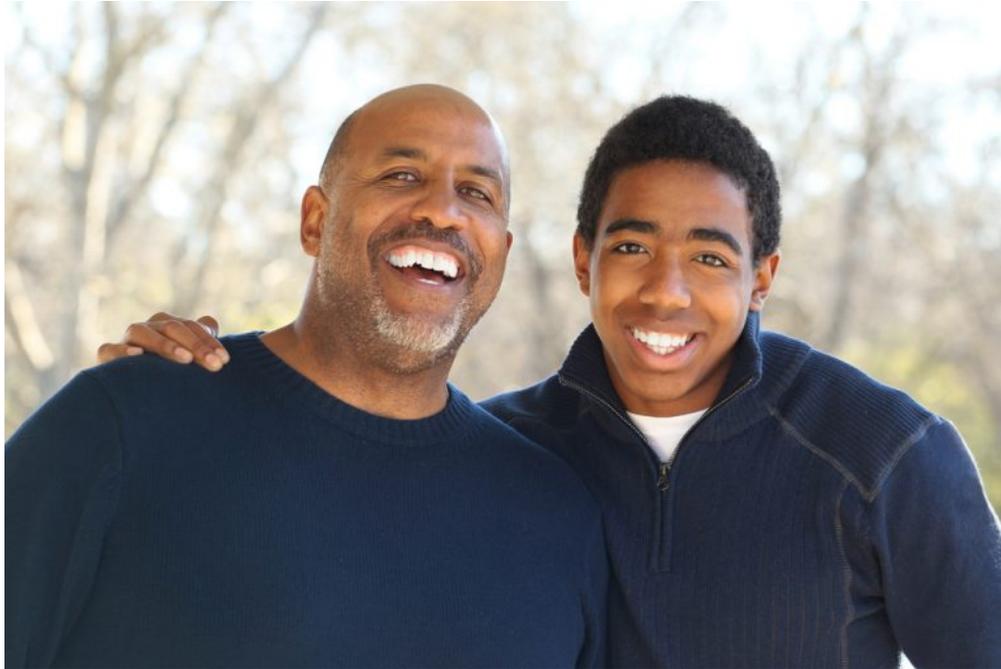


# Fathers, Talk to your Sons



Discuss relationships, respecting women, sex and consent

***Dr. Crutchfield, do you have any advice on what a father should tell his son about relationships and sex in the age of the “#MeToo” movement?***

One of the most important steps is to realize that, in this day and age, it is essential that fathers talk with their sons about how to behave and interact appropriately with young women. Psychologists say that it is important for both mothers and fathers to talk to their sons about relationships and sex, but fathers may have an advantage.

Most boys look up to their fathers, especially for guidance on how to act like a man and how to treat women. Don't get me wrong — this is not easy. In fact, it may be one of the very hardest things a father (or any parent) can do.

It is so hard that the majority of fathers don't do it. And when they do it, it is often inadequate and misguided. Most fathers will father the way they were fathered when they grew up. That means, for the most part, when it comes to having a talk about being sexually responsible and respectful, it was inadequate if it happened at all.

To make matters even more difficult, most fathers grew up in the era of AIDS, and the focus then was mostly on safe sex and condom use, not respectful and consensual sex. Most fathers feel terribly ill-prepared to approach this subject with their sons, so if you do, you are not alone. But there is help and there is hope.

For our sons, being a respectful and sensitive partner is a conversation that needs to occur. The discussion of sexual misconduct is now standard and out in the open. Having a discussion with our sons about how to behave appropriately with young women is probably more important today than it ever has been before.

Reports of sexual misconduct regularly appear in the media. Such reports and accusations typically alert us to the reality of these occurrences without any information that might help us understand why they happen and what can be done to prevent them. Rarely does the reporting media also provide guidance on how to avoid such misconduct before it occurs. That's one reason why father-son talks such as this column recommends are so very important.

## **Some facts:**

In 2017, a Harvard study of approximately 3,000 people, ages 18-25, elucidated some interesting facts.

- Nearly 90 percent of women had been treated (verbally or physically) in a sexually derogatory manner.
- Nearly 80 percent of respondents never had a conversation with their parents on not treating women in a way that was sexually disrespectful.
- More than 60 percent of respondents had never had a conversation with their parents about making sure their partner was comfortable having sex.

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- The majority of respondents said that, while growing up, having a talk with their parents about sexual relationships and engaging in appropriate behavior with partners would have been influential.

## Here are 17 pointers:

- Talk to your son as soon as he is curious. Talk early and talk often. Encourage him to talk, too.
- Remember, this is not a one-time talk, not a “one and done.” It is setting up a line of communication with your son that can be used year after year, whenever needed.
- If you think you feel awkward, your son feels three-times as awkward, so don’t force the conversation. Just let your son know it is something that needs to be talked about. Bring it up again shortly. Eventually, it will become much more comfortable.
- Look for teaching points in the news or TV shows or movies. If the story contains a situation relating to sexual conduct, use that as a doorway for conversation. Ask your son, “What do you think about that?”
- Acknowledge that as humans we are designed to want and have sex, but the focus of sex is to develop a meaningful and intimate relationship with a woman. Focus on the emotional rewards over the mechanical act. Teach him to be a friend first.
- Talk about respect and consent. Ask your son if he wouldn’t want his reputation to be one of a man who is kind and respectful to women rather than that of a man who disrespects and mistreats women? Let him know that nice guys usually win. Be polite; opening doors may be old-fashioned, but it will always work to win a heart.
- Ask him how he would want men to treat his sister(s). Teach him to be polite. Never wait in the car and honk the horn. Go up and ring the bell, greet her parents with a warm and firm handshake, and let them know their daughter is in good hands.
- Teach your son that no matter how a woman dresses, it does not mean she wants to have sex.
- Specifically, discuss consent. Tell your son that to engage in sex both partners must verbally and enthusiastically acknowledge a desire to do so.
- Consent for sex can change. It can change daily, and even hourly. Both parties must be completely willing.
- If a woman says “no,” teach your son to respect the answer.
- Silence is not a “yes.” Never pressure a partner to have sex if they are not ready.
- Teach your son to never try to have sex with a girl if she is intoxicated or otherwise impaired.
- Teach your son to talk about expectations with a partner. They should both be clear, up front, about what is and what is not expected and agree to avoid situations where

uncertainty could arise. Try to leave the cell phone in the car during dates. Talk to each other — don’t stare blindly into a phone while ignoring each other.

- It is alright for your son to say “no” to sex, too. Tell him to never feel pressured to have sex.
- Don’t assume too much. Your son’s level of sexual experience may be different from what you believe.
- Let him know that chances are good his heart will be broken. He can talk to you and learn from the experience. Tell him it might seem like the end of the world, but life will get much better. Tell him it is OK to feel sad and even cry. If you tell him this before a heartbreak, like during your discussions, he will be much more likely to believe you if it happens.

Also, remind him that relationships don’t always work out. If a relationship does not, be a gentleman. Tell him not to do or say anything that he would regret later, including posting messages or pictures on social media or making derogatory comments to friends. Part with respect and with his head held high.

## An easy way to start

Fathers will readily acknowledge how difficult it may be to start that talk, so I’ve got an idea to make it easy. Try this: Make a copy of the “17 pointers” above, show the list to your son, and say, “Let’s talk about these, maybe take a couple a week until we get through the list.” You might be surprised how easy and effective this can be.

The bottom line is to talk to your son about relationships and sex. Talk to your son about being respectful and considerate to women. Talk to your son about the absolute necessity of mutual consent. It is more critical today than ever.

If you don’t talk to your son about these issues, someone else will, and they may not have the same values and goals in mind that you do.

Finally, be a role model for your son. Boys will learn an infinite amount about how to act in a relationship and how to treat women by modeling the behavior of their fathers. Teach by example.

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