

AFFIRMING

'MY BODY, MY RIGHTS'

TO STUDENTS

Betty Lamont

Avant d'atteindre l'âge de 18 ans, une sur quatre femmes et un sur dix hommes auront été agressés sexuellement. Parmi ces chiffres choquants, 85% des agressions sont commises par une personne que la victime connaît – le plus souvent, le père naturel ou son remplaçant. Des éducateurs et éducatrices que ces statistiques inquiètent, ont commencé à chercher de nouvelles façons d'adresser la question des attaques sexuelles avec leurs étudiant(e)s.

Cet article par Betty Lamont traite d'un cours sur les agressions sexuelles, pour les étudiants de 8ième année, développé récemment par le conseil scolaire de North York. En décourant des stratégies pour contrôler ce qui leur arrive, plutôt que d'accepter une attitude de victime, les étudiant(e)s sont encouragé(e)s à prendre un rôle positif et décisif.

Statistics related to sexual offences against Canadian young people indicate that a shocking one out of four females and one out of ten males will have been sexually assaulted by the age of 18. Further investigation reveals that 85% of these offences are by someone who is known to the victim and that in 50% of these cases, the offender is the victim's natural or substitute father.

Concerned educators have begun to explore ways of addressing the topic of sexual assault with their students. The North York Board of Education recently developed a curriculum unit on sexual assault for grade 8 students. Entitled "My Body, My Rights," the unit is a means for teenage students to explore their personal and legal rights, and their role as victims of violence. By encouraging them to discover strategies for controlling what happens to them (rather than accepting a victim mentality), a positive, decision-making role is developed.

VULNERABILITY OF TEENAGERS

Teenagers as a group are particularly

vulnerable to becoming victims of sexual assault. It is normal for them to explore beyond their limits. For many the risks may involve hitchhiking, drugs, alcohol or being where they shouldn't be. Such risks are frequently factors in incidents of sexual assault.

Other examples of their vulnerability abound. As a group adolescents are confused and embarrassed by their sexuality and are bombarded with conflicting messages. While confused about the world of love and romance, adolescents are often pressured to enter into it. They may accept the myth that women get pleasure from being raped and often ask for it. They are told to believe that when a female says "No" she really means "Yes" and that she just wants to be coaxed. The popular media add to the confusion by appearing to condone sexual violence.

Male and female adolescents may already be actively involved in sexual harassment – either as victims or offenders. Activities such as obscene phone calls, abusive jokes, staring with sexual overtones, the spreading of sexual gossip, and the uninvited patting of breasts, crotches and behinds are common experiences within their culture. It is not unusual to find young males lining a school hallway and yelling sexual comments or calling out grades on female bodies. When victims smile, laugh, or otherwise fail to express their feelings of discomfort, embarrassment or anger, mixed messages are transmitted that further exacerbate the problem.

Female adolescents have already been victimized by a society that is turning them into sex objects at an increasingly early age. The latest craze in clothes – a torn, off the shoulder look – approximates the appearance of a victim of violent sexual assault. Female teenagers are socialized to believe that male sexuality is uncontrollable. Many females believe that the use of force by males to engage in intercourse is justified. In a study at the University of California cited in *No Is Not Enough* (Impact Publishers, 1984), females reported that it was okay if a male holds a female down and forces her to engage in sexual intercourse under circumstances such as the following: if she says she is going to have sex with him and then changes her mind (31%); if they have dated a long time (32%); or if she gets him sexually excited (42%).

The proliferation of pornography has a

serious impact on the adolescent group. Both males and females may have already become victims of kiddie porn. Male adolescents are high consumers of pornography. It is an unfortunate fact that in our society young males do not receive as much information on sexuality as their female peers. Socialized to believe they should know more, in many cases young teenage males glean this missing information from pornographic magazines – what they absorb there is female subordination, degradation and victimization.

Indeed, many teenagers have a misconception about the whole concept of sexual assault. They have a view of sexual assault that involves guns, knives and weirdos. Often they don't understand that the use of coercion, threats, verbal manipulation or engaging in sex without consent is also sexual assault. Their lack of understanding of consent as being *active* rather than passive can be limited: consent is not giving in, nor is it going along.

DATE RAPE

Teenagers are entering the age group in which they are being initiated into the social phenomenon of dating. Their participation in sexual assault under the guise of date rape has been well documented.

Offenders of date rape often feel that sex is their right. Many young men feel that they are justified in holding a female down and forcing her to engage in sexual intercourse. The following results are reported in the above-cited study: if he spends a lot of money on her (39%); if she has had intercourse with other guys (39%); if she is stoned or drunk (39%); if she says she is going to have sex with him and then changes her mind (54%); if they have dated a long time (43%); if she gets him sexually excited (51%); or if she's led him on (54%).

Offenders will not take "no" for an answer. They often lie to get sexual contact and have learned the persuasive power of "I love you." The "force" used in date rape is more likely to be verbal manipulation rather than threats of physical violence. The verbal coercion may involve trickery (running out of gas on a lonely road), bribery (gifts), deception ("I'll never tell"), pressure ("What are you, a prude?" "a tease?"), emotional blackmail ("I love you" or "I want to marry you"), or exploitation often under the guise of seduction (wine, soft music, a darkened room).

MY BODY, MY RIGHTS PROGRAM

The lessons in the grade 8 My Body My Rights program developed by the North York Board of Education are divided into three areas of exploration: Personal Rights, Legal Rights, and Protecting Your Rights.

Personal Rights

Students become aware of their personal rights related to personal space and touch. Through role playing situations they can learn to recognize their own comfort/discomfort zone. An open, honest discussion is important to delineate the differences between a warm, loving touch which recognizes a mutual, caring relationship and an exploitive sexual touch which has at its base coercion, threat or the misuse of power of male over female or adult over child. This discussion can be initiated through the use of films such as The Acquaintance Rape Series (End of the Road, The Date, and The Party Game) and Better Safe Than Sorry, Part III.

A clear understanding of the definitions of sexual harassment and sexual assault is important so that teenage students can develop a sense of their own rights. A knowledge of what sexual harassment is and is not allows young students to protect their personal rights as they enter the workforce.

Legal Rights

Students become aware of the laws governing sexual assault and explore specific but anonymous case studies from their community. The involvement of the police department in this part of the unit enables students to discuss their legal concerns openly with the police and to become aware that the police are there to help them. A discussion of actual case studies brings home to the students the reality of sexual assault as a crime. Students are reassured that they are not alone, helpless in the face of assault, guilty or responsible for the sexual perversion of others.

Protecting Your Rights

Students learn to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations and develop strategies for taking control of and dealing with them when they do occur. Through role-playing students practise

decision-making in a variety of situations typical of teenage experiences. They develop verbal skills and an awareness of body language through which they can communicate "NO" and mean it. By developing a confident attitude they can convey a clear message that they are not helpless victims.

PREVENTION STRATEGIES

- Provide adequate information to teenage students, sons and daughters.
- Stress equality of males and females in relationships. In particular teenage girls need to learn to see relationships realistically and not be unduly influenced by idealized notions of love and romance. They should learn to avoid someone who tries to have intimate contact when he otherwise indicates an uncaring, unfeeling attitude.
- Encourage open discussions about loving relationships and loving sexual touch. Discuss openly the differences between loving touch and exploitive touch. Discuss the differences between flirting and sexual harassment. Encourage teens to acknowledge sexual harassment.

- Establish a belief in personal responsibility. Because in most cases of sexual assault teenagers have sole responsibility for their own personal safety, they should learn to value that responsibility.
- Encourage a respect for personal judgement. Teenagers should learn to listen to their own feelings and trust their own judgement. They should be encouraged to set their own limits, stick to them and recognize and act on behaviours that are clues to mistreatment.
- Encourage assertiveness. Teenagers who walk and act confidently are less likely to be viewed as victims. They should, however, be realistic about their limitations in the face of physical force. When a potentially dangerous situation arises teenagers should be encouraged to do something outrageous, to make a scene to get attention and help.
- Female teenagers need to be prepared for pressuring and to learn strategies for saying no without hurting their partner's feelings. Studies have shown that teenage girls feel a strong need for the latter strategy.



Illustration by Jane Northey

- Encourage teenagers to arrange transportation ahead of time.
- Teenagers should learn about pornography as abusive, exploitive, violent and degrading to both men and women. They should be aware of the links to violence.
- Establish a bailout rule. This rule, followed very successfully by many teenagers and their parents, provides a 24 hour, no-questions-asked moratorium following a bailout call. Teenagers who find themselves in difficulty in a situation where they have been forbidden to be can have the assurance of getting help when they need it. Discussions following a 24 hour cooldown period have a better chance for an open, honest and rational resolution.

DISCLOSURES

The attitudes that are reinforced throughout the study of "My Body, My Rights" provide a permissive atmosphere for student victims to confide in a trusted staff member. For this reason it is critical that the entire staff is involved in an awareness session prior to the teaching of the unit. This awareness session should include an exploration of what sexual assault is; an overview of the unit; a clear understanding of the legalities and responsibilities regarding reporting of suspected assault; and a well established procedure for dealing with disclosures. Many staffs recommend the implementation of awareness sessions for parents as well.

CONCLUSION

By empowering young people to listen to their own feelings, to set limits and be prepared to take responsibility for ensuring their personal and legal rights, teenage students can learn to gain control over their lives.

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SOMEDAY

Someday

his murmur in the museum shattered ancient potteries

and mummies rolled their eyes

lovers

someday just the way he said

the word slipped off his lips hardbitten

An old lady sat down in the cafeteria with buttermilk and cherry pie

she stared at our marble faces

The curly groined Hades in impossible youth said

someday like he meant it

someday so much as though he yearned it that the old lady coloured

red as the cherries

the word was fossilized lucklessly remembered

I was captured and dragged down to a distant distant nowhere

One day

I whispered yes

but heard an urgent someday from the museum across the street

That night wrapped in bridal sheets

I nightmared stuffed Indians smoking cold pipes someday

deranged crawling dinosaurs someday

dead cardinals shrieking someday

up a winding marble staircase

along dim dusty halls

between walls I searched

for a little unlabelled drawer mislabelled someday

knowing when I opened it

it would be empty

Sandy Day

Toronto, Ontario