



The Talk

How Adults Can Promote Young People's
Healthy Relationships and Prevent
Misogyny and Sexual Harassment

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Executive Summary

Parents and other adults often fret a great deal about the “hook-up culture.” But that focus ignores two far more pervasive troubles related to young people’s romantic and sexual experiences. The first is that we as a society are failing to prepare young people for perhaps the most important thing they will do in life—learn how to love and develop caring, healthy romantic relationships. Second, most adults appear to be doing shockingly little to prevent or effectively address pervasive misogyny and sexual harassment among teens and young adults—problems that can infect both romantic relationships and many other areas of young people’s lives.

Over the past several years, in an effort to understand young people’s romantic and sexual experiences, Making Caring Common has surveyed over 3,000 young adults and high school students from many parts of the country and has gathered insights from scores of formal interviews and informal conversations. We have also talked with adults who are key to young people, including parents, teachers, sport coaches, and counselors.

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KEY FINDINGS

1. Teens and adults tend to greatly overestimate the size of the “hook-up culture” and these misconceptions can be detrimental to young people.

➔ Research indicates that a large majority of young people are not hooking up frequently, and our research suggests that about 85% of young people prefer other options to hooking up, such as spending time with friends or having sex in a serious relationship. Yet according to our research, teens and adults tend to greatly overestimate the percentage of young people who are hooking up or having casual sex. This overestimation can make many teens and young adults feel embarrassed or ashamed because they believe that they are not adhering to the norms of their peers. It can also pressure them to engage in sex when they are not interested or ready.

2. Large numbers of teens and young adults are unprepared for caring, lasting romantic relationships and are anxious about developing them. Yet it appears that parents, educators and other adults often provide young people with little or no guidance in developing these relationships. The good news is that a high percentage of young people *want* this guidance.

➔ While parents wring their hands about whether to have the “sex talk” with their kids, far fewer parents fret about how to talk to their kids about what mature love is or about what it actually takes to develop a healthy, mature romantic relationship. Yet 70% of the 18 to 25-year-olds who responded to our survey reported wishing they had received more information from their parents about some emotional aspect of a romantic

relationship, including “how to have a more mature relationship” (38%), “how to deal with breakups (36%), “how to avoid getting hurt in a relationship” (34%), or “how to begin a relationship” (27%).

➔ 65% of respondents to our survey of 18 to 25-year-olds wished that they had received guidance on some emotional aspect of romantic relationships in a health or sex education class at school. Yet sex education also tends not to engage young people in any depth about what mature love is or about how one develops a mature, healthy relationship. Most sex education is either focused narrowly on abstinence or is “disaster prevention”—how not to get pregnant or contract sexually transmitted diseases.

3. Misogyny and sexual harassment appear to be pervasive among young people and certain forms of gender-based degradation may be increasing, yet a significant majority of parents do not appear to be talking to young people about it.

➔ In our national survey of 18 to 25-year-olds, 87% percent of women reported having experienced at least one of the following during their lifetime: being catcalled (55%), touched without permission by a stranger (41%), insulted with sexualized words (e.g., slut, bitch, ho) by a man (47%), insulted with sexualized words by a woman (42%), having a stranger say something sexual to them (52%), and having a stranger tell them they were “hot” (61%). Yet 76% of respondents to this survey had never had a conversation with their parents about how to avoid sexually harassing others. Majorities of respondents had never had conversations with their parents about various forms of misogyny.

➡ The more females are outperforming males in school and outnumbering them in college, the more subject many appear to be to certain forms of gender-based degradation. Research suggests that when women outnumber men in college, men are especially likely to dictate the terms of relationships (Regnerus, 2011), and a “bros over ho’s” culture now prevails on many college campuses and in other settings. Casual sex is often narrowly focused on male pleasure (Orenstein, 2016), and words like “bitches” and “ho’s” and terms for sex like “I hit that” are now pervasive. That far greater numbers of teens and young adults over the last decade are watching porn regularly may fuel certain forms of misogyny and degradation.

4. Many young people don’t see certain types of gender-based degradation and subordination as problems in our society.

- ➡ 48% of our survey respondents either agreed (19%) or were neutral (29%) about the idea that “society has reached a point that there is no more double standard against women.”
- ➡ 39% of respondents either agreed or were neutral that it’s “rare to see a woman treated in an inappropriately sexualized manner on television.”
- ➡ 32% of male and 22% of female respondents thought that men should be dominant in romantic relationships, while 14% of males and 10% of females thought that women should be dominant.

5. Research shows that rates of sexual assault among young people are high. But our research suggests that a majority of parents and educators aren’t discussing with young people basic issues related to consent.

➡ Although this report does not focus on the many issues involved in consent and sexual assault, we found that this is another area where many adults don’t appear to be having meaningful and constructive conversations with young people. Despite the fact that 1 in 5 women report being sexually assaulted during college according to a recent national survey (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015), most of the respondents to our survey of 18 to 25-year-olds had never spoken with their parents about “being sure your partner wants to have sex and is comfortable doing so before having sex”(61%), assuring your “own comfort before engaging in sex” (49%), the “importance of not pressuring someone to have sex with you”(56%), the “importance of not continuing to ask someone to have sex after they have said no” (62%), or the “importance of not having sex with someone who is too intoxicated or impaired to make a decision about sex” (57%). About 58% of respondents had never had a conversation with their parents about the importance of “being a caring and respectful sexual partner.” Yet a large majority of respondents who had engaged in these conversations with parents described them as at least somewhat influential.

The good news is that a high percentage of young people want guidance.

Recommendations

The good news is that, because most parents and educators don't seem to be engaging young people in meaningful conversations about mature relationships or misogyny and harassment, there is substantial room for improvement. It is also hopeful that young people want to have these conversations—in particular, about romantic relationships.

We offer the following guidelines for parents and sex educators embarking on these conversations.

1.



Talk about love and help teens understand the differences between mature love and other forms of intense attraction.

Many parents may not see providing guidance on romantic relationships as their role, not know what to say, or feel hobbled in these conversations because of their own romantic failures. But relationship failures can generate as much wisdom as relationship successes, and all adults can distill their wisdom and share it in age-appropriate ways with teens and young adults. Adults might puzzle through with teens and young adults questions at the core of learning how to love and develop healthy relationships: *What's the difference between attraction, infatuation, and love? How can we be more attracted to people the less interested they are in us? Why can we be attracted to people who are unhealthy for us? How do you know if you're "in love?" Why and how can romantic relationships become deeply meaningful and gratifying? How do they contribute to our lives? How can the nature of a romantic relationship and the nature of love itself change over a lifetime?*

2.



Guide young people in identifying healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Adults can help teens identify the markers of healthy and unhealthy relationships. They might ask teens, for example: *Does a relationship make you—and your partner—more or less self-respecting, hopeful, caring, generous? What are some examples of healthy and unhealthy relationships in our own family and community? In television and film? What makes these relationships healthy or unhealthy?*



3.

Go beyond platitudes.



Almost all teens know they're supposed to be self-respecting and respectful in their romantic and sexual lives; what many teens *don't* know is what these kinds of respect actually mean in different romantic and sexual situations. Adults can identify for teens common forms of misogyny and harassment, such as catcalling or using gender-based slurs. Sharing data from this report about the high rates of misogyny and harassment can help crystallize the problem. Adults can also discuss with teens various examples of caring, vibrant romantic relationships, including relationships in books, television, and film that show how thoughtful, self-aware adults deal with common stresses, miscommunications, and challenges and use these examples to explore with teens the capacities and skills it takes to develop and maintain a healthy, energizing romantic relationship.



4.

Step in.



It is imperative that parents and sex educators proactively address healthy relationships with young people and that parents and other adults intervene when they witness degrading words or behavior. Silence can be understood as permission. Use the resources in the Appendix to help guide these interactions.

5.

Talk about what it means to be an ethical person.



Helping young people develop the skills to maintain caring romantic relationships and treat those of different genders with dignity and respect also helps strengthen their ability to develop caring, responsible relationships at every stage of their lives and to grow into ethical adults, community members, and citizens. Adults can support young people in becoming ethical in this broader sense by connecting discussions about romantic and sexual relationships and misogyny and harassment to ethical questions about their obligation to treat others with dignity and respect, intervene when others are at risk of being harmed, and advocate for those who are vulnerable. See the resources in the Appendix for additional prompts for these conversations.

Read the full report and find additional resources at www.makingcaringcommon.org.