

Talking to Kids About Sexual Assault in the News

The most important thing in this article - and the thing our children need most to understand - is the following sentence:

Healthy masculinity means helping the people around you feel (and be) safer and stronger.

In recent weeks, accusations of atrocious actions by boys and men that have resulted in terrible, and possibly lifelong, impacts on the girls and women who are victims of these alleged crimes. And I've been inundated with requests from media outlets, all asking the same questions:

How do we talk to our kids about this? And

How do we keep our boys from causing harm and our girls safe?

In this article I want to briefly respond to both of these questions to help you have age-appropriate discussions with your children - because these questions matter for kids of all ages.

Talking to our Children About These Stories

It's natural to want to cocoon your kids from these topics, *and at a younger age you probably can.*

But as they mature, silence will not be protective. They'll be on the bus or in the playground and they'll hear about their favourite footballers in the news. Someone will speak about the alleged assault involving young teens in an alleyway. If you're not open to a conversation, they'll build the story (and their attitudes) without you.

Once your children are at Grade 4 or beyond, it's a discussion *you* could start with a simple, "What have you heard about this?" Alternatively you could ask, "Are the kids at school talking about that news story where...?"

Your children are going to read your face as they talk with you about these tricky topics. If they see that you are in control, regulated, and capable of having a considered conversation, they'll be more likely to disclose to you than if you have a head full of steam and launch into a lecture.

The developmental framework for how to talk about these stories goes like this:

ELC to Year 3 - don't raise the topic unprompted. They're young enough to not want to know and not need to know. If they ask, describe it simply: someone hurt someone, adults are helping. At every age - and irrespective of whether stories such as this are in the news, your job is to let them know that if anything ever feels wrong in their lives - and particularly if anyone ever wants to touch them anywhere that swimsuits cover - they should tell you or another trusted adult right away. Discussions about [protective behaviours](#) are helpful. And please, [use correct names for body parts](#).

Years 4–6: If the story comes up - or if you choose to raise it - be honest, but keep details low-level and developmentally appropriate. Get curious to understand what your child knows. Introduce the idea that people can be hurt by someone they know. Again, emphasise your child's safety and that they should talk to you if they are ever uncomfortable or if someone tries to touch them without consent.

Years 7–9: At this age, it's likely they've seen the memes and the comment sections (even though they're supposedly not on social media). They've got their huge WhatsApp groups. Ask what people are saying online and in their grade.

Discuss [consent](#), which means freely given, informed, ongoing, able to be withdrawn at any moment, and impossible under pressure, intoxication, or a power imbalance.

Discuss coercion, which means someone is doing what they want *at the expense of someone else's wishes* (so they're making them).

And discuss pressure, which means someone is being influenced in a way that does not take into consideration their best interests or preferences.

Years 10–12: With children 16 and above, treat them as thinkers. Ask what they'd do if they saw something like this occurring. How would they engage, intervene, or move away? How could they help someone who might otherwise be a victim? And talk with them about what they think drives these harmful choices.

Keeping Our Children Safe From Harm (or From Harming)

Our children must know that people are responsible for their own actions. That means a girl is not responsible for what a boy does to her. Sometimes boys are victims too, and they disclose far less often.

Every parent must know this though: based on statistics, boys and men are significantly more likely to do harm, and the harm they cause is disproportionately high. Therefore, we must acknowledge that the culture boys grow up in shapes what they think is normal. Parents of sons have work to do.

As I said at the start, the *most important thing we must teach our sons and our daughters* is what *healthy masculinity* looks like:

A healthy man is one who helps the people around him feel - and be - safer and stronger.

Boys need to hear the following ideas and wrestle with them:

- [Consent matters](#). When someone says no, they mean it. When someone is not sure, that's *NOT* a 'yes'. That applies to tickling and wrestling as much as it applies to physical closeness and intimacy.



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- Perspective taking is a core skill that requires practice and discussion. "How do you think the other person felt?" builds more character and consideration than all the rules in the world ever will.
- The upstander conversation - what you say when a mate says something degrading - is vital here. Rehearse the actual words. "That's not cool bro", as he walks away can be a powerful status leveler.

And we need to ask them when they've seen healthy masculinity (and how it felt), compared with when they've seen its opposite (where an unhealthy man leaves those around him feeling smaller and weaker) - and how that felt. Which does he want to be?

Girls need to hear that they should use their voice because they have agency. They need to know that they should follow their instincts. And underpinning both of these messages that are safety-focused should be the clear message that they are never responsible for someone else's choices.

Our world is messy and, at times, awful. Which means these conversations are not a luxury. They're a necessity. But these conversations can't only happen once. They need to occur regularly: in the car, at bedtime, over the washing up, for the next fifteen years.

Let's have these conversations over and over again, and help all of our children understand that a healthy boy or man always leaves those around him feeling safer and stronger.



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