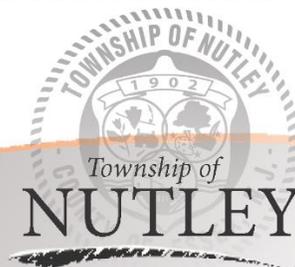




NEWSLETTER



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***Sexual harassment isn't just a Hollywood problem.
Here are 6 ways parents can help stop it among teens.***

By Alison Cashin and Richard Weissbourd, Special to The Washington Post

In the spring of 2016, a group of students at a Boston-area high school staged a walkout to protest what they said was daily misogyny and sexual harassment at school, including instances of sexual violence among students. Girls, they said, were called “b-- --,” “whore” and “slut” in class. Boys catcalled and groped girls in the hallways and stood near water fountains leering at them as they leaned over to drink.

The previous month, in Colorado, girls from a sex-segregated Jesuit high school walked out to protest the school’s inaction over severe online harassment from boys at their school, including rape threats on Twitter and jokes about sexual assault. Two boys from the school were suspended after the protest.

Stories like these are often underreported, but the fact is that misogyny and sexual harassment are stunningly common in young people’s lives — in the music and media they consume, in school hallways and classrooms, and on college campuses.

In other words, this isn’t just happening among Hollywood actresses and the Harvey Weinsteins of the world. Harassment isn’t contained to adult workplaces. It’s happening among our children and we are doing shockingly little about it.

As one 16-year-old told us while we were researching our recent report, “The Talk: How Adults Can Promote Young People’s Healthy Relationships and Prevent Misogyny and Sexual Harassment”: “One thing that I think all girls go through at some age is the realization that their body, seemingly, is not entirely for themselves anymore . . . the unfortunate thing is that we all just sort of accept it as a fact of life.”

As part of the report, Making Caring Common, the project we lead at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, conducted a national survey of 18- to 25-year-olds in

which 87 percent of respondents reported they had been the victim of at least one form of sexual harassment. This harassment included being catcalled (55 percent), touched without permission by a stranger (41 percent), insulted with sexualized words by a man (47 percent) or by a woman (42 percent), having a stranger say something sexual to them (52 percent) and having a stranger tell them they were “hot” (61 percent).

Yet the same survey indicates that most parents have failed to address and prevent misogyny and sexual harassment in their children’s lives: 76 percent of survey respondents — 72 percent of men and 80 percent of women — reported that they never had a conversation with parents about how to avoid sexually harassing others. Similar majorities had never had conversations with their parents about various forms of misogyny.

As parents, we need to do better. We need to have specific conversations with our teens about what misogyny and sexual harassment mean, why they are so harmful, and how to combat them. Below are six tips for parents for engaging in meaningful, constructive conversations.

— Define the problem.

Why? Many teens and young people don’t know the range of behaviors that constitute misogyny and sexual harassment. Adults need to explain what these violations mean and provide specific, concrete examples.

Try this: Start by asking your teen or young adult to define misogyny and sexual harassment and to give you examples of each of these violations. Clarify any misunderstandings and provide common examples of harassment and misogyny, such as commenting on someone’s clothes or appearance when those comments might be unwanted. Ask teens to carefully consider what it might be like to be subject to comments like these. You can use our data to explain, for example, that while many men think catcalling is flattering to women, many women are frightened and angered by it. Make it clear that boys and girls can harass, and that even if the words or behaviors are intended as a joke, they risk scaring and offending others.

— Step in and stick with it.

Why? If you’re the parent or guardian of a teen, chances are you’ll encounter a sexist or sexually degrading comment from them or their friends or peers. Yet too many adults stay silent when this happens. Passivity not only condones these comments, it can also diminish young people’s respect for us as adults and role models. Even if teens can’t absorb or act on our words in the moment, they often still register our words and internalize them as they mature.

Try this: Think about and consult with people you respect about what you might say if your teen uses a word like “b----” or “hoe.” How might you react in a way that really enables your teen to absorb your message? You might ask questions that any

thoughtful human is hard-pressed to answer affirmatively: “Why is this a way that you and your friends bond?” Consider what you might say if your teen says, “We’re just joking” or “You don’t understand.” You might explain how these types of jokes can come to infect how we think and act towards others and be interpreted by others as permitting and supporting sexual harassment and degradation. Talk to young people about the importance of listening to and appreciating their peers of different genders as a matter of decency and humanity, and work with them to develop empathy from a young age.

- Teach your child to be a critical consumer of media and culture.

Why? Many young people are raised on a steady diet of misogyny and sexual degradation in popular culture but have never critically examined the media they consume or the cultural dynamics that shape their lives. You may be with your teen in the car and hear sexually degrading song lyrics or be together when you learn about an episode of sexual harassment in the news. It is vital that we speak up and help our children become mindful, critical consumers of this information.

Try this: Ask how your teen interprets something you’re hearing or watching that you find sexually degrading. Does your teen find it degrading? Why or why not? If you disagree, explain why you think the portrayal is harmful. Point out how misogyny and gender-based degradation in popular culture can be so common that they seem normal and can begin affecting our relationships with others in harmful ways. If you’ve had an experience similar to what you’re listening to or watching, such as being harassed on the street or in your workplace, and it’s age-appropriate to share with your teen, discuss it and talk about how it made you feel.

— Talk to your child about what they should do if they’re sexually harassed or degraded.

Why? Many teens don’t know what to do if they’re harassed or degraded with gender-based slurs, whether it’s being called a “slut” or “b----” jokingly by a friend or being harassed by someone they don’t know. It’s vital for us to help our children develop strategies for protecting themselves and reducing the chances of the offender harming others.

Try this: Ask your if they have ever been harassed or degraded with sexualized words or actions and how they’ve responded. If they haven’t had these experiences, ask them what they think they would do in different situations. Does this differ from what they think they should do? We don’t always do what we should. Discuss how they can get from “would” to “should” by exploring the pros and cons of various strategies for responding. Would they feel comfortable confronting the person harassing them, confronting the harasser with a friend, talking to a teacher or a school counselor, or talking to you or another respected adult? Consider role playing so they can explore strategies. Brainstorm with your child ways of responding in various contexts.

— Encourage and expect upstanding.

Why? As ethical parents, we should expect our teens to protect themselves when they're harassed or degraded, but also to protect one another. Because they understand peer dynamics, are more likely to witness harassing behaviors and often have more weight than adults in intervening with peers, young people are often in the best position to prevent and stop sexual harassment and misogyny among their peers. Learning to be an "upstander" is also a vital part of becoming an ethical, courageous person. Yet upstanding can be risky — perpetrators can turn on upstanders. That's why it's important to brainstorm strategies with young people for actions that protect both them and the victim.

Try this: Talk to your teen about the importance of being an ally to peers who are subjected to harassment or misogyny. You might start a conversation by asking, for example, what they would and should do if a friend is the target of different types of harassment. What about a peer who is not a close friend? Talk about what might stop them from intervening in these situations, brainstorm various strategies, or do a role play. Think through the specific words they might use.

— Provide multiple sources of recognition and self-worth.

Why? Young people can be especially vulnerable to degradation and harassment if they're highly dependent on romantic and sexual attention and on peer approval. Many young people are also vulnerable because they have lower social status or are marginalized among their peers. LGBTQIA youth may be especially vulnerable in this respect.

Try this: Encourage and support your teen in engaging in activities that build their confidence that don't involve romantic or sexual attention or approval from peers. These activities might involve the arts, sports, or service to others. Talk to young people about solidarity and taking collective action against harassment and degradation. Sometimes girls and young women in particular can demean and undercut each other in the context of romantic and sexual relationships, and it's important to underscore the power of standing together. This can be another important source of self-worth.

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