

Stopping sexual harassment first starts with open, honest dialogue



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COMMENTARY

Have you ever felt the sting of sexual harassment? I've always felt that as a society, we haven't taken very good care of our little girls.

In general terms, trauma creates fear, fear creates controlling behaviors from the traumatized, oftentimes resulting in a fear of intimacy, one of the leading causes of relational conflict and ultimately divorce. Long-term data consistently demonstrates the above from a wide spectrum of sociological and psychological sources.

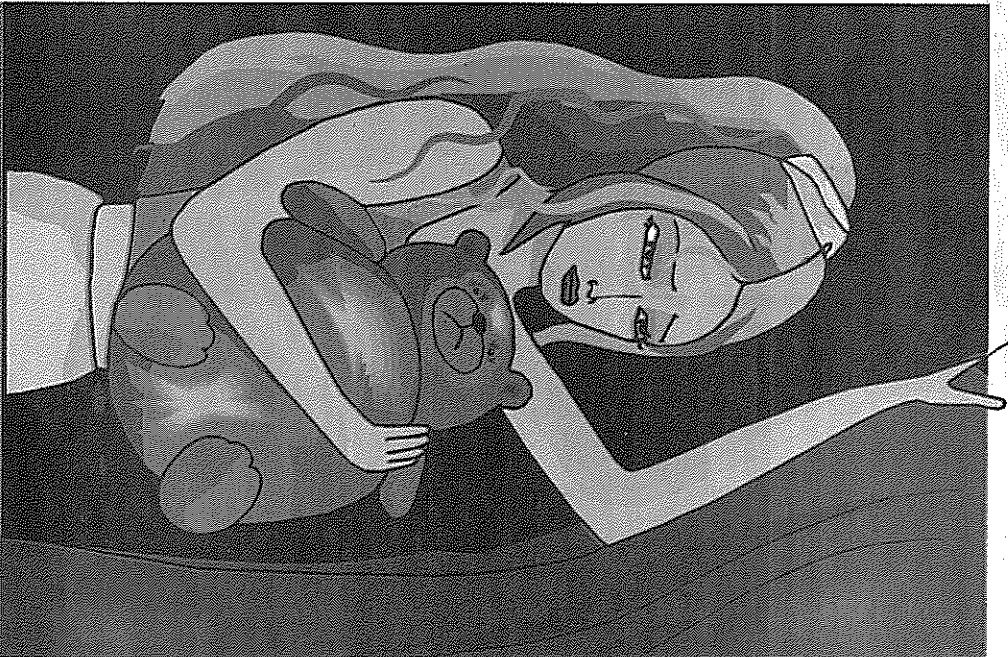
By definition, sexual harassment is any unwanted action, physical or verbal, that embarrasses or causes one person to be intimidated. This includes contemporary name-calling such as "slut" or "ho" and includes any inappropriate touching such as a ritual called "slap-ass Friday," currently in vogue. In other words, sexual harassment is any sexually based action or word that continues after it is known that it is definitely *not* appreciated.

Researchers from the University of Southern Maine showcased a study in the July 2008 issue of the journal "Sex Roles," which indicated an alarming statistic: 35 percent of 522 students ages 11 to 18 reported being sexually harassed. This is, however, not an entirely new phenomena. A 1993 study entitled "Hostile Hallways" surveyed 1,600 students in the eighth through 11th grades and indicated 83 percent of these girls experienced sexual harassment. Research shows that the younger the child, the more impactful and traumatic the experience is for them.

As a behavioral health provider and psychotherapist, I'm appalled at the sexual violence in our schools, and that's exactly what sexual harassment is. Men Stein, a research scientist and author, would agree: "We have a lot of sexual violence going on in school and it's happening at younger and younger ages." As previously mentioned, the data is prolific.

Parents with daughters in elementary and high school know of these truths. Our educational institutions have a wide range of policy from the mindlessness of zero tolerance where the little lesson appears to be "Don't get caught," to more progressive approaches including an open, honest dialogue among students, parents and educators. We are after all, there to teach, and teaching appropriate boundaries is about respect for self and others. Both educators and parents need to understand there is no avoiding uncomfortable conversations. It is here that we must lead by

WE OWE IT TO OUR DAUGHTERS



example. There also are no excuses, including budgetary constraints and time limitations.

This dialogue is more than a teaching moment; it is verification of the love that must manifest itself in these crucial, primary relationships. We either take the time — or we don't. Common sense, real world, inclusive choices must be made. We educate about the dangers of children around backyard swimming pools and the vigilance necessary. Repeated sexual harassment

can lead to low self-esteem and eventually self-loathing. How about "good touch, bad touch" and the security that defining and implementing appropriate sexual boundaries provides? As adults, we need to push ourselves past our own discomfort, and now Daddy's little girl deserves it.

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