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- [Health](#)
- [Life](#)
- [Lifestyle](#)
- [Nation](#)
- [Nation & World](#)

Parents are reaching for teachable moments on sexual harassment

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FILE

– In this Jan. 8, 2017, file photo, Harvey Weinstein arrives at The Weinstein Company and Netflix Golden Globes afterparty in Beverly Hills, Calif. With thousands of women embracing the “Me Too” movement to own their histories of sexual harassment and abuse, and those issues swirling at high volume in the culture overall,

parents are reaching for teachable moments in the post-Weinstein world. (Photo by Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP, File)

With an avalanche of sexual-harassment accusations in Hollywood, media and politics in recent days, parents are reaching for teachable moments. Here's what some are doing.

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By
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NEW YORK — Kenna Cook is a sex educator by profession, so it's natural that at home she teaches her two boys, ages 4 and 7, about the nuances of consent and the importance of being the bosses of their own bodies.

When sexual harassment allegations against Harvey Weinstein hit, she sat them down once again.

"I told them that there have been people in my life, men and women, who have not listened when I have said that I am the boss of my body," said Cook, who lives in Sacramento, California. "They were unkind to me and did not respect my words. We talked about how many other women and girls have been hurt by men and boys."

With an avalanche of sexual harassment accusations in Hollywood, media and politics in recent days, parents like Cook are reaching for teachable moments.

"We teach them to always ask before touching anyone, no matter who the person is or how they responded yesterday, and to wait for a loud and clear yes before giving a hug or engaging in any other physical contact," Cook said. "We emphasize that yes is both a word and an action."

Martha Mendez-Baldwin, who focuses on parenting as an assistant professor of psychology at Manhattan College in New York, said parents should seize the moment to open lines of communication with their kids.

"Parents should speak to their younger children about the difference between a good touch and a bad touch. They should remind their children about boundaries and privacy related to their bodies and encourage children to say no or stop if anyone, including a trusted adult, crosses those boundaries," Mendez-Baldwin said.

Parents should also reinforce the message that if this happens, "it is not their fault and they are doing the right thing by reporting it, that this is not tattle-taling," she added.

Kevin Wattles, in Simi Valley, California, is a father, attorney and vice president of the nonprofit organization Because I Love You, which has been running parent and youth support groups around the United States and Canada for 35 years.

"It is imperative that our kids know that we listen to them and are interested in what is going on in their lives, not only with matters like how school was that day, but things they are interested in, whether we are or not," he said. "What things have happened recently that make them happy and what things have happened that they find confusing or that make them unhappy? Trying to be there for them only when a huge success or terrible disaster occurs does not show them the kind of necessary and continued concern and interest in them and their lives."

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Dr. Karen Soren, a professor of pediatrics at Columbia University Medical Center in New York, urged parents not to shy away from the allegations against Harvey Weinstein, who has been accused by more than 50 women of sexual harassment or assault.

“The Harvey Weinstein case and the ‘Me Too’ movement (are) exposing the scale of sexual abuse and harassment for women worldwide,” she said. “These are serious issues and parents may often feel that they’re ‘adult topics.’ However, kids of all ages and genders pick up on these conversations at school, on playgrounds and on social media, so it’s important to address them openly at home as well.”

Jill Emanuele, senior director of the New York-based Mood Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute, said parents need to be mindful of their own emotions after more than two years of high-profile assault and harassment cases, from Bill Cosby and Bill O’Reilly to the Donald Trump audio that had the future president talking about grabbing women.

“I would imagine that some parents are reconciling all of this with their own experiences and having to manage that first,” she said. “I’d love to believe that every parent is going to sit down with their child and talk about it, but we know that’s not the case. ... I would hope there are parents who haven’t discussed this stuff and will for the first time.”

John Crossman, a commercial real estate developer in Orlando, Florida, has two daughters, ages 12 and 14. When both reached puberty, he let them know he would no longer offer hugs without their permission. He said their first question was: “Does that go for mom, too?”

He assured them it did not. Ever since, the girls have been happily and freely affectionate with dad.

“I just really wanted to reinforce that message of having control of your body,” Crossman said. “What I told them was no man has a right to put his hands on your body, including me. I want you to know, I’m your dad. I want to hug you, all the time, but I’m never going to hug you unless you want a hug from me.”

Have they come to him with additional questions in the wake of Weinstein?

“We’ve tried to discuss it in an open way,” said Crossman, the son of a pastor and civil rights leader. “It’s been a reinforcing, but we go beyond. They’re very much aware that their grandfather did things in his career that he could have died for, so there are things worth dying for and worth getting fired for. ... Get fired, but don’t stay silent because there may be 15 other girls or women going through the exact same thing. Be the one who stands up.”

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