

A parent's guide to ending sexual harassment and assault

December 14 2017, by Merle H. Weiner



Teaching kids early can help.

The resignation of three members of Congress – [John Conyers](#), [Al Franken](#) and [Trent Franks](#) – should serve as a reminder to parents to talk to their children about sexual misconduct.

As a law professor with a [focus on domestic and sexual violence](#), I know that the law alone does not deter sexual misbehavior. Parents have an important role to play in helping prevent [children](#) from becoming

perpetrators, now and as adults.

By "parent," I include those people who provide care and support for a child, but might not technically be the parent, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Children as perpetrators

Children are typically thought of as [victims](#) of [sexual misconduct](#). But children can be perpetrators too. In fact, [36 percent](#) of the sex crimes against juveniles are perpetrated by other juveniles. The U.S. Supreme Court [described one such incident](#) when it clarified schools' responsibilities under Title IX, the federal law that addresses [sexual harassment](#) in schools. The case involved a fifth grader who acted in a sexually suggestive way to a classmate. Among other things, he allegedly put a door stop in his pants and rubbed his body against hers. The victim was so distraught that she wrote a suicide note. The young perpetrator eventually pleaded guilty to sexual battery.

Lessons about appropriate conduct can matter for children's behavior during childhood, but the benefits of parental instruction extend beyond childhood. While young perpetrators [do not](#) necessarily continue perpetrating into adulthood, [some do](#). Even those who start offending in adulthood might not have if they had internalized right and wrong at an earlier age.

What can parents say and do to reduce the chance that their children will behave badly?

Proactive parenting

"[Proactive parenting](#)" is essential. The concept includes "prearming"

children with strategies that reflect the parents' values and [guiding them](#) through decision-making. In one study, psychologist Laura M. Padilla-Walker and her colleagues [found that](#) children's behavior reflected their parents' values when their [parents](#) were proactive.

Guiding children is important because rules in adulthood are not always clear or practical. For example, many people swear by the mantra: "[Never date anyone at work.](#)" But office romances are common and can end well. According to [one survey](#), 14 percent of couples that meet at work end up marrying, like Barack and Michelle Obama.

[Others say](#) never sleep with someone who has had anything to drink. Yet women frequently [drink and have sex](#).

Moreover, even very clear rules are routinely violated. Accusers have [alleged that](#) Harvey Weinstein committed rape, Kevin Spacey propositioned a minor by placing him on a bed and climbing on top of him and Jameis Winston touched a stranger's crotch.

Adults and children are more likely to obey the law and successfully navigate nuanced scenarios if they are taught early about clear communication and the reasons behind the rules.

Affirmative consent

Parents can explain that clear communication minimizes the risks of becoming a perpetrator. Parents can teach that [affirmative consent](#) is a necessary prerequisite to any sexual behavior. Affirmative consent is now [the standard commonly used](#) by universities during student disciplinary proceedings.

Children must learn how to seek affirmative consent respectfully, how to convey affirmative consent when they want to give it, and how to

recognize what is not affirmative consent. Silence, or acquiescence, is not the same as an enthusiastic "Yes!" Parents can [find tips](#) about affirmative consent from prevention specialists at [colleges and universities](#). [Clever videos](#) also convey the idea.

Principles are important too

Affirmative consent is a method to help ensure that people respect sexual agency and gender equality. These are the values behind the laws and [social norms](#) that proscribe sexual harassment and assault. Parents should teach the importance of sexual agency and gender equality because children will be more likely to seek affirmative consent, obey the law, and act appropriately in more ambiguous situations if they know the why.

[Sexual agency](#), also described sometimes as "individual autonomy," is the idea that everyone gets to say who can touch them and whether other [sexual behavior](#) is welcome. If a person does not obtain permission first, he or she risks violating the other person's sexual agency.

Even if consent is obtained, the consent isn't sufficient if the other person lacked the capacity to consent, either because he or she was drunk, on drugs, a minor or mentally deficient. Coercion also invalidates consent, and coercion can exist when there is any sort of negative repercussion from a refusal. Physical violence or an adverse employment consequence are obvious examples.

Gender equality is the idea that people of all genders have the same rights, including the same right to sexual agency. All people have the right to initiate sex, to say yes when invitations appeal to them and to say no when they are uninterested. Emphasizing gender equality is essential. Psychologist Antonia Abbey and her colleagues explain that [perpetrators typically](#) have "attitudes about women that can encourage treating

women as sexual commodities."

These principles can be discussed whether the child is 8, 12 or 16 years old, although the language will obviously differ. A parent can also use these principles to promote the child's [sympathy](#) for victims of [sexual misconduct](#) – encouraging moral reasoning and appropriate behavior.

Bystander intervention

Parents who teach their children about these principles may reduce sexual misconduct by others too. [Peer norms](#) influence sexual misconduct in college. People [offend less](#) when their friends send a signal that sexual aggression is unacceptable and gender equality is important.

Bystanders' views can make a difference outside of the college context as well. Scholars [Christina Bicchieri and Ryan Muldoon](#) explain that social norms are most effective when people believe others expect them to follow those norms.

Recent events suggest that more could be done by bystanders to interrupt problematic or illegal conduct. Many people apparently knew about the alleged behavior of [Harvey Weinstein](#), [Kevin Spacey](#) and even [George H.W. Bush](#), but it continued.

Parents can help create a world in which everyone respects sexual agency and gender equality. It's on us to do so.

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