



IT'S ON US

Teaching Young Adults About Sexual Consent Starts At Home || BY DIANNA SMITH

Leonardo DiCaprio may have finally won an Oscar, but his achievement was eclipsed by a much more poignant moment at the 88th Academy Awards: when Lady Gaga performed “Til It Happens To You,” from the documentary “The Hunting Ground” about sexual assault on U.S. college campuses. A-listers in the audience and at-home viewers were moved to tears as the singer, herself a rape victim, was joined onstage by dozens of victims of sexual assault.

Vice President Joe Biden even introduced the performance in conjunction with the White House initiative against sexual abuse, It's On Us, asking the public to pledge “to

intervene in situations where consent has not or cannot be given,” among other things.

“I hear it from girls all the time: ‘I was afraid to stop it. I didn't want him mad at me.’ It all comes from a fear base, so I want to empower them not to be fearful. Girls don't like to not be liked. They follow through with things that ultimately they didn't really want to do.”

— Tina Connan, licensed mental health counselor

Clearly, the subject of sexual consent has reached a national boiling point, and colleges and universities, as well as parents, across the country are working to more clearly define what qualifies as consent – and to communicate that definition to young adults. But the task is challenging.

“Sexual consent is a gray area because it involves communication, which can be influenced by a number of factors,” says Anne E. Norris, who holds a Ph.D. in nursing and psychology and is a professor at the University of Miami School of Nursing & Health Studies. “These factors can sometimes make it hard for someone involved in a sexual encounter with another person to recognize that they have crossed a line and violated consent. For example, the person sending the message may not send a clear message.”

In many sexual assault cases, alcohol or drugs are involved, blurring the lines even further. According to Florida law, an individual who is mentally incapacitated, asleep, physically helpless or unconscious due to alcohol or drug consumption is considered unable to give consent.

But many young adults might not agree with that, which is why several Florida colleges and universities are spreading the word that the law does indeed exist.

Norris says the University of Miami offers programs on safe sex and consent to first-year students in residence halls. Some schools, such as Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton and Florida International University in Miami, now require students to take online courses about sex and alcohol and drug abuse.



Though local therapists respect higher education officials for these efforts, they say that the discussion should start at home, with parents talking frankly with teenage boys and girls about sexual consent, including the consequences of abusing drugs and alcohol.

"Kids need to have an understanding of what actually may happen," says Tina Connan, a licensed mental health counselor in Boca Raton.

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, it is estimated that, for every 1,000 women attending a college or university, there are 35 incidents of rape each academic year. And the majority of victims do not report the assaults to law enforcement.

Many women aren't sure that they've been legally assaulted because they were drinking or using drugs at the time. Others were afraid to say no because they didn't want to upset their partners. And

some had originally given consent but changed their minds and didn't know how to tell their partners. The same goes for young men, who — let's not forget — can also be victims of sexual assault.

So, the better educated children are about sexual consent and how to handle themselves in uncomfortable situations, the better off they will be.

According to Dr. Barbara Winter, a psychologist, sexologist and certified sex addiction therapist in Boca Raton, one important thing to constantly remind children is that their bodies are their own: "Your body is precious. You get one body in your lifetime, and you have to treat it with care."

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If a young adult wants an individual to touch her in a sexual way, then it's OK to give consent, Dr. Winter says. But, if she feels any hesitation, she should say no and tell the person to stop. Advise her to use her words.

Connan says that young women need to know that it's OK to change their minds, too.

"I hear it from girls all the time: 'I was afraid to stop it. I didn't want him mad at me.' It all comes from a fear base, so I want to empower them not to be fearful," says Connan, who also serves as a teen life coach. "Girls don't like to not be liked. They follow through with things that ultimately they didn't really want to do."

She reminds us that children should know at an early age that no means no.

Ultimately, parents should be their children's biggest cheerleaders, she says. We should build them up and make them feel loved and appreciated, which will affect how they comport themselves sexually in the future.

"We are responsible for how our children feel about themselves," Connan says. "If you're always yelling at your children, they don't really feel very good. And, many times, the sexual thing has to do with approval and feeling loved."

Plus, the more confident a teen feels, the more comfortable and honest he or she will be in a precarious sexual situation.

Parents should also emphasize to their children that verbalizing one's desires is the clearest way to give — and receive — consent before engaging in a sexual act with someone else.

"It sounds weird, but you need to ask," she says. "Otherwise, you are putting yourself in a situation in which you could be accused of sexual assault."

Norris realizes that sexual consent isn't an easy topic to bring up with teens, so she recommends that parents uncomfortable with the issue write letters. This allows a child to take in the message on her own time, in her own way, and she can read the letter over again.

If you do write a letter, remember to be honest.

"Say, 'There is something important that I need to talk with you about,'" she says. "I wanted to write out my thoughts because I am uncomfortable and also want to be clear in what I tell you."

Most importantly, Norris suggests ending the letter in a reassuring and supportive way, and leave the door open for future discussion: "I love you, and I am willing to talk with you about this more if you want to." ○