Yes, it’s true, life gets much easier when women learn to say no

The Crown Prosecution Service has given new advice to police in England and Wales clarifying the circumstances surrounding consent to sex in the context of rape allegations.

The guidelines spell out that staying silent does not equal consent. Neither does having access to contraception; being incapacitated through drink and drugs; being the subordinate of someone in authority such as a teacher or an employer; having special needs; being asleep; or having been a victim of domestic abuse.

Alison Saunders, the director of public prosecutions, spoke of the “myths and stereotypes” about rape and said: “This is really about making sure investigators and prosecutors look at the whole context, so we’re able to put strong cases before the court and we don’t just focus on what a victim did or said.”

This is all good, though it seems astonishing that it needs to be pointed out. In a broader context, though, I think it would be helpful if women, from childhood, learnt to be more comfortable with the idea of saying no to things in life generally.

How often do we say a clear and emphatic, heartfelt no, other than in the context of, as it were, our toddlers sticking wet fingers into power sockets? Outside situations involving the risk of electrocution or other dangers, most women still find saying no agonising. It mortifies us. It seems so unhelpful, so ungenerous, so intransigent.

We’ve been trained for acquiescence since infancy: to smile and say yes because it’s nice to be nice. Well, yes, it is, up to a point. It’s also nice to know your own mind and not be shy about expressing it.

I’m not suggesting we raise generations of boot­faced little girls who say no to everything, but the eternal expectation of the eternal yes needs re-examining. It’s fine to say no. Why should you like everything that’s suggested to you, at any age?

For years, I used to find myself traipsing out to things I didn’t want to do and to places I didn’t want to be — events, dinners, visits: you name it, I’d reluctantly be shuffling along to it, purely because it had seemed rude to say no when asked, six months previously. So I said yes, and then I stared at my diary in boiling fury when the date arrived and my week was ruined.

It is so much easier to say no in the first place and risk maybe 20 seconds of someone sounding put out. And it’s not especially rude, because nobody’s irreplaceable. You don’t want to go to the boring, pointless dinner? It’s fine. There will be someone to whom it is not boring and pointless and they’ll happily go instead.

We should just tell the truth. “No, because I’d rather watch telly in my pyjamas. No, because I’d rather see my friends. No, because I like being at home. No, because I’m reading a really good book,” gradually losing the explanations and building up the beautiful baldness of “No, because I don’t want to,” or simply, “No.” But we never do this.

If we do manage to say no, we immediately start scrabbling around for improbable excuses to back up our perfectly rational decision: we invoke imaginary missing babysitters, traffic jams, the effects of the weather on the train, our workload — and only then are we able to say (or, more usually, type) “and that is why, regretfully, I’m going to have to say no”. We then spend another five minutes apologising further, just in case.

Now, nobody loves manners more than me, but this is absurd and damaging: acquiescence seeps into every aspect of daily life over the decades. You become an anxious people­pleaser — especially if your interlocutor is rudely insistent.

What a lesson for our daughters. “I suppose if I moved things around,” you say. “Let me call you back.” You wriggle on the hook, instead of just removing yourself from it.

This is how people end up sitting in bad restaurants, having had horrible food, and when the waiter asks if everything was fine, say “Yes, lovely, thank you”, instead of “No”. It’s how you have children round to play that neither you nor your child even like.

It’s why you’re having coffee with that woman you can’t stand, again. It’s how you’re doing someone else’s job for them, knowing perfectly well that they’ll take the credit.

All for want of thinking no, and meaning it, and saying it out loud.

Interestingly, once you start saying no — to selected questions, obviously, rather than to everything — people don’t find it rude as such. There’s sometimes a nervous laugh or a “seriously?” or a moment of incomprehension (because, absurdly, there remains something transgressive about a woman saying no), but it passes. The more you do it, the less people are surprised.

Ease with saying no is a life­improver even in the most quotidian situation. In extreme ones, it isn’t fanciful to suggest that it might stand you in better stead than saying, “Oh, gosh, could you not . . .” or “Sorry, please don’t.”

1. Having read the entire article explain in your own words why the title is an effective introduction to the line of thought. (2)
2. Read paragraph 2.

Analyse the imagery ‘guidelines spell out ’and comment on the effectiveness of the image in this context. (2)

1. Identify any of the techniques of sentence structure in the rest of the paragraph and analyse how effective they are in supporting the point being made in the first sentence? (2)
2. Explain in your own words what point is being made by Knight in paragraph 4? (1)
3. Analyse the language of paragraph 5 to show how it helps to convey the difficulty that women have in saying no. In your answer you can refer to features such as word choice, sentence structure… (4)
4. Read paragraphs 6-8.

Show how the context of these paragraphs helps you to understand the word ‘acquiescence’. (You should say what the word means then quote the expressions and explain in your own words how they brought you your understanding of the word.) (3)

1. Read paragraph 10.

Analyse how the use of sentence structure is effective in making the point that is it is acceptable to say no. (2)

1. Read paragraphs 11-13

According to Knight explain (in your own words) how most people feel when they say no. (2)

1. Analyse how her word choice /imagery effectively conveys her disapproval of those who can’t say no. (4)
2. Read the last 2 paragraphs. ‘Interestingly, once you start saying no…or “Sorry, please don’t”’.

How effective do you find these paragraphs as a conclusion to the overall message of Knight’s article? (2)