you want to say more about that, then about this freedom to choose?

## Justin Hancock - [00:42:04]

Yeah. So let's go with, let's link this to the interpersonal. If a man is going on a date with a woman in the classic heterosexual experience, we have to take into account the messages that men are given around masculinity and messages women are given around femininity.

Men are talk from an early age, and it's embedded, it's embedded through as frat culture that men are supposed to be active and supposed to be interested in sex and supposed to be the ones who take the lead and know what they're doing and be confident.

Women are supposed to be meek and supposed to be passive and supposed to wait to be asked. And that's what women are supposed to do. Obviously, I despise all of this. It's wrong. My entire life is about tackling all of this and challenging it, but we can't escape that these are the messages that we have around us.

So that means in any given situation between a man and a woman there may well be some differences in power around the awkwardness around negotiating a snog, for example, or the expectation that someone's going to do the asking first. Added to that, all of the messages that men get around being interested in sex are very different to all the messages that women might get around being interested in sex.

So there is a further stigmatization around women potentially asking for what they want from sex and relationships. So that means that, as well as navigating that, as well as men needing to do more work around learning how to ask, learning how to give options, learning how to empower the other person around having the freedom to choose. Learning that it's okay to just not, creating conditions where lovely things can happen with collective agency with other people. Men need to do their work there as well.

We also have to remember that we have to do this work politically. We have to bear in mind that that freedom to choose is also different, unfairly distributed at different levels, too. So many people with disabilities just are not given the same freedoms to choose than other people.

Like, if you are, again, I'm going to talk about pizza. If you're going on a date with someone to a pizza place and they don't have a disabled loo, if they don't have disable access. If you're going to a pizza place with your same sex partner, can you hold hands as you go in and out? Like, do you feel comfortable having public displays of affection? If you're going to a pizza place and the owner is racist or known to be racist, do you feel like as a black person or a person of color that you can feel fairly treated?

So that means that there is this broader work to do. There's broader political work to do, which is to tackle all of these things. So sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and that's a really important part of it.

But also I think here that there is something around how we can think about consent in the ways that we organize and in the ways that we do this kind of work. How do we bring the things that we can do, the things that we know we can't do, and the things that we might be able to do with other people in ways where collectively we have more agency and we're more able to do things? How can we see where we have the ability to do something that somebody else might not, and then working with our shared interests of building a better society, can we do this kind of work?

So content is important in actually doing this political organizing, in doing anything around BLM or Me Too or Everyone's Invited or Climate Justice. So that work in organizing, literally, I think, is really important.

But also that we can't simply just say, okay, we will. All we have to do is just behaving as consensual individuals trying to have consensual interactions with one another is important. But it can't be the

whole thing, like, we have to be able to do all this other work to even out the injustices in order to enable more people to have more choice and more freedom.

And that's the ultimate work there. And that's where the book ends, really. It's about how do we empower each other in order, on an interpersonal level, but also a broader social level, to even things up? To give more people more freedom to choose? And that means not necessarily some people having less choice in order for other people to have more choice. It's, how can we all have more choices? How can we work together to give each other more freedom to choose?

I'm speaking very broadly and grandly here, but I think it's just really important that we have to see this as this social, political, cultural thing, too, rather than it just being about individuals being, like, kinder and nicer to each other, which is also what we need to do.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:47:21]**

Brilliant. I think that's so important. So thank you for bringing that in.

I think we're almost out of time, but before we end and you tell us how we can find out more about you. If you were to sum up, what are the main takeaways you'd like people to have from this talk?

**Justin Hancock**

Consent is not just about yes or no, it's about the freedom to choose and trying to empower each other to also have their freedom to choose. And it's about your own agency but it's also how you can have collective agency with other people and the possibilities for that.

And we can always have more consent. So we can always think of more ways to give people more choice and to empower ourselves and other people to have more choices in the things that we might do with other people, as well as the things we might do for ourselves.

**Jaia Bristow**

That's brilliant.

Thank you so much, Justin.

So for people who want to find out more about you, where can they do that?

**Justin Hancock**

Well, they can go to my website for young people, [bishuk.com](http://bishuk.com)

One of the leading sex and relationships advice websites for young people.

You can also visit, if you're interested in a podcast for adults you could go to my *Culture Sex Relationships* podcast so you can find that at [soundcloud.com/culturesexrelationships](https://soundcloud.com/culturesexrelationships)  
Or in your podcast app just search *Culture Sex Relationships*, and it'll come up hopefully.

And you can find me on Twitter [@bishtraining](https://twitter.com/bishtraining) if you want to talk to me on Twitter.

**Jaia Bristow**

Brilliant. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**Justin Hancock**

No worries.