Rough Sex

Information and guidance on understanding, responding to, and reducing the risks associated with harmful rough sex.

Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa

THE LIGHT PROJECT

Contents

Introduction 1

01. Understanding harmful rough sex 2

- 'Rough sex' terms and definitions 3
- Sociocultural contexts 4
- Risks and harms 5
- Consent, harm-recognition, and help-seeking 7

02. Engaging effectively 10

03. Harm prevention & response 13

- Harm prevention 14
- Harm reduction 17
- Harm management 19

Support services 23

This Guidance was developed by Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa and The Light Project, August 2026.
We are grateful to the many services that reviewed the Guidance, and extend special thanks to Dr Samantha Keene, Professor Nicola Gavey, Dr Hala Nasr, Sandra Dickson, and Dr Clare Healy for their significant contributions.
All quotes in the Guidance are from young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Guidance Scope

The Guidance is primarily intended for health practitioners working with young people aged 16–28 years. It focuses on rough sex occurring within sexual relationships, while recognising that these experiences can intersect with sexual assault and intimate partner violence.

The Guidance is intended to complement, rather than replace workplace policies and practice, including disclosure pathways. Sexual strangulation can also occur within rough sex, but iit s not a specific focus of this resource, nor is rough sex within kink/BDSM contexts.

Introduction

Rough sex has become an increasingly common practice within contemporary sexual culture. Widespread portrayals of rough sex across online environments, alongside broader changes in the sexual landscape, are shaping new sexual norms and expectations – influencing how many young people understand, negotiate, and experience rough sex.

Alongside these shifts, services across Aotearoa are seeing an increasing number of young people presenting with complex and confusing experiences of harmful rough sex. This Guidance has therefore been developed to support practitioners to better understand, respond to, and reduce the risks and harms associated with rough sex.

It provides practical, youth-centred, and evidence-informed guidance across three sequential steps: understanding harmful rough sex, engaging effectively, and preventing and responding to harm.

01 Understanding harmful rough sex

Building knowledge of contemporary rough sex terminology, risks and impacts and sociocultural contexts.

02 Effective engagement

Positive, shame-free approaches to support safe, respectful, and mana-enhancing rough sex conversations and care.

03 Harm prevention and response

Effective prevention, harm reduction, and harm management.

01. Understanding harmful rough sex

Experiences of harmful rough sex can be complex. While some young people engage in consensual and informed rough sex, others may experience pressure, distress, fear, injury, shame, or other forms of harm. Harmful experiences may also involve confusion around consent, difficulties recognising or making sense of harm, minimisation of harm, and reluctance to seek support.

A broader understanding of rough sex terms, contexts, risks and complexities can help practitioners provide informed, non-judgmental, and relevant care and support.

Inside

Rough sex terms and definitions 3

Understanding how rough sex is defined, described, and understood within youth sexual culture.

Sociocultural contexts 4

Understanding the social, cultural, and gender contexts that can shape young people's understandings and experiences of rough sex.

Risks and impacts 5

Recognising the potential risks and impacts of rough sex through a hauora (wellbeing) lens.

Consent, harm recognition, and help-seeking 7

Understanding why harmful experiences may be difficult to recognise, make sense of, or disclose.

‘Rough sex’ terms and definitions

The term *rough sex* is commonly used to describe a broad range of sexual acts and experiences. There is no clear clinical or legal definition, and its meaning can vary significantly between individuals and contexts.

Important considerations when working with the term rough sex:

Rough sex refers to a spectrum of sexual acts.
These can include spanking, biting, hitting, hair pulling, name-calling, forceful sex, sexual choking/strangulation, aggressive anal or oral sex, gagging, and other physically intense acts. Experiences can range from mutually negotiated activities to dangerous practices, or to sexual assault.

Rough sex means different things to different people.
Understandings of rough sex vary widely in terms of acts, intent, intensity, consent, and impact, and differences may only become apparent once rough sex occurs. Some young people may also not describe rough or forceful sex as rough sex when they perceive it as just ‘everyday’ sex.

Rough sex can describe consensual and non-consensual experiences.
An experience may also shift from consensual to non-consensual when boundaries change, or where there is fear, pain, unexpected sexual acts, or physical injury.

Sexual choking/strangulation is commonly considered part of rough sex.
Young people typically use terms such as choking, neck holding, or breath play, and are often unfamiliar with the medical term non-fatal strangulation (NFS). If asked about ‘NFS’, they may not associate it with choking. Despite involving the same risks, sexual choking is often considered different because of its sexual intent and the perceived belief that it can occur more safely through using less pressure or holding a different area of the neck.

Context often shapes how young people understand rough sex.
Factors such as relationship dynamics, prior expectations, trust, care, communication, level of force, and consent can all influence how a young person may perceive and define rough sex.

“I never knew that rough sex had a name because that’s all I’ve ever known from my first sexual encounter at 15. There’s a name for vanilla sex, though.” Female, 17 yrs.

Sociocultural contexts

Rough sex doesn't occur in isolation. Social, cultural, and gender influences can shape how young people understand, experience, and navigate rough sex. Recognising these influences can support more informed and effective prevention and response.

The mainstreaming of 'rough sex'

Rough sex has become an increasingly common practice within contemporary sexual culture. Depictions of rough sex are now widespread across pornography, social media, and streaming platforms, where it is often portrayed as normal, desirable, pleasurable, and a marker of sexual confidence, adventurousness, and agency. The mainstreaming and eroticisation of rough sex within these contexts have contributed to its integration into youth sexual culture, with international research suggesting approximately 40–70% of young people have experienced some form of rough sex.

Motivations and influences

Young people engage in rough sex for a variety of reasons. Some describe motivations such as curiosity, perceived pleasure, and dominance play. However, many also identify broader social and cultural influences, including peer pressure, sexual norms shaped by online environments, partner expectations, beliefs about what is normal or desirable, and concerns about being perceived as "vanilla" if they don't participate.

Despite widespread media portrayals of rough sex, the risks associated with it are seldom depicted online, discussed with adults, or included in relationships and sexuality education.

As a result, many young people learn about rough sex from peers or online, reinforcing the social norms and expectations that shape their understanding of the practice.

Broader gender context and concerns

Rough sex should also always be considered within the broader continuum of gendered sexual norms, power dynamics, and sexual harm. Women, both cis and trans, transfeminine people, and, in depictions of sex between men, trans men, transmasculine people and more feminine-presenting men, are disproportionately targeted in both online depictions and offline experiences of rough sex; mirroring and reinforcing broader gendered socialisation patterns.

As rough sex becomes increasingly common within contemporary sexual culture, aggression may also be minimised or reframed as "just sex", blurring the boundaries between consensual sexual experiences and sexual harm. Within intimate partner violence and sexual assault, the term rough sex may also be used to sanitise or justify sexually violent behaviour, with acts of sexual assault reframed or defended as "rough sex".

"You think that you have to do it because it's in porn, and well, yeah, everyone just does it." ***Male, 18yrs.***

Risks and harms

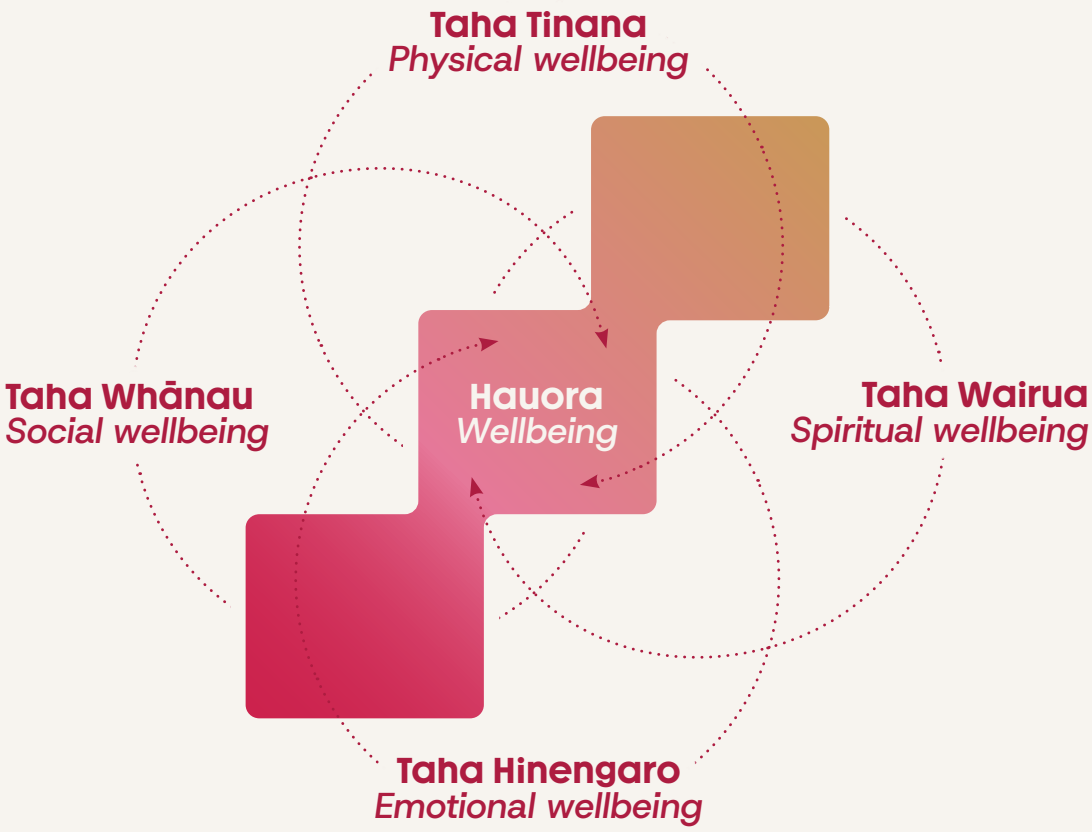
When rough sex occurs outside a safe, informed, and fully consensual context, it can result in a range of risks and harms. These harms may be immediate and/or long-term, can occur with and without physical injury, and may occur even when consent was given.

The context in which rough sex occurs is critical to how it's experienced. Factors such as power, age, and gender dynamics; prior agreement; the presence or absence of coercion, force, and fear, trust, care and communication; social context; and the ability to withdraw consent can all shape a young person's experience of rough sex.

Harm is more likely when rough sex is unwanted, unexpected, frightening, and when a young person feels unable to stop what is happening.

Impacts on hauora

There are a wide range of impacts that harmful rough sex can have on a person's wellbeing, which can be understood through the concept of 'hauora'. Hauora is embedded in Te Ao Māori and offers a holistic approach to understanding wellbeing, encompassing four interconnected areas:



Taha Tinana
Physical wellbeing

Rough sex can cause a range of physical harms from acts such as forceful, repeated, or rough vaginal, oral, or anal sex; genital, facial, or head slapping; punching or other forceful blows; anal fisting; smothering or blocking the airways; and aggressive oral sex or gagging.

Injuries can include genital and anal tears; musculoskeletal and internal abdominal injuries; bruising and bite marks; and head and facial injuries. Longer-term harms can include ongoing genital, musculoskeletal, or pelvic pain; pain during or after sex; and internal scarring and functional impairment.

Sexual strangulation during rough sex can cause headaches, neck pain, bruising, bloodshot eyes, tinnitus, voice changes, loss of consciousness, and neurological injury, and carries a risk of serious injury or death.

Taha Wairua
Spiritual wellbeing

Experiences of rough sex may not sit well with some people's personal or cultural beliefs about sex and relationships, or with the spiritual or whānau values that are important to them. This can affect their sense of dignity, mana, confidence, spiritual wellbeing and self-identity.

Taha Hinengaro
Emotional wellbeing

Rough sex that is unwanted, unexpected, frightening, painful, and/or causes injury, can cause significant emotional harm. This includes feelings of distress, shame, degradation, dehumanisation, triggering, or broader distress and trauma symptoms.

Frequent sexual choking/strangulation can be linked with ongoing anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Emotional harm may also be compounded where experiences are minimised, trivialised, normalised, or difficult to verbalise.

Taha Whānau
Social wellbeing

Unwanted and harmful rough sex can impact a person's sense of trust, safety, connection, and security in relationships with partners, whānau, and the broader community.

There may also be legal implications for the person leading the rough sex if it occurs without specific consent and without an honest belief that their sexual partner consented to it. The relevant laws that may apply to unwanted sexual encounters can be found here.

"They have rough sex and then are confused and call us and say, 'But that's what's in porn – that's what's normal, and that's what you do.' But then they say... 'It felt just like assault though' "

Youth helpline staff

Consent, harm-recognition, and help-seeking

Experiences of harm associated with rough sex are often complex. Confusion and uncertainty about consent, difficulties acknowledging or articulating harmful experiences, and broader sociocultural influences that reinforce rough sex as expected, accepted, or pleasurable can all act as barriers to recognising harm and seeking help.

Understanding these complexities can help practitioners respond in ways that validate young people's experiences, support their hauora, and reduce the risk of ongoing harm.

Consent challenges

Consent in the context of rough sex is often complex. While, in principle, consenting to rough sex should prevent harm, young people report that in practice, harmful rough sex experiences are often accompanied by confusion and uncertainty about consent.

Even where varying forms of consent are given, a young person can feel that rough sex was not safe, wanted, or freely chosen.
For example, when:

non-specific consent is given for sex – and one partner assumes this implies consent for rough sex, despite the other partner not wanting or expecting it;

consent is given for rough sex – but partners have different understandings of what constitutes rough sex, and/or don't discuss specific acts, limits, or intensity. This can result in acts that are unexpected, unwanted, or harmful;

consent is given for rough sex – but it becomes painful, frightening, or distressing, and a partner feels too afraid, 'prude/vanilla', or ashamed to withdraw.

Consenting to rough sex should also be understood within the context of contemporary youth sexual culture and through the lens of 'social coercion'.

Young people may engage in rough sex without explicit pressure yet still be influenced by dominant sociocultural norms. As rough sex is increasingly reinforced as 'normal', 'pleasurable' and 'acceptable', young people may feel pressure to engage, limiting their perceived sense of choice or ability to negotiate rough sex even when it isn't wanted or enjoyed. As a result, they may consent to rough sex, while still experiencing it as unwanted, harmful, or distressing.

"I didn't explicitly say yes ... I never said no – the fact I didn't feel I could say anything was not because I was scared of him, but because I felt pressured by societal expectations, norms, pressures." Woman, 24yrs

Harm-recognition

Some young people may minimise or normalise harmful rough sex experiences, or struggle to recognise or articulate harm, particularly when rough sex is perceived as normal, expected, or desirable, or when some form of consent was given. Acknowledging a harmful experience may also occur at a later time, through reflection, conversations with peers or counsellors, or if trauma responses such as fear, distress, or triggering emerge.

Scripts impacting harm recognition

The following are examples of common scripts used after harmful rough sex that can minimise unwanted experiences and make them harder to acknowledge:

"It's my fault, I didn't say no."
(When consent is perceived as 'not resisting' or 'going along' with sex)

"I wasn't clear enough about what I did or didn't want"
(When boundaries or unwanted acts aren't discussed)

"Well, I consented to sex"
(When specific consent for rough sex isn't perceived to be needed)

"That's just what queer sex is now" "I went to the sauna for sex, so it's my fault"
(When rough sex is linked to harmful stereotypes)

"He said this is what's normal and if I loved him, I'd do it."
(When there's sexual coercion in the relationship)

"It's my fault, I'm too vanilla" (When blame is internalised due to sexual norms)

"This is just what people do"
(When rough sex is perceived as normal or expected)

"They would never harm me on purpose"
(When rough sex occurs in an established relationship)

"I can't quite remember how this happened, and can't tell anyone because of the drugs."
(When rough sex occurs alongside sexual pleasure enhancing substances)

"How did I find myself here?"
(When rough sex 'just happens' without communication)

"I was kind of just persuaded into thinking that vanilla was really bad and the idea that you have to have some sort of like rough acts in it when it's not really the case." ***Woman, 21yrs***

Barriers to help-seeking

Confusion around consent and difficulties recognising harm can make disclosure and help-seeking more difficult following harmful rough sex. There may also be additional barriers related to a young person's circumstances, relationships, and social context. For example:

When rough sex occurs within an established sexual relationship

Some young people may minimise their experiences, have difficulty acknowledging harm, or be reluctant to disclose concerns because it occurred with a trusted partner.

When there's increased vulnerability

Some young people with adverse childhood experiences, autism, disabilities, or additional support needs may be more vulnerable to coercion and/or face additional challenges communicating or seeking help for harmful rough sex experiences.

When harmful rough sex occurs among Takatāpui and Rainbow people

Rainbow young people may already experience stigma or judgement relating to their sexuality or gender, which can create additional barriers to disclosure. Some may also believe their experiences do not fit legal, societal, or stereotypical understandings of sexual violence or that they won't be taken seriously.

Sexual violence between women can also be minimised due to misconceptions that violence between women is less harmful. Together, these factors can contribute to fears of further judgement and discrimination, making help-seeking for harmful rough sex difficult.

Understanding these barriers and creating safe, non-judgmental, and validating spaces can help influence whether a young person recognises harm and feels able to seek support.

"I didn't really know how to react ... I was very very enamoured by him, and I guess I felt like he might think I was prudish or boring if I got him to stop and I kind of didn't say anything about it afterwards." *Woman, 24yrs*

02. Effective engagement

How practitioners engage around rough sex matters. Some young people may feel uncomfortable discussing rough sex or seeking support because of uncertainty, social or cultural norms, shame, or fear of being judged.

Taking a positive, shame-free, and empowering approach can help build the trust and rapport needed for young people to speak openly about their experiences, receive the health information and support they may need, and strengthen their sexual agency.

Inside

Consider the context 11

Take a shame-free approach 11

Recognise diverse experiences 12

Encourage critical thinking and sexual agency 12

Be culturally safe 12

Engagement approach tips

There are many ways to engage with young people about rough sex. Conversations may arise naturally through disclosures or specific presentations, or practitioners may raise the topic proactively through routine or relevant opportunities, such as during safe sex and wellbeing conversations. Creating opportunities to discuss rough sex can help minimise associated risks and support young people who may not otherwise disclose experiences of harm.

The following tips can help create a safe, informed, and mana-enhancing approach to rough sex conversations and care.

Consider the context

How rough sex is experienced by young people depends on factors such as the relationship, expectations, level of force, and the presence or absence of communication, consent, or care.

Harmful experiences often involve confusion around consent, boundaries, or harm. Young people can consent to rough sex and still experience fear, injury, or regret, and may minimise these experiences because they consented, or because they view rough sex as "normal".

Tips:

- Consider the unique context of each person's experience.
- Validate harmful experiences to help young people recognise harm and accept support.
- Focus on the impact of their experience, not just the acts that occurred.
- Avoid focusing on the presence or absence of injury.

Take a shame-free approach

Young people may feel hesitant about discussing rough sex or seeking care for harmful experiences, due to uncertainty, shame, or fear about being misunderstood.

A shame-free, positive, and informed approach helps build trust and rapport, so young people feel comfortable discussing their experiences and seeking support.

Tips:

- Use neutral and non-judgemental language.
- Be empathetic, positive, and curious.
- Reflect on your own views about rough sex and how these might impact your care.
- Use terms that are familiar and relevant to the young person.
- Avoid assumptions about partners, types of sex, or power dynamics within rough sex.
- Be mindful that Takatāpui and Rainbow young people may face additional barriers to discussing harmful experiences. See here.

Recognise diverse experiences

Young people's experiences of harmful rough sex often present differently.

Some young people experience significant physical injury with little emotional distress, while others can experience profound emotional harm with little or no physical injury. Rough sex can also affect different aspects of a young person's hauora, including their physical, emotional, social, and/or spiritual wellbeing.

Tips:

- Listen to a young person's individual experiences and perspectives, and be guided by their presentation and needs at the time.
- Avoid making assumptions about what constitutes 'harm'.
- Model respect for diversity and adapt your approach to meet individual needs.
- Takatāpui, Rainbow, and disabled young people, may face barriers to accessing services. Offer tailored support, such as a choice of practitioners or relevant services where available.

Encourage critical thinking and sexual agency

Social and sexual norms, pressures, and expectations often shape young people's understandings of rough sex.

Knowledge gaps about rough sex are common. Most young people learn about it through peers, social media, or porn, and may not have discussed it outside of these contexts.

Tips:

- Encourage informed decision-making and sexual agency through building knowledge of rough sex risks and myths, and the social influences and pressures shaping sexual beliefs.
- Reinforce that sexual experiences should be consensual, respectful, and pleasurable, and fit with a young person's values and ideas.
- Encourage the importance of developing personal sexual preferences and boundaries that are informed, feel safe, and made without pressure. (see pg. 4)

Be culturally safe

Culture shapes how young people understand, experience, and talk about sex and relationships, including rough sex.

Any rough sex conversations or care should be culturally safe and mana enhancing.

Tips:

- Create spaces where young people can engage without racism or discrimination.
- Be mindful that experiences of racism and culturally unsafe care can affect trust, disclosure, and engagement.
- Be responsive to a young person's cultural identity and values. Consider referral to kaupapa Māori or Pasifika services and learn more about whakawhanaungatanga and culturally safe frameworks and care.

03. Harm prevention & response

The increasing prevalence of rough sex within youth sexual culture, its diverse contexts, and the wide-ranging impacts of harmful rough sex require a comprehensive and integrated approach spanning prevention, harm reduction, and harm management.

These three areas are overlapping rather than linear, and the approach taken will depend on the young person's unique experience, context, and needs.

Inside

Harm prevention 14

Preventing harm by building critical thinking, supporting informed decision-making, and strengthening sexual agency.

Harm reduction 17

Reducing the risks associated with rough sex through strategies that promote consent, communication, care, and caution.

Harm management 19

Responding to harmful experiences through informed, supportive, and mana-enhancing care.

Using the response guidance:

Read Guidance Steps 1 and 2 to ensure care is informed, relevant, and culturally safe.

Work within your role and scope of practice, with responses complementing, not replacing, workplace policies and pathways. If disclosures of harm occur, follow workplace disclosure procedures.

Harm prevention

A harm prevention response to rough sex is part of broader sexual wellbeing and safe sex education.

It supports all young people, whether or not they're engaging in rough sex, to:

- develop critical thinking around rough sex, including norms, pressures and expectations
- strengthen sexual agency and autonomy
- make informed decisions that reduce the risk of harmful rough sex experiences.

Conversation and question prompts

The following prompts can help support harm prevention conversations. They should be tailored to each young person's unique circumstances and needs and used as a guide, not a checklist.

Introducing rough sex

We talk about rough sex as a routine part of sexual wellbeing care to help keep people safe and informed.

Would it be okay if we talked about this?

Knowledge of rough sex

Rough sex can mean different things to different people. The term can describe a range of different sexual acts like choking, spanking, biting, hitting, name-calling, forced sex, aggressive oral sex, or slapping. It can describe acts that are playful and consensual, acts that may be considered sexual assault, and a range of acts in between.

What do you know about rough sex? Where do you learn about it?

What does the term mean to you? What term do you use?

Harms to wellbeing (hauora)

Rough sex, by nature, is more 'risky' sex – so learning about the risks can help us make informed and safe decisions. When rough sex occurs outside a safe, informed, and fully consensual context, it can impact our hauora (wellbeing), including the following harms:

Tinana (physical): Genital, facial, internal, abdominal, or musculoskeletal injuries.

Wairua (spiritual): Impacts on dignity, mana, confidence and spiritual wellbeing.

Hinengaro (emotional): Feelings of distress, shame, degradation, fear, confusion, or being triggered.

Whānau (social): Impacts on trust, safety, and connection in relationships. There can also be legal consequences if serious physical harm occurs.

What have you heard about the risks with rough sex? Would you like me to share these with you? Do you have any questions about these risks?

Conversation and question prompts

Choking/sexual strangulation

Some people practice sexual 'choking' as part of rough sex. Choking is termed 'sexual strangulation' and is particularly risky, as there's no safe way to choke someone.

Is sexual choking something you've come across or have heard about?

Would you like some more information on it? Do you have any questions about it?

Sexual views and ethics

It's common to see rough sex online now. The more aggressive acts are usually directed at women and younger or more feminine or vulnerable-looking partners, and it looks like they enjoy it. In real life, many people don't enjoy sex that includes aggressive acts.

Just because it's common online doesn't mean we have to like or try rough sex. Part of exploring what you want and like sexually includes thinking about how the type of sex you want fits with your own views about sex, pleasure, gender, and relationships.

Have you thought about how rough sex sits with your own sexual ideas and views?

What helps you decide what kind of sex feels right for you?

Consent and safety

Consent with rough sex needs to be very clear. Some people think consent general to sex includes rough sex acts – even if that isn't their partner's understanding. This can cause unexpected, unwanted, and harmful sexual experiences. To avoid unwanted rough sex, talking about sexual expectations beforehand is important.

Do you generally discuss what type of sex is expected before agreeing to sex?

What does consent look like with rough sex in general i.e. do people ask for specific consent for it?

Would you feel confident talking to a partner about expectations before sex?

If not, what are the barriers, and would you like some support with this?

Conversation and question prompts

Social pressure

Some people describe feeling pressure to try rough sex from peers, from partners, or from social and online influences. Takatāpui, rainbow, trans, and gender-diverse people may feel particular pressure because of stereotypes and expectations. Everyone has a right to decide the type of sex they want and like – without any pressure.

Have you ever felt pressure to try rough sex or other types of sex you're not sure about?

If so, what do you think is influencing that pressure – and what are your thoughts about that?

How might you navigate any pressure to try rough sex? Do you need any help with this?

Responding to concerns (if appropriate)

Sometimes discussing rough sex can raise some confusing feelings or trigger memories of unwanted past experiences. If you or someone you know has had a sexual experience that felt confusing, pressured, or unwanted, we are here to support you. You can also come back and talk about this again if questions come up later.

Do you have any questions or thoughts about anything we've talked about?

Would you like any more information on services that offer support with unwanted experiences?

Follow-up information, referral, and support

Conversations about rough sex can raise the need for further information, support, or specialised care. Depending on the person's experiences and needs, this may include providing relevant health information, connecting them with appropriate support, or referring to specialist services. Useful information, resources, and support services include:

- **Rough sex and sexual strangulation information for young people:** Rough Sex and Sexual Choking
- **Sexual wellbeing rough sex information:** Rough sex
- **Clinical advice and support relating to sexual strangulation:** MEDSAC
- **General sexual health information and services:** Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa
- **Information and support for Takatāpui and Rainbow young people:** Kahukura
- **Support following harmful sexual experiences:** RPE Directory
- **Disclosures of harm:** Follow relevant workplace disclosure policies, procedures, and referral pathways.

See page 23 for more support services

Harm reduction

A harm reduction approach supports young people engaging in rough sex to:

- build skills, knowledge, and sexual agency around rough sex risks
- discuss, reflect, and problem-solve using the 4Cs model, to reduce potential rough sex risks.

Conversation and question prompts

The following prompts can help support harm reduction conversations. They should be tailored to each young person's unique circumstances and needs and used as a guide, not a checklist.

Starting the conversation

We talk about rough sex as a routine part of sexual wellbeing education. Because rough sex is riskier sex, understanding the possible harms can help you keep safe and informed.

Would you be comfortable if we talked about the possible risks with rough sex, and how to reduce them?

Exploring harms and risks

The type of sex we have is a personal choice – and all of us deserve pleasurable and harm-free sex. Rough sex can cause a range of harms that are important to be aware of including physical injury and harm to our emotional wellbeing. In some cases, there can also be legal risks.

What's your understanding of the risks with rough sex?

Would you like to discuss these? (See risks pg 14)

Exploring safety and consent

There are some simple things that can help reduce the risks associated with rough sex including ensuring consent, communication, care, and caution before, during, and after rough sex.

Would you like me to share some tips on what consent, communication, care, and caution look like with rough sex? (See full 4 C's prompts on next page)

Responding to concerns (if appropriate)

Some people reflect on rough sex experiences and realise afterwards that what happened was unexpected, confusing, unwanted, or un-consented. If you've had an experience that you're not sure about, there are services here to support you.

Has anything come up during our conversation that you'd like further information or support with?

Do you have any questions about anything we've talked about?

The 4C's: consent, communication, care, and caution

01 Communication

Clear communication about rough sex can help lower risks. This includes communicating what you both want and enjoy; your expectations, boundaries and limits; and how to indicate if you change your mind or want to stop.

What does communication look like for you with rough sex?

Do you agree on what's going to happen, and what feels safe, comfortable, and respectful?

How do you communicate boundaries and if you don't want or like some acts?

02 Consent

Specific, clear, specific, and enthusiastic consent is essential with rough sex. FRIES provides a helpful framework for consent, which should be:

Freely given: no pressure, guilt, or forcing

Reversible: anyone can change their mind at any time

Informed: everyone knows what they are agreeing to, including the risks

Enthusiastic: everyone is 100% into it and didn't consent while drunk or high

Specific: there's consent for each sexual act and each new time rough sex occurs. Consenting to sex in general doesn't automatically include rough sex and not saying "no", isn't consenting either.

What are some things you consider when consenting to rough sex?

How might you know if a partner consents to rough sex, or what types of sex acts they want or expect?

03 Care

Caring for your partner before, during, and after rough sex is an important way to reduce rough sex risks. Here's some tips:

Before: Agree on consent, expectations, safety (condoms, lube, etc.), and only do what's pleasurable for everyone.

During: Start gently. Introduce one act at a time. Check in before new acts. Give opportunities to stop.

After: Make sure all sexual acts felt safe, respectful, and enjoyable.

How can/or do you and a partner/s show care before, during, and after rough sex?

Do you have any questions or concerns around care during rough sex?

04 Caution

Being cautious and using safety measures is important to keep safe. Here's some tips:

Create safe words or signals (e.g. hand gestures) so you can stop at any point.

Agree on alcohol and drug limits, as these can affect consent, boundaries and recognising warning signs.

Recognise signs someone may be distressed, e.g. freezing, fawning, pulling away, or shutting down.

Have a safety plan in case something goes wrong and if in doubt, always stop. Consider if the person feels 'safe' before having rough sex. Having rough sex on a dating profile, doesn't mean you or they automatically consent to it.

Do you and your partner/s talk through risks and have safety measures in place?

What do you consider before agreeing to rough sex with someone, i.e. red and green flags?

Harm management

A harm management approach supports young people who have experienced, or may have experienced, harmful rough sex to:

- access assessment, treatment, and support services
- build skills, knowledge, and sexual agency around rough sex risks and harms
- explore ongoing support services and reporting options.

The following considerations and question prompts can help practitioners with responding to a broad range of harmful rough sex experiences.

Safety and support considerations

Harmful rough sex can present in different ways. Harm may be immediate or ongoing, occur with or without physical injury, and with or without consent. No single approach to care is appropriate for every presentation; and support should be tailored to each young person's experience and needs.

Provide validation and reassurance

Validation can help create a safe space, particularly when a young person feels confused or ashamed about their experience, has difficulty acknowledging harm, or is reluctant to seek support.

Address physical injuries:

Undertake (if in scope), or support access to, a physical assessment. If there are genital injuries, refer to local sexual health or gynae services. If pregnant, refer to lead maternity carer or an emergency department.

Address safety concerns:

If there are safety concerns, follow internal safeguarding pathways and/or refer to sexual violence response services for guidance. Discuss Police reporting options if appropriate.

Address potential emotional harm:

Assess (if in scope) impacts on emotional, spiritual, or social wellbeing, regardless of whether physical injury is present. Consider the need for culturally specific, relevant, and safe services (e.g. Māori or Pasifika-based, disability, rainbow).

Enquire about sexual choking/strangulation as appropriate

If sexual strangulation has occurred, refer to ED or urgent care for an assessment. For non-urgent concerns, consider a Non-Fatal Strangulation (NFS) referral. If it occurred in the context of domestic violence, refer to specialist family and sexual violence response services for follow-up. If strangulation is occurring as part of consensual rough sex, offer education on risks.

Offer ongoing support:

Refer to specialised support services as relevant, and with the young person's consent (e.g. helplines, GP, mental health and FVSV support services) here. If support is declined, provide future options, harm reduction information, and basic safety planning. Encourage connection with existing safe supports (e.g. whānau, counsellors, trusted adults).

Conversation and question prompts

Harmful rough sex can present in a wide range of ways, and experiences are often complex. Factors such as the relationship, expectations, and the presence or absence of communication, consent, or care can influence how harm is understood and experienced.

The following prompts cover a range of presentations and should be selected and used flexibly according to each young person's experience, circumstances, and needs.

If there's been physical injury

Rough sex has become more common among young people. Because of the nature of rough sex, there's an increased risk of physical injuries and other forms of harm. This can happen even when people don't intend harm.

Tell me about your experience... Is it something that you felt safe and comfortable with?

Did anything happen that was unexpected, unwanted, or that you weren't sure about?

(If appropriate): *Some people practice sexual choking/strangulation as part of rough sex. Is this something you're familiar with? Do you have any questions about it? More information*

If there's indication of potential emotional harm

Sometimes rough sex can affect people emotionally, mentally or spiritually.

Some people describe feeling frightened, degraded or confused after rough sex. This can happen during or after sex, even if everyone consented, and/or when it occurred with someone who didn't intend to harm them.

Did anything happen that you didn't expect, like or want, or that you feel unsure about?

Would you like to share anything about your experience with me?

Did you find yourself responding in a way you didn't expect?

If there's indication pressure or coercion occurred

Feeling pressure to have rough sex can be common. This might be because of expectations from a partner, peer pressure, or just because it's considered a 'common' type of sex.

Any sex that is pressured or unwanted can be harmful – and when specific consent isn't given, it may be considered sexual assault.

Tell me about your experience. Did you feel pressure to try anything you didn't want to do, or felt unsure about?

How did you decide to have rough sex? Was it something you genuinely wanted and agreed on?

Prompts continue on next page

Conversation and question prompts

If there's confusion around consent or self-blame

Consent for rough sex can sometimes feel confusing. Some people blame themselves for unwanted rough sex because they initially consented to general sex, they didn't say 'no' or 'stop', or they think rough sex is just 'normal' and 'expected'. But consenting to sex in general doesn't mean someone agrees to rough sex.

Consent for rough sex includes informed consent for every single act, and it can be withdrawn at any time.

Any type of unagreed, unwanted, or unexpected sexual experience can be harmful.

Would you like to tell me about your experience?

Did you know, want, and agree to everything that happened?

What did consent look like for you?

If there's difficulty acknowledging harm

Some people think because rough sex is common or because they consented to it, rough sex can't be considered 'harmful' or 'abuse'. But any type of sex that is not wanted can be harmful. Even if it occurs with a trusted partner or if consent was given, it can still feel degrading, frightening, scary, or unwanted.

Would you like to tell me about your experience – and how you're feeling about it?

What you're describing sounds like it could be a harmful and unwanted sexual experience. Would you like to talk about how you're feeling about it?

Some people only recognise how they felt about rough sex after some time has passed. Has anything come up that you'd like to talk through?

If harmful rough sex occurred with an established partner

Rough sex can be harmful – even with a caring partner who doesn't intend to harm you.

Some people feel pressure to try rough sex because their partner likes it, but many people don't like rough sex – and it's okay not to like it or want it.

Is rough sex something you and your partner both agree on, want, and enjoy?

If not, is your partner aware of how you're feeling?

Do you feel able to share with them what you didn't expect, like, want, or feel confused about? Why/why not?

If not, what support might you need to do this?

Prompts continue on next page

Conversation and question prompts

If the young person indicates they want to keep practising rough sex

We encourage anyone who's had a harmful experience to consider ways to prevent harm from occurring again.

Everyone deserves safe, enjoyable, and harm-free sex – and because rough sex is riskier sex, it's important to take steps to keep as safe as possible.

What do you know about reducing the harms that can occur with rough sex?

Would you like me to share the 4 C's consent, communication, care, and caution tool which can help reduce the risks associated with rough sex?

Can I share some information on confidential services in case you have another similar experience and want support in the future?

If the young person would benefit from support or reporting

What you're describing sounds like it could be a harmful and unwanted sexual experience. We are here to support you – and as part of that, we can help you access some specialised support.

Some people want to report harmful rough sex experiences to the Police, and others don't. Whatever you decide is your choice, and you don't have to decide right now.

A lot of people find it helpful to get support from specialist services after experiences like this. There are lots of confidential options available – can I share these with you?

Would you like me to talk through Police reporting options?

Do you have any concerns about reporting to Police? If so, we can talk through them, or I can connect you with a support service that can help.

If they decline support ...

You don't have to take any steps you're not ready for, but knowing what support is available could be helpful in the future.

I can share information on safe, confidential services if you'd like support in the future.

Do you have any concerns about accessing support services? If so, we can talk through them.

What could safe 'support' look like for you? Have you talked to anyone else about this before? Is there anyone you feel safe talking to?

Support services

The following resources and services offer support and information related to this guidance:

Sexual health and sexual wellbeing

Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa
Training and resources for professionals supporting young people with sexual wellbeing, including other useful links and services

The Light Project – for professionals
Training and resources for youth services on online harm and rough sex/sexual strangulation

Sexual strangulation/choking resources and services

Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa – Rough Sex
Education resource on rough sex, including risks and harm reduction

The Light Project: Porn, rough sex, and choking
Information for professionals discussing 'rough sex' and 'choking' with young people

In The Know
Information for young people on 'choking' and 'rough sex' including risks and impacts

Medical Sexual Assault Clinicians Aotearoa (Medsac)
Specialist sexual assault and non-fatal strangulation (NFS) service

Understanding Sexual Assault and Consent
Information on New Zealand legislation relating to sexual assault and consent

Mental health support

Youthline: Free helpline and face-to-face counselling.

1737: Free helpline (text, phone)

Safe to Talk: Helpline for people who've experienced sexual harm

Sexual violence response

RPE: National directory of sexual violence response services.

ACC: Support for mental injury resulting from sexual harm, for eligible cases

Kink communities

Guidelines for Working with People with Kink Interests

Consent Frameworks S.S.C, R.A.C.K and P.R.I.C.K

Glossary and Resources

What professionals need to know about kink (2024)

Takatāpui and rainbow communities

Rainbow Best Practice Guidance – Working with Rainbow Communities in Primary Violence Prevention
InsideOut: Rainbow terminology
Hohou Te Rongo Kahukura – Resources and **Counselling**

Gender Minorities Aotearoa
Information and support services to transgender people and their whānau

Burnett Foundation
Counselling, group support and HIV and STI testing

OutLine Aotearoa
Rainbow support line, online chat and peer support

Working with disabled communities

To Be Frank
Support, advice and education for tāngata whaikaha Māori, disabled people and their family/whānau/āiga

Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa – for disabled people

Māori services

Māori Community Health and Social Services Directory
National directory of support services for Māori victims and survivors of sexual harm

Asian services

Shama – Supporting Ethnic Women affected by sexual harm or abuse

Pasifika services

HELP – Poutu Pasifika services for Pasifika people affected by sexual harm or abuse

Sexual harm services

Wellstop, Safe Network, and STOP
Support services for people with harmful sexual thoughts and behaviours