

ON THE ROPES

CONTENT SUMMARY & THEMATIC GUIDANCE

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- Children withdrawn or hiding during conflict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

Explicit Language in the Play

On the Ropes contains a number of instances of coarse and explicit language. This section outlines what that language is, where and how it appears, and why its presence is both deliberate and developmentally appropriate for the play’s target audience of students aged 12–17.

What Language Appears and Where

The explicit language in the play falls into three broad categories: general profanity used in moments of high emotion, sexual language that arises in the context of peer banter and relationship dynamics, and targeted verbal abuse used by one character toward another.

General profanity including “shit,” “hell,” “freaking,” “bloody,” “arsehole,” and “pissweak” — appears throughout the script and reflects the natural speech patterns of contemporary teenagers. These words surface in moments of frustration, anxiety, and social banter, consistent with how young people communicate when stressed or surprised.

Sexual language is used in two distinct ways. In the context of Asha and Ted’s early workplace banter, terms including “pussy” and “dick” appear in a playful exchange about resilience. Asha uses them to push back against Ted’s dismissiveness, which is a small but telling moment of her early agency before the relationship becomes controlling. In the bullying scene at school, the word “dick” appears again in a homophobic taunt by Ben directed at Heath, used alongside crude speculation about Heath’s sexuality.

The most confronting language in the play occurs at the formal. As Asha arrives in her handmade dress, Ted says quietly: “You’re going to regret that, slut.” Later on the dance floor Asha tells him to “Fuck off” as he physically grabs her. These two moments are the emotional and moral centre of the play’s final act.

Why This Language Is Used: Dramatic and Pedagogical Purpose

The explicit language in *On the Ropes* is not gratuitous. Each instance is purposeful and serves the narrative or educational function of the play in one of three ways.

First, it establishes **authenticity and dramatic credibility**. Research in developmental psychology consistently shows that adolescents are acutely sensitive to whether adult-created media “rings true” to their own experience. When the language, tone, and texture of a story feels sanitised or unrealistic, young audiences disengage; and with them, the educational message. The vernacular used by Heath, Asha, Fran, and their peers reflects how teenagers in Australia actually speak with one another. This is not incidental; it is the mechanism by which the play earns the trust of its audience.

Second, specific instances of language are used to **mark harm clearly and without ambiguity**. Ted calling Asha a “slut” at the formal is the play’s clearest example of this. The word lands hard precisely because it is meant to. It is a moment of sexualised degradation and a form of verbal abuse. Using a softer word or paraphrasing the insult would blunt the moment and obscure its nature. Young people in the audience who have heard this word used against themselves or others will recognise it immediately as what it is: an attempt to shame and control. The play does not shy away from naming that harm in the terms it actually takes.

Third, the language used by Heath in moments of internal crisis, particularly his inner monologue during the bullying scene, externalises his emotional state in a way that communicates psychological overwhelm to the audience. Adolescence is characterised by the development of emotional regulation skills that are not yet fully formed; strong language in this context signals the dysregulation that is at the heart of Heath’s arc.

Why It Matters: A Developmental Psychology Perspective

Students aged 12–17 are at a stage of identity development in which they are actively constructing their understanding of relationships, power, gender, and social norms. This period, often described in developmental psychology as a critical window for the formation of relationship schemas, is precisely when exposure to realistic representations of harmful behaviour, combined with structured reflection, is most likely to be protective.

Research in this area indicates that young people are better equipped to identify harmful language and behaviour in their own lives when they have first seen it named and examined in a safe context. Theatre, by its nature, creates what psychologists call *aesthetic distance* — the audience observes events happening to characters rather than themselves, which

allows for emotional engagement without being overwhelmed. This distance makes it possible to explore confronting material, including verbal abuse and coercive control, in a way that builds awareness rather than trauma.

Avoidance of difficult language in educational drama has been shown to create a credibility gap that undermines the very learning it is trying to support. When the language in a play does not match the language young people encounter in real peer relationships the implicit message is that those real experiences cannot be talked about in institutional settings. This can reinforce silence and shame. *On the Ropes* takes the opposite approach: by naming difficult things directly, it signals to students that these experiences are speakable, recognisable, and worth taking seriously.

It is also worth noting that the most explicit language in the play (Ted’s use of “slut”) is unambiguously portrayed as harmful. The play does not normalise or glamorise this language; it contextualises it as verbal abuse within a pattern of coercive control. This framing is itself pedagogically significant: it models the discernment that educators hope students will develop.

Guidance for Educators

Educators are encouraged to prepare students briefly before the performance by letting them know the play uses realistic language and deals with serious themes. This brief framing normalises the experience and positions students as thoughtful observers rather than passive recipients of content that may feel surprising.

After the performance, the moments of explicit language, particularly Ted’s use of “slut” at the formal, offer productive entry points for classroom discussion. Questions such as “What did you feel when that word was used?” and “What does that language tell us about what Ted wants Asha to feel?” can help students connect the dramatic moment to broader learning about verbal abuse, power, and coercive control.

Schools may wish to note the language in their pre-performance communication to parents and carers, particularly for students who may be more sensitive to this content. However, the language in the play has been calibrated to the material it depicts, and its use is not incidental. It is a considered artistic and educational choice.