

CONTENT SUMMARY & THEMATIC GUIDANCE

For Schools, Educators & Legal Sector Stakeholders

Youth Theatre Play

Story Overview (General Summary)

On the Ropes follows two 16-year-olds — **Asha** and **Heath** — as they navigate pressures at school, home, and in relationships. They reconnect as neighbours when Heath seeks Asha's help the morning after their school formal, where he has assaulted a peer after believing that intimate photos of Asha were being shared.

As the backstory unfolds through flashbacks, we witness:

- Asha entering a new romantic relationship with **Ted**, an older boy (18) she meets at work.
- Heath living in a household with escalating tension and emotional abuse between his parents.
- Heath discovering his sexuality and having an uncertain sexual encounter with **Angus**, a boy at school.
- Heath assaulting Ted and potentially being charged with assault.

The narrative combines realism and humor, framed by a lawyer character (**Michael**) guiding the audience through the unfolding legal issues. The core experience for young viewers is developing understanding of:

- Consent in relationships
- Coercive control as a form of family violence
- Image based abuse
- Legal rights and responsibilities
- Police powers and police interviews/arrests
- Accessing legal advice
- How cumulative pressures lead to harmful decisions and how support services can intervene

The story ends with hope: early access to a community legal centre gives Heath and Asha pathways toward safety, support, and justice.

Family Violence: Heath's Parents

The script depicts a **pattern of coercive and emotional abuse** by Heath's father toward his mother:

- Financial control (withholding pay, humiliation at the supermarket)
- Verbal humiliation at a community event
- Household tension escalating into silent fear
- Children withdrawn or hiding during conflict
- Heath's mother masking distress and protecting the family image

On the Ropes shows the impact family violence has on Heath in the following ways:

- Hypervigilance and anxiety
- Retreats into the shed and boxing bag as coping
- Intergenerational pattern of violence ("I get what it feels like to be my dad")
- Shame and secrecy — refusing help when offered

Educational and Legal Messaging

- ✓ Family violence isn't always physical
- ✓ Children are victims of family violence even if they aren't physically hit
- ✓ Support services exist for young people in violent homes
- ✓ Breaking the cycle requires intervention, not punishment alone

Coercive Control: Ted's Relationship with Asha

The play models a **textbook grooming pattern** escalating into coercive control:

- Excessive contact / rapid intensity of the relationship
- Guilt trips and emotional punishment (“you disappeared...you don’t care about me”)
- Jealousy and body policing (dress shaming)
- Pressure for nude images & threats of withdrawal of affection
- Isolation from friends

Key insights

- Asha blames herself — a common dynamic
- Teachers (Mrs Parson) and peers notice warning signs
- Michael names the behaviour as coercive control and gives safety planning guidance

Educational & Legal Messaging

- Control ≠ love
- Monitoring or guilt-tripping someone is harmful, not romantic
- Image-based abuse has serious consequences
- Report and seek guidance

Emphasise that **recognising early red flags prevents escalation.**

Nudes & Image-Based Abuse

The story follows the common youth experience of creating and sharing intimate images:

- Asha takes nude photos under pressure to maintain affection
- She shares one of Ted encouraged by a friend
- Ted *threatens* to share Asha's image (harmful intent)
- Later, Heath sends a photo from Ted's phone causing **criminal liability**

These intertwined moments present **the full spectrum**:

- **Consent** in taking, sending and possessing intimate images
- **Trust violations** and the fear of exposure
- **Legal consequences** around image-based abuse (IBA)
- Gendered shame and the need for supportive responses

Education Messaging

- Nobody is entitled to demand images, ever
- Sharing someone else's intimate image without consent is illegal
- Victims should not be blamed for taking images
- Help exists: reporting pathways, legal advice, safety planning

This section is reinforced by the lawyer character's clear legal framing:

"It's not just social harm — it's a criminal offence."

Consent and Sexual Harm: Heath & Angus

In the play there is a moment where Heath, who is exploring his sexuality, has a sexual encounter with another boy, Angus, in a gym bathroom. The key reason this scene is included isn't to be explicit (the action is implied, not shown) but to open a sensitive and essential conversation about consent:

- What happens when someone goes along with sexual behaviour before they've decided they want it?
- How do pressure, shock, attraction, or fear complicate someone's ability to say "yes" or "no"?
- Why is enthusiastic, informed, and freely-given consent the standard, regardless of gender or sexual orientation?

Heath describes mixed emotions: he wanted connection with Angus, but the speed and pressure of the moment left him confused and unsure. He blames himself. Young people often do.

This storyline helps students understand that:

- A sexual act can feel "wanted" in one way, but still be harmful
- Consent requires space, communication, and respect
- Boys and LGBTQ+ young people can also be victims of coercion
- It's okay to seek help and talk about confusing feelings

The encounter in the school toilets explores **unclear, pressured consent**:

- Heath feels attraction and curiosity but also surprise and uncertainty
- Physical guidance by Angus initiates a sexual act before Heath has processed what's happening
- Heath later feels confused and uncomfortable, but believes "I did want it"

The script handles this with **care and realism**:

- The lawyer explains that consent must be *free, informed, and enthusiastic*
- Mixed feelings do not invalidate that harm occurred
- Law supports survivors even when they're unsure or conflicted

Educational & Legal Messaging

- Silence ≠ consent
- Prior attraction ≠ consent
- People discovering their sexuality deserve support, not shame
- Young men can experience coercion too
- Reporting and support options exist *regardless* of gender or sexuality