I've Talked with Teenage Boys About Sexual Assault for 20 Years. This Is What They Still Don't Know

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I started visiting schools two decades ago. It was after the publication of my novel, *Speak*, which tells the story of a teenage girl struggling through the emotional aftermath of being raped. It is commonly read in high school and college literature classes, and has proven to be a useful springboard to conversations about rape mythology, sexual violence and consent.

I thought I understood rape. It happened to me when I was 13 years old. I assumed my job was to model survivorship, and to show readers how to speak up after being abused, molested or attacked. I thought I was supposed to talk to the girls.

I had a lot to learn.

The girls heard me. I'd give these large talks, often in a high school auditorium, with a thousand students seated and me — a stranger — on stage. The girls would come up to me after the bell rang, in tears, and whisper what had happened to them. My job, after listening, was to find an adult in the building they trusted, an educator who could help them find the support they needed. That scene has been repeated after every single presentation I've ever given, at high schools, middle schools, colleges, bookstores, libraries and conferences across the country — thousands of victims.

But I have also seen something that, at first, surprised me: The boys want to talk, too. Some want a private conversation; others ask bold questions in front of their classmates.

Those who want to talk to me alone wait until the last student leaves the auditorium or track me down in the library office, where I'm eating lunch. A few have been victims of sexual violence themselves. Many more have been targeted by bullies at school. Others come for advice about situations they don't know how to deal with.

We sit in a quiet corner. The boy, sweating, fidgeting, eyes downcast, tells me his story. Sometimes he tells of a girl, a friend who has been raped. He wants to know the best way to help her because since it happened, she has been cutting herself, skipping school and getting high to avoid the pain. He wants to kill the boy who hurt his friend. He wants to help and doesn't know how.

And then there are the half-confessions. No boy has ever come out and admitted to me that he raped someone, but a few have said, "I might have pushed things too far," or "Well, we were drunk," or "Things got out of hand and... she refused to talk to me after that night." They don't look me in the eye

as they say this. They are not proud of themselves. Their confused shame is heart-breaking and infuriating.

After my auditorium presentation, I typically visit a few classes for smaller group discussions about the themes of my book. In schools all over the country, in every demographic group imaginable, for 20 years, teenage boys have told me the same thing about the rape victim in *Speak*: They don't believe that she was actually raped. They argue that she drank beer, she danced with her attacker and, therefore, she wanted sex. They see his violence as a reasonable outcome. Many of them have clearly been in the same situation.

They say this openly. They are not ashamed; they are ill-informed. These boys have been raised to believe that a rapist is a bad guy in the bushes with a gun. They aren't that guy, they figure, so they can't be rapists.

Why should they think otherwise? Their parents generally limit conversations about sex to "don't get her pregnant" lectures. They learn about sex from friends, and from internet porn, where scenes of non-consensual sex abound. No one has ever explained the laws to them. They don't understand that consent needs to be informed, enthusiastic, sober, ongoing and freely given.

This is only made worse by the other question I get most often from these teenage boys in the classroom: *Why was the rape victim so upset?* They explain, *The sex only took a couple minutes, but she's depressed for, like, a year*. They don't understand the impact of rape.

When a boy says these things, the girls in the class are shocked, and the teacher is appalled. They are stunned to discover how many of the guys don't have a clue. So was I, at first. But I quickly learned that reacting with anger and judgment did not help anyone. Instead, I discuss the studies that show that 94% of women who are raped experience PTSD symptoms. Nearly a third of victims still have those symptoms 9 months after the rape, and 13% of women who are raped attempt suicide. Facts like that make an impact. I share resources like the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) website with the teacher, and encourage the staff to follow up my visit with presentations from mental health professionals and police officers.

After my recent visit to a school in California, a teacher told me that a boy came up to her after my presentation and said, "This is the kind of stuff we need to know, Miss."

The empathetic boys searching for ways to help survivors and the boys who believe that rape only counts if it is committed by an armed stranger have more in common than you'd think. They struggle in the absence of information. They are looking for leadership and models of behavior. They share a desire to learn more.

Teenage boys are hungry for practical conversations about sex. They want to know the rules. They want to be the good guy, the stand-up, honorable dude. Their intentions might be good, but their ignorance is dangerous. Our society has begun talking a bit more openly about these issues, but that doesn't mean teenage boys suddenly have all the information they need.

The #MeToo movement is helping survivors of sexual violence find the courage to speak up about being attacked. Many have been silenced for decades. For some, the rape or assault dramatically changed the direction of their lives. They've developed PTSD, suffer anxiety and depression, and struggle to form relationships.

Supporting these victims is necessary and compassionate. But support on its own does little to reduce the number of people who are attacked every year. Every 98 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted. According to a 2000 report from the Department of Justice, 96% of sexual assault offenders reported to law enforcement were male.

How do we reduce the horrifying amount of sexual violence in this country?

We talk to our boys. Parents, family members, educators, clergy and other leaders have the opportunity and responsibility to model and teach consent from the time kids are old enough to walk: "You don't touch anyone without their permission." Families and schools should regularly share facts about bodies and sex appropriate to the developmental age of the child. Cultural leaders — writers, musicians, film producers, artists, advertisers, professional athletes, actors and social media influencers — have the power to accurately portray how sexual assault happens, providing information that will save lives.

I know it's hard, but if we don't figure out how to have tough conversations, we will sacrifice another generation of victims. It is time to not just inspire those who have been hurt to tell their stories — but to find our own courage to have open conversations about these complex subjects.

We need to teach our boys about healthy sexuality. We need to be crystal-clear about the laws and moral code surrounding consent. Our children must be aware that not only is there a federal definition of consent, but that states have their own, additional definitions. This is particularly significant for people younger than 18. "Close-in-age exemptions," which permit some types of sexual contact between consenting minors, vary widely. RAINN has a State Law Database, to help you sort out the details.

We need to ask our boys questions so that we understand what they think they know about sex and intimacy. Sharing books, movies and TV shows are a great way to open these conversations. Discussing the choices made by fictional characters paves the way for more personal conversations.

We need to tell our own stories to make sure our boys understand that these things happen to people they know and love. We need to give them the tools required to navigate relationships in a positive way.

Our boys deserve information and guidance. The only way they'll get it is if we speak up.