



Green Light

Consent workshops at the Oasis Aqualounge balance strict rules with a sexually liberated vibe. By Laura Hensley

It's a warm Wednesday night in downtown Toronto, and a group of men are sitting on a pleather sofa at the Oasis Aqualounge sex club listening to a woman in a push-up bra and G-string talk about consent. Cece, tonight's host of the monthly workshop called The Right Approach, stands on a slightly elevated stage in the club's "ballroom"—a room where a couple had sex only moments earlier. Next to her is another staff member, Jason, a large, muscular man wearing a black T-shirt and shorts. He eagerly nods along as Cece explains how to properly approach women in the club: Don't corner them; don't make sexual comments about their bodies; engage in icebreakers; and *always* ask before you touch. If someone says no, it means no. Jason adds, "Don't treat people like objects—you need to get to know them first." The men in the audience nod.

Strict rules may seem at odds with a sexually liberated space, but Oasis's consent policy is what helps ensure that all of its patrons have a good time. The club, which opened in 2010, focuses on female sexuality, which in turn means it takes consent seriously—and for good reason.

According to a recent survey from the Canadian Women's Foundation, only 28 per cent of Canadians say they fully understand what consent actually means. Despite the surge of the #MeToo movement, this figure is down from 2015, when 33 per cent said they understood it. This is likely due to societal confusion around what constitutes consent. (When comedian Aziz Ansari was accused of sexual misconduct in January 2018, people were divided over the allegations: Was it sexual assault or just a bad date?) Pair that confusion with the fact that comprehensive sex education varies across the country and you're left with a lot of question marks. People still need to learn about consent, and Oasis recognizes that.

"Part of our job is to educate men on how to successfully meet people at Oasis," explains club co-founder Judy Kaye. Kaye, a middle-aged woman with a kind demeanour and gentle laugh, sips on a mixed slushie drink from one of the club's bars. The property is a multi-level heritage building and former gay bathhouse, and stepping into the club feels like walking into a clothing-optional house party. Kaye and I are perched on a small two-seat patio that overlooks

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Oasis's outdoor pool and the handful of naked people swimming in it. It's relatively tame, but it's a Tuesday.

"With our Right Approach workshop, we often act out skits to explore 'OK, so where did consent get off track?' and 'What do you think would be the right way of doing this?'" she says. "We are, in fact, trying to educate men on how to meet people without expectation. It's really not something anybody is teaching."

The knowledge gap is something Emily Thomas knows well. A PhD student in clinical psychology at Toronto's Ryerson University and a researcher at the school's sexuality- and gender-focused SHiFT Lab, Thomas studies how people negotiate consent in their relationships. She interviews women about their sexual experiences and desires and has also taught workshops on consent and healthy relationships to teenagers at a sexual assault centre. She has found that consent is not always taught in school. "One of the challenges people have is that when we talk about consent, it's seen in a very contractual way," she says. "I've heard young people say, 'That's really awkward; that's not sexy.' I think part of that comes from media and TV shows: People aren't asking for consent; it's just this instant 'make eye contact and start taking each other's clothes off.' If consent was part of the conversation from a younger age, it might be a lot more normative."

Thomas also says that education needs to go beyond the "yes means yes" narrative and include lessons on how to navigate sexual encounters in a healthy way—including discussions about what people like and don't like. "A lot of people don't know how to [negotiate consent] because it's so outside the realm of something anyone's ever talked about," she says. "I think that's where consent comes down to being a societal problem and not just an individual one."

From a legal perspective, it makes sense that consent is at the core of all encounters at Oasis. Sure, adults are allowed to have sex in almost any space in the club, but if a patron touches someone without asking or harms them, staff will kick that person out. "If someone's bothering you, you don't have to deal with it," says Kaye. "We will handle it."

But to Kaye, ensuring that consent is practised is more than just a business move. She says that women—especially young women—feel more comfortable exploring their sexuality in a monitored space with others around. This is why so many people like Oasis and why its weekly "student nights" are so successful, she says.

"Even though many people are meeting others online these days, they don't necessarily want to give out their home address; they would rather meet in neutral territory," she says. "In that sense, we're safer than a bar because

we don't allow casual touching—even putting a hand on someone's back without their consent isn't allowed."

For Ella,* part of the appeal of Oasis is its focus on female safety. The 26-year-old says that she doesn't feel comfortable meeting strangers at bars and that when she wanted to meet someone to hook up with after a breakup, she went to the club. At Oasis, she explains, she was able to engage in activities on her own terms. "They have policies in place where if you are told 'no,' you accept that and don't keep asking," she says. "I knew what I wanted; I didn't want there to be any confusion about what was going to happen."

Being in control also leads to better sex. According to Thomas, when people are able to communicate with their partner and feel respected, they typically have more enjoyable experiences and think about sex more positively. "The women I interviewed talked about consent and good communication as being significant components of good sex for them," she says. "Sex is so much better when you know you're both enjoying it and you feel safe. It makes a big difference."

During the Right Approach workshop, a university student named David* sat on the pleather couch, naked save for a white cotton towel wrapped around his waist. He asked if he could sit behind me, and when the consent lesson ended, he asked if he could introduce himself. It was his first time at Oasis, he said, and he had come to the venue alone. "It's hard to read people in clubs," he said. "Here, it's easier to know what people are looking for."

While many at the club are respectful, it's clear that even with Oasis's massive focus on consent, the message doesn't always get through. Twenty-seven-year-old Angela* says she was comfortable at Oasis until a middle-aged man made an offhand remark to her boyfriend about her—right in front of her. "I felt objectified and like I was just a piece of meat and that my boyfriend was there to chaperone me," she recalls. "It's like, 'No, it was our choice. We both have a fetish, and we both wanted to do this.' We left very quickly after that."

But Kaye is optimistic that Oasis is laying the groundwork for consent education, and she believes that its focus on safety is what attracts so many women. "The main goal is to create good behaviour in the club. We get lots of feedback from customers and staff that people at Oasis are more respectful about consent than at other venues," she says. "We would definitely be happy if other clubs adopted some of our approaches. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." □

(*Name has been changed.)