

## Transforming a Sexually Toxic Society

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This last decade seems to be pointing to the need to step up our efforts to prevent sexual violence. There appears to be an increase in sexual violence in terms of sexually aggressive behavior among children and youth. For example, we are seeing more incidence of sexual violence in schools.

In this hour I will be touching on four different action steps I want you to consider to ultimately stop sexual violence. The first of those is pretty basic: recognize "it" happens. The "it" is sexuality, sexual behavior problems, and sexual violence. Second, we need to talk about "it." Third, we live in a sexually-toxic society. We need to ask ourselves if we're helping our children to grow up to be healthy sexual adults, or to be sexual bullies, sexual takers, and sexual offenders. Fourth, and the part that keeps my heart and soul going, we can, with the will, transform "it."

I was recently asked to be on a panel to do a twenty-five year retrospect on prevention of child sexual abuse at a national conference. There is a lot to say about the history of child sexual abuse prevention efforts but for purposes of this talk, suffice it to say that in the 70s breakthroughs were being made between the women's movement and gay and civil rights efforts. Adult survivors were speaking up and out, and a wide range of professionals began to listen. Rape and sexual assault centers expanded their work with adults and included child sexual abuse as a whole, the other piece of sexual violence that wasn't being addressed. Now, the secret certainly is out. Sexual violence and sexual trauma are talked about; the attention has led to conferences like this. There are more services for victims, survivors, and perpetrators; more curriculum and educational resources. Eighty percent of parents now say they want and support education for their children. "It" is in the mass media to the point where people can say, how do you say we don't talk about "it;" we are bombarded by "it!"

But in many ways our confusion is greater than ever. Why? In part it is because we are still very confused about what "it" is.

We still teach in the "it" syndrome.

I want you to know that you can talk to me about "it." I want you to know that if you have any questions about "it" that I am comfortable talking about "it," and I want you to be able to ask your questions about it. I want you to know that if anybody does anything to those parts of your body, those part of your body that are covered up by a swimming suit, that there is

nothing wrong with those parts of your body. I don't want you to think that you have anything to be ashamed of because of those parts. It is really important for us to talk about "it."

We still take a word like abstinence and never say exactly what it means. Is abstinence anything but sexual intercourse? Is it a surprise really that we have a lot of kids that are confused about whether oral sex is a form of sex? Our discomfort leads to omission - omission that misses great opportunities. We do all this work on violence prevention but avoid talking about sexual violence as a type of violence. We do all this work around bullying, but we avoid the fact that a lot of bullying that goes on has to do with sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Further, we are still not wanting to do something comprehensive. We want one video - one theater piece - or one curriculum that is going to do it all for us. We also don't want to do the education in a balanced way.

Let me give a few examples of the sexual behaviors, sexual behavior problems, and sexual violence we are seeing. This year I was very involved in a high school where three boys were accused of, and subsequently found guilty of, sexually assaulting a girl during the school day. We did work with students, staff, and the community. What initially happened was a split between people's perceptions of what happened and who was to blame, who to hold accountable. As is typical in these cases, there was a lot of blaming the victim. Many wondered how such popular, good boys could do this. If they did it, what does that mean? That really blows our image of who perpetrators are. It is scary to think it could happen in school. What does that mean?

Such incidents aren't limited to high schools. Two kindergarten boys held down a kindergarten girl; while one of the boys pins her down the other touches her vagina over her underwear. Two first-grade boys held another boy in the bathroom; one inserted a pencil up the boy's anus while the other boy pulled on his penis. A middle school sexual resource officer sexually harassed another staff person. A middle school boy sexually harassed a teacher. An eighth-grade girl skipped school with other students - all were drinking; two boys forced her to have sex. A ninth-grade boy exposed himself in the locker commons area not far from the main office. At a school basketball game a boy grabbed a girl and sexually touched her; he was charged with criminal sexual conduct. It turned out he had five prior incidents of inappropriate touch, all of which got him administrative transfers but not much help. A politician in our state in her early fifties, dressed in a mini-skirt and tight shirt, quipped to a young female organizer near her side, "Isn't it sad that we girls have to dress this way."

I get a variety of calls from parents, one of them was about a five-year-old writing in her diary about how sexy her boyfriend is: "I would like to see him with his shirt off so I can see his nipples. My brother is very sexy too." Her parents wanted to know, is this normal? What could it mean? Do you think it has anything to do with those TV shows she watches? According to the Nielsen ratings of the top ten websites, the number one is [porncity.com](http://porncity.com). [Porncity.com](http://porncity.com) gets 12.5 million visits per month, with an average of \$8 each. Technically, none of them is under 18 because in theory they can't go there. Dr David Finkelhor, who has done a lot of research in this area, recently did a study for the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) on

frequency of sexual exploitation of youth on the internet. The study found that one in five youth on-line experienced an unwanted sexual solicitation and one in four see unwanted (they are not looking for it) pornography. While a lot of these kids report they aren't traumatized, a small but significant portion are. And, of course, most don't tell. The NCMEC does have a cyber-tip-line that is for reports of on-line child pornography and sexual solicitation of children. Servers are mandated to report when it is brought to their attention that this is happening on their sites. The NCMEC gets a range of reports from child pornography, child prostitutions, sex tourism, molestation, and on-line enticement. They also have sites around the world and are learning more about the sexual trafficking of children internationally, which, of course, the US is not exempt from. We like to look at the other countries where this is happening and think it can't happen here.

What can we do about it? We get really complacent, and we can't be. We tolerate and condone "smaller acts of sexual exploitation" and begin to think it's normal or just the way it is - it's not unlike how we respond to rudeness. A study on rudeness, or mean spiritness, shows such behaviors are not just common in schools but also in the work place. In fact, one study indicates that rudeness causes a 50% decrease in productivity. Yet when it comes to things like rudeness, sexual bullying, and so on, we tend not to take inappropriate behavior or harmful behavior seriously until there is blood - until there are charges.

Part of the challenge is definitions. Let me start with a definition of what I mean when I say violence. Violence is very often defined as words and actions that hurt people; the misuse of power and control; physical, psychological, or sexual harm to your family, your friends, your peers, your community, or yourself. Sexual violence is a type of violence. Sexual violence involves forced or tricked or destructive sexual words, sexual touch, sexual advances, sexual contact, or sexual behaviors. Three ways to determine if that behavior is abusive or not are: Was there consent? Was it equal? Was it coerced? Sexual behavior problems, sexual aggression and sexual violence, whether verbal, physical or psychological, very much interferes with our learning and our work. It creates a disrespectful, if not blatantly hostile environment.

There is a continuum of behaviors. On one end we have healthy, appropriate, respectful and safe behaviors. These are the behaviors we want to see, we want to encourage, we want to make clear that we expect, we support, we reinforce. These behaviors are helpful and they enhance relationships. Moving on the continuum we get to teasing and flirting. When teasing and flirting are fun, mutual, and no harm is done to anyone involved, then they can enhance relationships.

Then there is this category we added - especially in school and in work places - mutually inappropriate. These behaviors are mutual. There is consent. But having sex in school or at work is not appropriate. We must learn to consider time, place and manner. We've lost the context of appropriateness not only by moral or legal standards but by the appropriateness of the setting. Moving further on the continuum, I differentiate bullying from teasing. Bullying is not fun for at least one person involved; it's not mutual; there is harm done; it is aggressive; it hurts the relationship and often the person doesn't stop even when asked to.

Next on the continuum is harassment. Harassment is unwelcome and unwanted sexual words and behaviors. After harassment on the continuum is violence. While there is confusion about what many of the previous terms mean, violence tends to be clearer: coercion, force, harm done. There are policies and laws against harassment and violence.

With any given incident we see people use these words very differently to describe the same thing. Our perceptions and beliefs about how serious a given behavior is varies widely. I think it's useful to point out a couple of fundamental issues. One, children, youth, and adults are sexual beings. Two, there is a great deal of individual and societal confusion about what is sexually healthy and what is sexual violence. We as adults are supposed to guide, protect, and supervise children and youth, but we are confused. We also have a lot of adults who are scared of children, especially youth. We are especially scared around sexuality issues and sexual behaviors. We hesitate to say what needs to be said. We avoid asking questions that would help open dialogue. We hesitate setting limits that our children and youth often crave.

Sexual orientation is always a controversial issue and one many would prefer not to address. Yet sexual orientation bullying is probably one of the most frequent kinds of bullying and the one that gets overlooked the most. With any type of sexual bullying or sexual violence, our confusion and lack of information too often leads to blaming and expecting young people to prevent it from happening to themselves.

Diversity whether it is racial, cultural, gender, sexual orientation, ability, class, religion, life experience, or age plays into how we see what sexual health is and what we see what sexual violence is. These differences play into what behaviors we place at different points on the continuum. Ongoing dialogue is critical so that we keep talking about our perceptions, our realities, and our experiences. Dr John Briere who has written about trauma and on sexual abuse has said that we live in a violent, sexist, racist society where people with lesser power are hurt by people with greater power.

I've been talking about prevention for nearly twenty-five years. I have written more than my share of curriculums and educational materials. I still find I need to say some of the same things I said years ago. On the other hand, some of what I thought then I now know is wrong, and I've changed. For example, a lot of my energy use to go into helping people protect themselves. While finding ways to reduce chances of victimization is not a bad thing, it should not be the sole focus of prevention.

Rather than simply talking about prevention, I now talk about the three P's: promotion, protection, and prevention. Promotion is building protective factors, strengths. Dr Robert Blum at the University of Minnesota says that getting rid of a risk factor is proven not to have the impact that increasing a protective factor has. But inevitably we keep focusing on the problem rather than looking at what needs to happen to strengthen an individual, to strengthen a family, to strengthen a community -- and how we build on those strengths. Promotion also involves teaching life and social skills so everyone has core skills.

The second "P" is protection. Protection involves safety and security measures. Technology such as cameras, metal detectors, and wireless walkie-talkies are popular because they are useful but also because they are "doable." It is very clear when hardware is purchased, how the money was used. It can be frustrating when I hear there is no money for prevention, but somehow there seems to be money for hardware. I don't mean to minimize such efforts because they can make a huge difference. Safety assessments, criminal background checks, sex offender registration, and community notification are all different pieces of the protection puzzle. But I do get concerned when we separate hardware too much from "heartware." Hardware is much easier. We can buy it, we can use it, we can know it. But we rely too much on technology.

The third "P" is prevention, and there are four levels of prevention. One of those areas is reducing the chances of sexual victimization. This involves increasing the awareness and understanding of the dynamics of sexual violence and sexual health. It also involves increasing the skills that might help us - communication, assertiveness, refusal, resistance, and perhaps most notably, a strong sense of identity, self-esteem, to know you deserve respect and do not deserve to be sexually exploited.

Arguably the most important level of prevention is stopping sexual offending. Clinician Jan Heinman says that "it is our power of omission that is creating sexual offenders. Our kids get hurt hearts when adults sexually abandon our children. We need to battle our denial that our children can be victims or can be sex offenders." Certainly part of stopping offending behaviors is criminal record checks, screening, and community notification. But another part is clear, consistent and honest messages that don't play into myths like "dangerous stranger." Most of the sexual exploitation is committed by someone the victim knows and trusts. But we tend to avoid talking about how somebody grooms, seduces, and coerces. It scares me that we have made our children afraid to ask somebody for help. Some children are learning that if a stranger talks to them, they should scream and yell. Too many are taught that any male who is nice, kind, and likes children is a predatory sex offender. There has to be a balance in how we do our education.

To stop offending behaviors we also need to address individual and societal faulty thinking that justifies so much sexual exploitation, the attitude or belief that he or she wanted it or asked for it. Because the person likes me or is attracted to me, does not mean it's okay to sexually exploit me. Perhaps not directly said, but often implied in male victimization or in encouraging offending are beliefs like "he wasn't man enough - we're just helping him be more of a man."

Gender socialization is alive and well in perpetuating sexual violence. Still dominant is the belief that the way to be a man is to use power and violence to get sex. Or, that it is okay to violate somebody because of perceived or real sexual orientation. It is a shame that so many of our girls still get the message that the way to get attention is looks and sexual appeal. Girls are supposed to be sexy, look sexy, but not have sex. Plus girls hear that if they are sexually violated

while they are looking and acting like they are taught, it's their own fault. How can boys be expected to control their impulses?

Recently a series of books and experts have questioned what is going on in male socialization to produce so much violent behavior. Though most males are not sex offenders, most sex offenses are committed by males. Experts like Dr James Garbarino point out that boys are socialized away from connection, away from empathy, away from the feelings within themselves or toward another person. They are picked on if they do. Boys are encouraged to prove their masculinity by behaving in a sexually aggressive manner toward girls or ridiculing boys who aren't male enough.

Walk into any pre-school, elementary school or high school or work place and feel how palpable is the gender socialization. Here are a few quotes from youth. One girl said, "Girls go against girls, they attack them for what they do and the choices that they make, because we girls were taught to compete with other girls for boys attention." A boy pointed out, "A lot of guys are thinking that girls are just trying to get them into trouble. Did you see that TV show, always the source of information, where this girl got drunk and she came into this guy's room - she laid herself out. I mean, he didn't know she was drunk. Later she said he raped her. Guys are really afraid of being accused of something like that." I said, "I hear that a lot. Given how concerned the guys say you are about being falsely accused it seems like you would be really careful to not have any kind of sexual contact with someone unless you were 100% sure that they wanted that."

The third level of prevention: build the capacity of bystanders. Most people are not the ones being victimized or the ones doing the bullying. The majority are watching, seeing, hearing, and doing nothing. They may not know what to do or to say. Sometimes bystanders support the behaviors by standing guard, laughing, cheering it on, or spreading the rumor. We need to get the message across that a big part of prevention is taking personal responsibility.

There does tend to be a gender difference in how bullying is done. Girls tend to bully through rumors, isolating and banishing. Boys tend to do it in more physically aggressive or emotionally threatening ways.

So what can a bystander do? Respond to those inappropriate jokes. Respond when you see somebody being hurt and put down and taunted and teased. Show compassion. Understand that each of us can be a peacemaker. For five years during the State of Minnesota's mass media "Make the Peace Campaign," I was in charge of community outreach. The theme was, "You're the One Who Can Make the Peace." It is no small thing to get people to realize the power of small acts. We are all peacemakers. We know from violence studies that a lot of times people didn't know there was anything they, as an individual, could do. They don't really think taking action is their role. They worry they might make things worse. We all don't have the same set of skills or comfort, but there is something each of us can do.

The fourth level or approach to prevention is addressing the reality that we live in a sexually toxic society. We need actively to encourage positive and healthy relationships. In some ways it's amazing we have as many healthy people as we do! We need to encourage behaviors we want to see. We need to stop being indifferent to "small things" and start to take harmful behaviors like sexual bullying seriously. We need to expect adults to act like adults, and remember that it is our job to supervise and do all that we can do to protect children. It is our job to bring up some of the tough subjects. It is our job to set some of the limits children and youth often crave but resist.

Dr David Walsh, a national expert on violence and the media, has said, "The real power of the mass media is in shaping social norms and expectations. Whoever tells the story defines the culture. With children and youth bombarded with images of sex and violence, it is not surprising, although it is tragic, that more and more of our children are engaging in sexual behavior and perpetrating sexual assaults." Media is by no means the sole contributor to sexual violence, but it is part of the problem and can be part of the solution.

Talking about touch is another tool of awareness and education. Touch relates to everything we have been talking about. When I first coined the concept of the "touch continuum" in 1977, I wanted people to be less confused about touch, not more confused. Twenty-five years ago, many equated all touch with sex, so touch was avoided. Now no one wants to touch because they equate all touch with sexual abuse. Well-intended parents tell their children, "no one has a right to touch you." A teacher declared, "I am afraid to touch my students anymore. I think I know the difference between touch that is appropriate and touch that isn't. But it's not worth the risk of not knowing what someone else might think." If someone is a victim, too many believe that no one should touch them because you know they are going to take the touch wrong.

The touch continuum is often oversimplified into "good touch, bad touch." I cringe because it is much more than that. We need to talk about the entire continuum of touch and teach related skills. For example, lack of touch on one end of the continuum is positive when a person knows and is setting a personal limit. Lack of touch is also on the opposite end of the continuum when there is a deprivation of touch. When people are touch-starved they might look to get touch in self or other destructive ways through violence or sex. We all need appropriate and caring touch throughout our lives.

The touch continuum also involves knowing what to do when touch is confusing. Touch can be confusing for many different reasons: if I am not used to it; if there are double messages around it; if I don't know your intent; if the touch feels really good, but it's a secret and I am not supposed to tell anybody; if I'm made to feel like there is something wrong with me, or, dirty with me; if it started out as a fun game, but changed and I don't like it anymore and you won't stop, won't listen, and then blame me. We need skills to discern confusing touch, but we also don't want to "awfulize" all touch.

Another prevention tool is simply the "Talk About It Model."

Talk about it. See it. Name it. Speak up. Speak out. Act (it takes courage!).

Talk about sexuality and sexual violence. I do not believe in one big talk. I believe in talks at every opportunity, in ways that make sense, that are as common as "pass the salt and pepper, please." If children sense you comfortable and willing to listen, they will bring up all kinds of topics. It might be a little awkward or embarrassing for people who are not quite that comfortable. But when we talk about our own discomfort it can help the talk to move forward. It helps to point out there are different values and different norms in different families. It doesn't mean that one is better or worse, just that people believe different things. We can be clear about our personal values and beliefs while respecting others who think differently. The key is to talk about it.

See it. See it refers to the fact we walk by inappropriate behaviors because we don't want to take the time, don't want to deal with it.

Name it. Name it refers to the power of giving a behavior a name. Whether a behavior is "sexual bullying" or "sexual harassment" or "sexual violence" makes a difference in determining an appropriate response.

Speak up. Speak up refers to each of us taking responsibility assertively to say what we want and what we don't want.

Speak out. Speak out refers to speaking out for what is right and against what is harmful to ourselves or to others. Be a compassionate bystander.

Take action. Take action refers to doing something about behaviors we don't agree with. It takes a lot of courage to act especially when we're talking about speaking up and speaking out about behaviors that others condone or expect. It is easy to expect children to do things we are not willing to do. We expect them to speak up, we expect them peacefully to resolve conflicts when we don't do it ourselves. We tell children not to bully or put down others, but then we turn around and do it to each other.

There is no quick fix. The reality is if we really want change, we need a comprehensive approach. Doing one training does not fit with research that shows it takes about twenty hours to teach a skill and fifty hours to really learn it well. Think about how many sets of skills are involved in most prevention curriculums. Schools are struggling to improve test scores in core subjects. Schools cannot be expected to do it all. Everyone has a responsibility for prevention. Schools can do what I call the core nutrition, the life skills, but we have to reinforce these messages in our homes, faith community, mass media, parks and recreation places, social settings and workplaces. There is a role for broad message campaigns to counter mass destructive education.



Interventions need to be diverse and designed to help all those involved - those harmed, the community affected, and those who caused the harm. Restorative justice is a philosophy that looks at restoring all involved rather than simply getting rid of the person who caused the harm through punishment or banishment. Restorative justice is not a panacea, but neither is our criminal justice system. Restorative efforts are having great effects with some bullying and harassment incidents. People who cause harm need to be held accountable and understand the impact of their behavior, not just on those harmed but on the community. This can have more effect than punishment where the person never really needs to face the harm done to others. Restorative justice also provides an opportunity for victims to be heard and the community to be involved in solutions.

I am concerned about our acts of omission; about what we don't say. Consider how seldom we actually say to people it is not okay for an adult to have sex with a child! It is not okay to misuse your power or your position of authority. When you are in a position of authority, you need to recognize that and think through what that means and why it means that sex isn't okay with a child, adolescent, or an adult you have power and authority over. We need to say that simply in a unified voice in 2001. Parents need to talk to their boys and girls about the fact that it is never okay to force, pressure, or coerce sexual touch or sexual contact.

I'm on the Board of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Even after all my years in this field, it is painful to get weekly reports of child pornography and sexual exploitation on the internet. I delight at the breakthroughs in forensic evidence and investigations but I get extremely concerned at the increasing ways for people to exploit others sexually.

What keeps me going is that I truly believe in the power of each of us to make a difference.

There is a power in finding our voice, a power in building on our own strengths and helping others to build on theirs. There is a power in celebrating the many people who are doing the right thing and overcoming the barriers. Each of us lighting a candle illumines the way.

I truly believe that. And I believe that we are all sparks. Everyone can light the way in our relationships with our children and the systems we work in and the communities we live in; that's the power of change.

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