

18 AND UNDER | Perri Klass, M.D.

Another Awkward Sex Talk: Respect and Violence

Not long ago, in the clinic, a fellow pediatrician and mother asked whether we were still teaching our sons old-fashioned elevator etiquette: stand back and let the ladies off first.

We all protested that we don't particularly like it when men pull that elevator stunt — hospital elevators tend to be packed, and the best thing to do if you're near the door is get out promptly — but we had to admit we thought our adolescent sons should know the drill.

Once you start asking about whether there are special lessons that should be taught to boys, people jump pretty quickly from elevators to sex (or maybe that's just the crowd I run with). Sex, after all, is a subject on which pediatricians give plenty of advice. And it becomes very tricky to formulate that advice without making some unpleasant assumptions about adolescent sexuality.

It has never been easy for adults to deal with young teenagers honestly and sensibly on this subject, and it isn't easy now. We live with an endless parade of hypersexualized images — and a constant soundtrack of adults lamenting children's exposure to that endless parade. There's increasing knowledge of dating violence, including well-publicized celebrity incidents. And there's always a new movie to see about how adolescent boys are clueless, sex-obsessed goofballs.

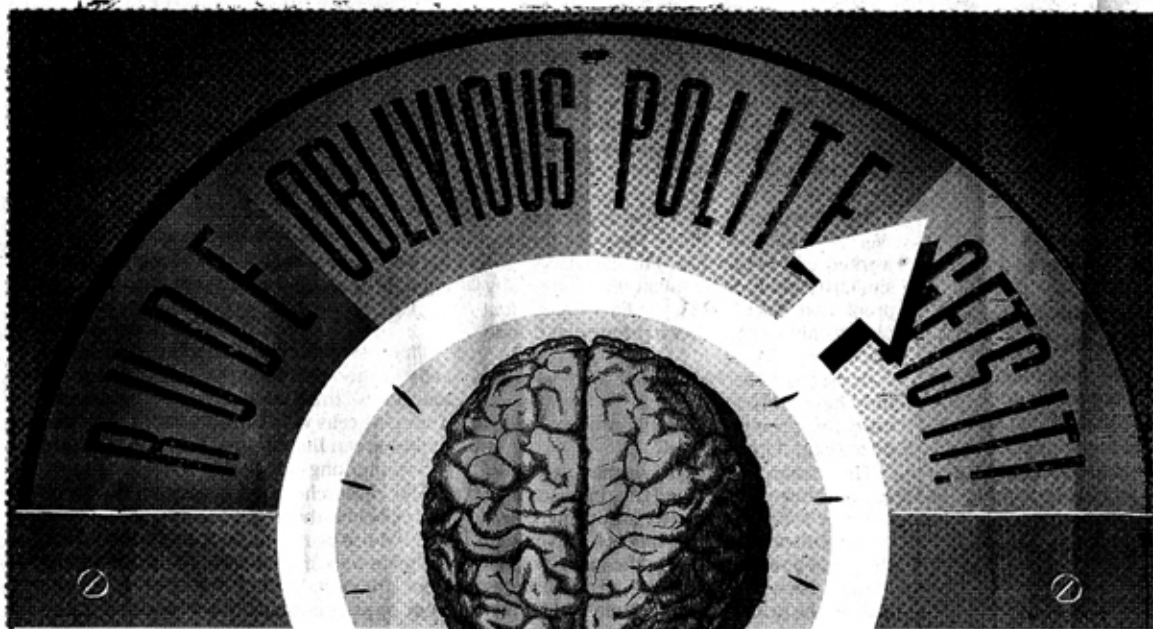
Stir it all together, and you may get an official worldview in which boys are viewed as potential criminals and girls as potential victims.

William Pollack, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School who wrote "Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood" (Owl Books, 1999), argues that the way we talk to boys and young men about sex often stereotypes them and hurts their feelings.

"One boy said, 'They treat us like we're perpetrators — we have sexual needs but we also have other needs,'" Dr. Pollack told me.

Somehow, there has to be a way to talk about sex and relationships beyond the anatomical details, and a way to discuss what happens in school and what happens on the cover of *People* magazine.

My friend Dr. Lee M. Sanders is associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, where he takes care of many adolescent boys. "Six or seven years ago," he told me, "a mother said to me: 'Listen, there's no dad in the home and I'm worried about the way I see my son treating other girls. Will you talk to him about it?'"



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Over time, Dr. Sanders incorporated this conversation into his regular exam room routine, starting with boys around age 12: "We'll talk about respect, about whether they feel they are respected in their own families, the respect they have for their mothers, the respect they see other men paying to their own mothers or sisters — do you think that applies to other girls that you meet?"

"At first it was a very awkward conversation for them to have," he went on.

A perception that boys need special lessons in manners.

"But now I'm used to having it with them, and they're used to having it with me."

So are we teaching our sons any special lessons? The psychologist Michael G. Thompson, the author of "Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys" (Ballantine, 2000), says it isn't a question of girls and boys, just a question of well-behaved kids and not-well-behaved kids; everyone should learn the same lessons about care and consideration and even about giving up a seat on the subway.

"I think manners get you very far in a rather uncivil world," Dr. Thompson said. "A simple respect for adults goes a long way in this day and age."

There is a special lesson for boys in deploying their good manners, he continued. "I would teach boys that there are many adults who are scared of boys, who have fears of boy aggression, and I think politeness is the surest way that a boy can reassure the adult world that he is O.K. and trustworthy."

Dr. Sanders thinks that a double standard is legitimate here — "maybe because I have two girls and no boys of my own."

"Girls need to be treated with more respect," he said. "We need to focus more on empowering girls in relationships, particularly relationships with the opposite sex. I think of myself very much as a feminist."

As a pediatrician with two sons and a daughter, I acknowledge the need to emphasize manners and respect as boys maneuver into adolescence and adulthood, and to help them understand the implications and obligations of their increasing size and strength. And I acknowledge that for their own protection, boys need to understand that there are people — male and female — who will see them as potential predators; and judge them automatically at fault in any ambiguous situation.

But I am enough of an old-fashioned feminist to want to teach daughters the same fundamental lessons I teach sons: err on the side of respect and good manners; understand that confusion, doubt and ambiguity abound, especially when you are young; never take advantage of someone else's uncertainty; and, just as important, remember that adolescence should be a time of fun, affection, growth and discovery.

It's too bad that one side of teaching our children about sex and relationships means reminding them that there are bad people in the world; stay away from them, stay safe, speak up if someone hurts you or pushes you. But everyone needs that information, and that promise of adult support. We have to get that message across without defining some of our children as obvious perpetrators and others as obvious victims, because that insults everyone.

And speaking of insulting everyone, I would offer everyone the even less-palatable lesson that sometimes people make dumb decisions. Sometimes you decide to do something and then you wish you hadn't done it, and that doesn't necessarily make you bad or good, though it may make you sadder and wiser.

Got that, boys and girls? Now, if you would all please get out of the way, I would like to get off the elevator.