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## COMMENTARY

# Focus on middle schoolers in effort to prevent sexual assault

By C. Quince Hopkins  
and Marissa Neuman Jachman

"One in five women will experience completed or attempted rape during their lifetime." If this Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistic sounds familiar, it's because it has not changed in the several decades since data collection began. Prevention efforts have not coaxed the numbers down and, as high as that figure remains, researchers believe it represents a fraction of the country's sexual assault problem: An estimated 80% of sexual assaults go unreported.

This decade's prevention efforts targeted young adults and teens with the concept of consent, but they, too, have had no statistical effect in reducing sexual violence. We aimed to find out why.

Research analysis led us to believe interventions aimed at teens were arriving too late. Sexual assault is not only occurring, but beginning to escalate in the teen years, which we have seen recently from reports by students at area high schools. Starting prevention in high school is like trying to prevent a car crash while it's happening. Some damage might be averted, but not enough.

Also, the research around the subject revealed the so-called "issue" of sexual violence in reality comprises a handful of issues that includes understanding consent, but also reaches beyond. Since more than 90% of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the survivor knows, building healthy relationships is key. The "issue," then, centers on empathy, respect, gender norms and roles, and communication.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, researchers

have linked sexual harassment behaviors to an increased likelihood of sexual assault. And middle schoolers, grappling with new developmental social and physical realities, are most likely to be the primary victims — and perpetrators — of sexual harassment by peers. This is where we focus our work.

The Erin Levitas Foundation is investing in preventative education and partnering with the University of Maryland's Carey School of Law to implement the Erin Levitas Initiative for Sexual Assault Prevention. It begins by approaching seventh graders on their own turf and telling them — nothing, at first.

Instead, we sit in a circle and listen. We have heard the complex, nuanced struggles kids experience while learning and processing evolving social realities. We heard girls are just as likely to engage in sexual harassment as boys, and boys are just as likely to be victimized by toxic masculinity as girls.

Working in a circle instead of lecturing, we've worked with these kids to help them process and understand the drivers behind harassment, the foreteller of assault.

Educators have said these efforts changed classroom dynamics and, in addressing problematic behavior directly, created fundamental changes in students' understanding of what is and is not OK.

Here's what we've learned in these raw, honest, uncomfortable, but-oh-so-important conversations:

■ Boys, too, are struggling and almost as likely to be sexually harassed as girls at this age. Peer pressure and gender expectations can make kids fearful to speak up. One antidote to unhealthy ideas about masculinity and femininity is fostering a healthy, close

relationship with family and peers. People with strong attachments are less likely to engage in sexually aggressive behaviors.

■ Kids are relieved to have space to talk about this stuff. Our groups have engaged in thoughtful conversations about the social waters they are navigating. Have you ever said to a child or been told: "He's teasing you because he likes you." Parents sometimes brush off these concerns. Instead, when kids bring up these topics, it's important for caregivers to address them.

■ Empathy is a powerful antidote. Every time you label a person or assign them traits based on cultural constructs, you are dehumanizing them. Assigning gender roles forces one to look at people through a reductive lens, seeing them as less human. This is a first step on the path to sexual assault. In our program, we talk about understanding social cues and developing perspective taking. Have you ever caught yourself saying: "That's just for girls." Kids hear the judgment inherent in these messages.

Sexual assault takes an emotional and a measurable financial toll. With the CDC reporting 25 million rape survivors in the U.S. right now, we can expect to spend more than \$3 trillion over their lifetime on health care, criminal justice response and lost productivity. If you are uncomfortable speaking with your kids about sexual assault, that's OK. Try listening instead.

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