

Respect for women starts with understanding 'no'

Conversations about consent must begin early, say **Adam McCormick, Alma Baker and Rawan Ashrawi**

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, many parents are feeling a sense of urgency to engage in conversations with their sons about issues related to sex, gender and respect. Reality has set in for a lot of parents that they can't simply assume their sons would never grow up to engage in behaviors that are harmful towards women and girls.

As parents become more intentional about addressing issues related to gender, sex and respect, efforts to initiate these conversations can be challenging. Perhaps one of the most important topics for parents to address in these conversations is the issue of consent.

The messages that many boys receive regarding consent can be confusing and harmful. Parents cannot simply assume or hope that their sons are being given the tools outside of the home to safely and respectfully navigate the issue of consent. In the absence of these conversations with their parents, boys are likely to turn to their friends, the media and pornography to help shape their understanding of sex, relationships and consent.

A series of studies from the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire assessing the impact that pornography has on boys suggests that boys are turning to online pornography as their most prominent form of sexual education. Almost all (93 percent) adolescent boys have seen pornography in their childhood, and 18 percent have watched the rape of a woman online. Not only does pornography depict high levels of aggression and control, but it also suggests that gender inequality is sexy.

For many adolescent boys, their ideas of consent and sex are being shaped by experiences that are absent of connection, respect, love and consent. According to a meta-analysis of the relationship between porn and violence, exposure to pornography increases sexual aggression in boys by 22 percent and increases beliefs in rape myths by 31 percent. In a study from researchers at the University of North Dakota, more than one third of college men who responded said that they would engage in sexual assault if they knew that they would

get away with it.

Efforts to engage boys in conversations about consent should start early. The average age at which boys report their first experience with pornography is 13, and media influence likely begins long before that. Since most boys will be exposed to graphic images online and stories about sexual expectations from their peers, it is critical that parents address issues such as power dynamics, ethics and the range of emotions that often accompany relationships and sexual experiences.

Consent is a necessary part of so many of the actions that children engage in. Conversations about things like hugging provide platforms for parents to begin a dialogue about consent. Learning the fundamental idea of the word "no" offers a young boy a foundational understanding of what consent entails.

Early conversations with boys about consent should stress the importance of recognizing that "no" means "no" and that another person's "no" should be respected in any context. Boys are coming of age in a culture that largely teaches them to never take "no" for an answer and to be more persistent and insistent when they are told "no." It is critical that boys recognize early on that pressuring or convincing someone to do something is not

consent.

Similarly, consent should never be implied or assumed. Even more important than "no" is recognizing the lack of words and communication that is often present in sexual intimacy. Research shows that victims of sexual violence are more likely to freeze than any other reaction during an assault. So, it is important to teach boys that silence does not equal "yes."

More parents are recognizing that simply hoping that their sons would never do something harmful is not enough. Establishing a deeper understanding and appreciation of consent is foundational in raising boys who are empowering, respectful and inclusive of women and girls, and those conversations should happen early and often.

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