

Why you should start talking to your kids about sexual assault from a young age



Jennifer Lawrence with Harvey Weinstein. Weinstein has been accused of sexual harassment, assault, and rape by more than 36 women. Jason Merritt/Getty Images

- Since October 5, **more than 36 women** have come forward to speak about their encounters with Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood executive who's been accused of sexual harassment, assault, and rape.

- **Their stories have inspired other women — famous and non-famous alike — to open up about their experiences with sexual assault and harassment.**
- **These stories have caused people to wonder what we can do to put an end to sexual assault and harassment.**
- **Teaching people — specifically young children — about sexual assault and harassment could end them for good.**
- **INSIDER spoke to psychologists and lawyers who agree that education is key.**

On October 5, the [New York Times released a report](#) in which Hollywood executive [Harvey Weinstein](#) was accused of sexual harassment, assault, and rape. Since then, more than 36 women in the entertainment industry — including [Gwyneth Paltrow](#), [Angelina Jolie](#), and [Cara Delevingne](#) — have come forward to share their terrifying allegations about Weinstein.

What started out as a Hollywood-specific story has sparked a world-wide movement. Famous women outside of the acting space, like [Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney](#) and [model Cameron Russel](#), shared their stories to expose the misconduct in other industries. Women from all walks of life [shared their own experiences using the hashtag #metoo](#) to prove just how often sexual assault and harassment occurs in this country.

People are talking about the prevalent problem, and show no signs of slowing down. But sharing stories and putting a spotlight on the perpetrators is only part of the solution. In order to put an end to this problem — or at least, reduce the occurrences — adults have to make an effort to educate children about sexual harassment and assault.

INSIDER spoke to several psychologists, advocates, and lawyers to learn how we can better educate our children on a topic that even some adults don't fully understand.

Teaching kids about sexual harassment and assault helps them identify it and feel comfortable coming forward about it.

I'll be honest — until a few years ago, I didn't know what defined sexual harassment. My parents never had the sex talk with me, let alone the sexual harassment talk. And although my Sex Ed classes had a brief lesson on assault (there was a catchy song that emphasized your body being nobody's body but yours), there wasn't much coverage in terms of the non-physical aspect of it.

So when I was ultimately sexually harassed by a male CEO at a prior job, I didn't even realize it. I thought I was overreacting to him wrapping his arms around me in a hug that I'd previously

denied him. I thought I was just being "dramatic" when, a few days later, he cornered me in the kitchen for another unwelcome embrace.

And that's part of the problem.



Ashley Judd was one of the first women to come forward with accusations about Weinstein. Mireya Acierto/Getty

"If no one intervenes [at a young age], how are they ever going to know that's not OK," [Amy Morin](#), a psychotherapist and author of "[13 Things Mentally Strong Parents Don't Do](#)," told INSIDER.

[Dr. Kathryn Stamoulis](#), a licensed mental health counselor who specializes in female adolescent sexuality, agreed with Morin and told INSIDER that, "we have to do a better job of talking about sex with kids."

"If there's no adult in a child's life that's talking about sex, dating, or bodies, there's no way they will tell their parent about harassment," she said, adding that the lack of education gives perpetrators an advantage in situations of assault and harassment.

"Perpetrators know there is a culture of shame and silence surrounding it," Stamoulis said. "This is how extreme sexual predators get away with it. They know kids don't have

the language to articulate what's happening and that, because they're embarrassed, they're not going to talk to an adult about it."

And when you look at the statistics, her argument makes sense. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), 1 in 9 girls and 1 in 53 boys [under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault](#) at the hands of an adult. Additionally, [females ages 16 to 19 are four times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape](#), attempted rape, or sexual assault.

That said, it's not solely up to schools to teach kids about sexual harassment and assault. Parents should be making a conscious effort to talk about these topics early and often.

But before teaching kids about sexual harassment and assault, adults have to know what it is.

Unfortunately, making time after dinner to talk about these topics won't do kids any good if the person teaching them doesn't have an accurate definition of sexual harassment and assault. Or worse, doesn't see the behavior as wrong.

"Too many adults still don't see that [behavior] as offensive," Morin said. "When parents or society as a whole acts like that's normal and that's OK, I think it sends a confusing message."

So how do we make it less confusing. Well, to start, you can explain sexual assault and harassment as its simplest form: bullying.

"I see sexual harassment as a subset of bullying," [Jill Stanley](#), a former criminal defense lawyer and legal commentator, told INSIDER. "It's when someone who perceives themselves in a higher position of power and uses that to get their way."



Julianne Moore, Rachel McAdams, and Selma Blair are three of the most high-profile women to accuse director James Toback of sexual harassment or assault.

Theo Wargo/Getty Images; Brian de Rivera Simon/Getty Images; Kevin Winter/Getty Images

Of course, it's a bit more nuanced than that. The United Nations [defines sexual harassment as any "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature."](#) Sexual assault falls under the umbrella of sexual harassment and, as noted by the Department of Justice, is any type of sexual contact or [behavior that occurs without the explicit consent](#) of the recipient.

The key element in both terms being that one member of the party — man or woman — is not OK with the actions.

As Stanley said, in the most basic sense, "anything that is unwanted is harassment."

When teaching kids about sexual harassment and assault, it's important to speak to them in a way they'll understand.

Simplicity will be key when talking to children about sexual harassment and assault. Although many argue that you shouldn't [downplay sex or use "cutesy" words for anatomy](#) with children, you do have to speak to them in a way they'll understand. That's

starts with choosing the right words.

"Harassment is just such a hard word to get your head around, especially as a kid," Julia Simmens, a clinical psychologist, told INSIDER. "It almost has a connotation of being violent, and a lot of the sexual harassment isn't violent — it's just awful."

To that end, Simmens echoed Stanley's thoughts to frame it as bullying. Stamoulis agreed, adding that doing so, "might be helpful for parents who may feel uncomfortable."

Simmens also added that, for older kids, you can use terms like ethical decision to help move the conversation along.

"I'm always telling parents that we have to talk about ethical decisions," she said. "You start introducing that terminology in a young kid's life, they learn how their choices affect other people."



Blake Lively spoke out about allegedly being filmed without her consent by a makeup artist. Theo Wargo/Getty Images For US Weekly

Once you know what to say, you have to find the time to say it. Simmens suggested finding a time when, "there aren't any stressors going on" and you won't be cut off too soon.

Stamoulis added that, for older kids, parents can turn to pop culture to get the conversation going.

"If, for example, a parent hears the word slut on a show, I think that's a good jumping off point," she said. "Ask them, 'What does that mean? Have you heard that said to someone else? How did that make them feel?'" and explain that it's not alright to use." If, however, your child does open up and recounts a time they or someone they know was harassed, it's important not to inundate them with questions. Donna Palomba, founder of the nonprofit advocacy group [Jane Doe No More](#), said it's best to "just be there for them and let the conversation flow."

"One of the big things that we hear kids say is, 'I want to tell my mom something, but every time I open the door to a conversation, I get pummeled with questions,'" she told INSIDER. "Be attentive, listen, and don't ask a million questions."

Although the conversation will eventually come to an end, it's important not to close the door on the topic forever. As children are exposed to more and learn more, you will have to adjust to the conversation to fit their new life.

"[Parents] have to hit it at different ages," Simmens said. "You can't just do it once and say, 'finished with that.'"

There are people opposed to teaching this topic to kids, but statistics and history prove it's necessary.

As the [mother of an accused rapist told the New York Times](#), "we don't really need to teach our sons not to rape." But considering that there are [321,500 victims of rape and sexual assault each year](#) — not counting the two thirds of cases that go unreported — it's clear that ignoring the problem isn't working.

And if the numbers aren't a strong enough argument, consider history. As Stanley told INSIDER, many of today's laws that protect rape victims were implemented only after people started talking about it.

"It used to be that a rape victim's past — how she dressed, how she interacted with men — could be admissible in court," she explained. "Then people realized that's prejudicial and had nothing to do with that specific situation. That's when the [rape shield laws](#) were developed."

Stanley noted that the same can be said for statute of limitations. Until the early 2000s, Stanley said most states had a five year statute — meaning a perpetrator could not be tried for a crime that took place outside of that window. But as more rape cases came to court and more people spoke out, the more people knew how unfair that was to the victim. Nowadays, most states have either extended the statute of limitations or removed it all together for sexual harassment and assault cases. ([RAINN has a page to help you navigate your state's laws.](#))

Teaching children about sexual harassment and assault isn't just about telling them what's right and wrong: It's about empowering them to come forward when they see or hear something wrong.

"The perpetrators need to know that it's not all right and that people are going to call them out for what it is and that people are going to care," Stamoulis said. "If they're taught that this isn't right, then they know their peers will hold them accountable." They say children are the future; lets give them the tools and knowledge to make it a better one.

If you are a victim of sexual assault, [you can visit RAINN](#) or call its hotline at 1-800-656-4673 to receive confidential support from a trained staff member.