

6 Tips for Parents: Reducing and Preventing Misogyny and Sexual Harassment Among Teens and Young Adults

Misogyny and sexual harassment are distressingly commonplace in young people's lives—in music lyrics, popular television shows, video games, magazines, and movies. Words like “bitch” and “ho” are thrown around casually in school hallways, a “bro’s over ho’s” culture pervades many college campuses, and many teens and young people still label girls as either “good” or “bad” and “slut-shame” those they consider “bad.” In our recent national survey, 87% of 18 to 25-year-olds reported that at some point in their lives they had been the victim of some form of sexual harassment.

Yet it appears that most parents have failed to address and prevent misogyny and sexually harassment in their children's lives. While 87% of survey respondents reported that they had been harassed, 76% of our respondents—72% of men and 80% of women—reported that they had 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.

Given the prevalence of sexually degrading and harassing behavior in young people's lives, these conversations are critical, but it's vital that parents go beyond platitudes like “be respectful.” Following are six tips for parents for engaging in meaningful, constructive conversations.

1 Clearly define sexual harassment and degradation.

WHY? Many teens and young people don't know the range of behaviors that constitute misogyny and sexual harassment. We as parents need to explain what these violations mean and provide specific, concrete examples.

TRY THIS:

➔ Make a point of talking to your teen or young adult about what specifically constitutes sexual harassment and degradation. Make it clear that you take the conversation seriously and that you are open to questions. You might start by asking them both to define these terms and to give you examples of each of these violations. You might then need to clarify any misunderstandings and provide common examples of harassment and misogyny, such as referring to someone as a “bitch” or “ho,” or catcalling, whistling, or commenting on someone's clothes or appearance when those comments might be unwanted. Ask young people to carefully consider what it might be like to be subject to comments like these. Make it clear that girls *and* boys can harass, and that even if the words or behaviors you are discussing are intended as a joke, they risk scaring and offending others. In fact, 62% of female respondents to our survey of 18 to 25-year-olds reported that they would be “offended,” “scared,” or “angry” in response to being catcalled.

➔ Check in with your teen or young adult periodically to see if they've remembered and absorbed this information.

2 Step in and stick with it.

WHY? If you're the parent of a teen or young adult, chances are you'll encounter a sexist or sexually degrading comment from them or their friends or peers. Yet too many parents stay silent when this happens. Sometimes we freeze—we simply don't know what to say. Parents who do intervene often think that their intervention won't matter or change young people's behavior. It's true that, even if we intervene, offensive comments may not stop; there are powerful forces that have driven males throughout history and across cultures to degrade females. But passivity not only condones these comments, it can also diminish young people's respect for us as adults and role models. Further, 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 or young adult uses a word like “bitch” or “ho.” How might you react in a way that really enables your teen to absorb your message? You might, for example, ask questions that any thoughtful human is hard-pressed to answer affirmatively: “Why is this a way that you and your friends bond?” “How is making a sexist comment different from making a racist comment?” 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. You might ask your teen or young adult to think about, for example, both what is positive and what is challenging about being another gender, or ask children of different genders in your family to explain to each other what it's like from their perspective to be their gender in their family, school, or community.
- ➔ Encourage young people to think about the nature of real honor, courage, and dignity. There is, of course, no honor or courage in degrading, belittling, or sexualizing others. There can, though, be honor in standing up to your peers when they label or “slut-shame” girls, or shun young women or men they find unattractive. There is also dignity in attending to those who might be vulnerable to harassment and intervening to help defend and protect them.

3 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 or young adult in the car and hear sexually degrading song lyrics or be together when you learn about an episode of sexual harassment or degradation in the news. In these situations, it is vital that we as parents speak up and help our children become mindful, critical consumers of this information—even if speaking up makes us uncomfortable. Here again, silence suggests support.

TRY THIS:

- ➔ Ask how your teen or young adult 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 songs, films, and television can be so common that they come to seem normal and can begin affecting our relationships with others in harmful, hidden 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, try discussing it and talking about how it made you feel.
- ➔ Help your teen in spotting and critically examining troubling male roles, attitudes, and behaviors in our culture. Why do many women continue to be subject to sexual harassment in the workplace? Why do men continue to outnumber women in critical roles in politics and business? What are effective ways of combating entitled male attitudes that diminish or degrade females?

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

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

TRY THIS:

- ➔ Ask your teen or young adult 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? All of us, of course, 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. For example, 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 doing a role play with them that helps them explore a variety of strategies, including what specific words they might use in confronting the perpetrator. Brainstorm with your child ways of responding in various contexts.

Many young people, for example, will call their friends sluts jokingly, a situation that's quite different from someone who is not a friend using the word intentionally as a weapon. However, both uses can be harmful.

- ➔ Continue to check in with your teen or young adult periodically to see if they've had these experiences and to find out what strategies they have used—or would use—in dealing with them. Underline the importance of your teen or young adult talking to you or another trusted, respected adult if the offending behavior doesn't stop.

5 Encourage and expect upstanding.

WHY? As ethical parents, we should expect our teens and young adults to not only protect themselves when they're harassed or degraded but also to protect each other. 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 themselves 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 or young adult about the importance of being an ally to peers who are subjected to harassment or misogyny. You might start a conversation by asking about what they *would* do versus what they *should* do. Ask them, 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 to them about what might stop them from intervening in these situations, brainstorm various strategies, and/or do a role play. If confronting the perpetrator is an option, think through the specific words they might use.

6 Work to assure that young people have 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 or young adult in engaging in activities that build their confidence that don't involve romantic or sexual attention or approval from peers. These activities might involve, for example, 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. It's important to underscore for girls the power of standing together and collective action.