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# Looking Out for the Girls

# 7

## Identifying and Preventing Sexual Violence

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*About 30% of girls will experience some type of sexual violence at some point in their lives. We must instill in our girls the idea that they are worth defending and that they have the capacity and the right to successfully defend themselves.*

Sexual violence may be one of the most difficult topics for parents, educators, and counselors to think about when it comes to the girls they care deeply about. As a result, this chapter might be the easiest one to skip because most of us have difficulty believing that our lives could be affected by sexual violence. We often think that sexual harassment is something that happens to someone else . . . to *those* girls . . . to the ones who dress sexy and “ask for it.” The actresses who had the misfortune of being on the wrong side of a powerful movie producer. The overtly sexually dressed college girl who is headed out for a night of partying. We believe that sexual assault is one of those violent issues that we see on crime shows on TV and that it only happens to people we don’t know.

Unfortunately, the reality is that most of us know people whose lives have been affected by sexual violence, whether or not they have ever shared their experience with us. If you are an educator, there is a strong possibility that you have observed sexual harassment in the halls of your school and a statistical probability that you have encountered many individuals who have been victims of a more egregious sexual crime. Among college women nearly 30% reported that they had experienced sexual violence from a dating partner while they were still in high school (Smith et al., 2003), and according to the Association of American Universities and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, about one in four women experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault during their college years.

When we look at data from 15- to 19-year-old girls, between 12% and 28% report being forced to have sexual intercourse at some time in their lives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2012; Morrison-Breedy & Grove, 2018), and nearly half have been coerced into performing other sex acts, excluding intercourse. It is hard to think that for every classroom of 30 girls there are likely 10 girls who have experienced or are experiencing some type of sexual pressure or violence.

A sexual violation—either harassment or abuse—is one of the most intimate violations that can happen to a person, and it can have lasting consequences. Unfortunately, many of us lack a sound understanding of what sexual violence is and often do not have accurate information on how to identify a situation that meets the definition of sexual harassment or sexual assault.

The CDC (2015) defines sexual violence as

a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse. It includes: forced or alcohol/drug facilitated penetration of a victim; forced or alcohol/drug facilitated incidents in which the victim was made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else; nonphysically pressured unwanted penetration;

intentional sexual touching; or non-contact acts of a sexual nature. Sexual violence can also occur when a perpetrator forces or coerces a victim to engage in sexual acts with a third party.

A key aspect surrounding sexual violence is the presence, or lack thereof, of freely given consent. Meaning that if the sexual activity is completed under pressure, duress, force, threat of force, impairment, or incapacitation, there is no presence of consent (Basile et al., 2014). The CDC (2015) expressly discusses consent as follows:

Sexual violence involves a lack of freely given consent as well as situations in which the victim is unable to consent or refuse:

*Consent*

Words or overt actions by a person who is legally or functionally competent to give informed approval, indicating a freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact.

*Inability to Consent*

A freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact could not occur because of the victim's age, illness, mental or physical disability, being asleep or unconscious, or being too intoxicated (e.g., incapacitation, lack of consciousness, or lack of awareness) through their voluntary or involuntary use of alcohol or drugs.

*Inability to Refuse*

Disagreement to engage in a sexual act was precluded because of the use or possession of guns or other non-bodily weapons, or due to physical violence, threats of physical violence, intimidation or pressure, or misuse of authority.

Many of us incorrectly believe sexual violence to be a violent, forced sexual activity or rape, when in fact sexual violence includes *any* unwanted or coerced sexual activity (Dichter et al., 2010).

### Examples of Sexual Violence

- Unwanted sexual touching (touching a person’s genitals, buttocks, or breasts; forcing someone to kiss or touch another person)
- Forcing another person to perform a sexual act (undressing, posing for photographs, genital or oral contact, oral sex, intercourse)
- Pressuring, coercing, convincing, or tricking someone to engage in sexual activity
- Unwanted noncontact sexual experiences (exposure to pornography, unwanted filming or dissemination of sexual photographs, creating a hostile environment through the use of technology)
- Engaging in sexual activity with a minor (the age of consent to sexual activity varies from state to state, so it is important to know what the laws in your state say regarding sexual consent)

Often when we think of sexual violence, we think of a college-age or adult woman who is wearing a short skirt and is accosted in a dark alley by a stranger. While some sexual violence does take place in this manner, the unfortunate reality is that sexual violence affects people of all ages and most likely happens between people who know each other, not between strangers. Forty-four percent of victims of sexual violence are under the age of 18, and girls between the ages of 12 and 14 are at the highest risk. A peak occurs again at age 18 (CDC, 2012), with the first year of college being a particularly vulnerable year. The new-found freedom, the party and hookup culture, experimenting with drugs and alcohol, and exposure to higher-risk situations create an environment where girls can be taken advantage of by others who may exploit their vulnerabilities.

Conversations about sexual abuse and sexual violence do not occur with any regularity, and many perceive the subject as taboo. It is easy to believe that sexual violence happens to “those other people” but not in my school or community. Unlike other forms of child maltreatment, sexual abuse occurs with similar frequency in urban, suburban, and rural areas to children of various races, genders and socioeconomic statuses. Educators, counselors, and parents find it extremely difficult to talk to children about sexual

violence and report not knowing what to say or how to approach the topic (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008). When I surveyed teachers and counselors about their training to identify and address issues of sexual violence, most reported that their college training programs spent little, if any, time discussing the topic.

We learned that few adults have accurate information on how sexual violence happens and most believe that their daughters are well insulated from risk. Parents generally believe that their supervision of their children is so intense that there are no opportunities for an unwanted sexual incident to take place. As one parent of a 12-year-old said,

She is almost never by herself, so there is really no opportunity for her to get into trouble. I make it my job to ensure that she is safe.

A father of a 13-year-old girl told me,

My daughter is not allowed to date, and if she spends any time with a boy, it is when I or another adult is around. We would not ever allow her to be in a situation where she could get hurt or make a bad decision.

Similarly, girls report that they don't drink, aren't promiscuous, and dress modestly, so they do not perceive themselves as potential victims.

I think about what I wear and how I act so that I don't send the wrong message. I see girls who are wearing clothes that are very sexy and girls who are always flirting with or doing stuff with guys. I don't do any of that stuff, and that is how I keep myself safe.

### **Isn't It Enough to Say, "Don't Talk to Strangers"?**

When my colleagues and I teach sexual violence prevention workshops, we begin by asking the girls to discuss some of the things that we know about people who take advantage of others in sexual ways.

So I ask you to think about this as well. Describe below the person who sexually assaults another person:

- What do they look like?
- What are they wearing?
- What is their state of mind?
- Where are they when the assault takes place?
- What kind of job do they have?
- Where did they meet the victim of the assault?

If your reactions are like those of most girls, you may have thought of things like “He’s crazy,” “He has low self-esteem,” “He’s scary and creepy,” or “He’s mentally ill.” There is a clear stereotype that persists surrounding who is capable of sexual assault. It is very rare to hear reactions such as “They are attractive and sexy,” “A mentor and a coach,” “A family member,” or “A close friend.”

Girls are generally surprised to learn that the notion of a scary guy jumping out of the bushes and abducting and raping a woman is usually way off base. While stranger assaults do occur, they happen rather infrequently. For children and teens who experience sexual abuse or violence, only 7% of the time is the perpetrator a stranger. This means that in 93% of the cases, the girl knows the person. Girls are most likely to be sexually assaulted by a family member, friend, or date, or someone they know and even trust. In fact, about 34% of the time the perpetrator is a family member, and 59% of the time the aggressor is an acquaintance (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

We’ve got to expand our thinking from the traditional “stranger danger” mentality, where we simply tell girls not to talk to strangers or walk alone at night. This approach fails to account for how sexual assault actually happens to girls. From childhood through their teen years, girls are most likely to be sexually assaulted by a family member or friend of the family. Because few elementary-age girls are “dating,” their exposure to potential abusers tends to occur within the family system or within close proximity to the family (e.g., a coach, neighbor, family friend, etc.). In instances where the abuser

knows the victim, there is often the presence of grooming behavior. *Grooming* refers to the actions of the abuser working to gain the trust of the child, and often her parents, in order to have increased access to her and, in some cases, authority over her (McAlinden, 2006). This is generally a gradual process of gaining trust through giving attention, having fun, flattering, and buying gifts. Sounds a bit like how a dating process between adults might take place. However, an additional component of the grooming process in abuse situations is the affirmation of loyalty through the confirmation of secrets. Kids begin to develop loyalty to the adult such that when the abuse begins, the child may feel admired and cared for while simultaneously confused and fearful. Grooming can be a lengthy process that can place over the course of weeks, months, or years, often ensuring that the child develops a dedicated attachment to the abuser. This is one of the ways in which child sexual abuse can persist for many years without the child reporting it to another adult or the authorities (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008). Another of the main reasons that prevent children from reporting is that the victim often feels some responsibility for the abuse.

### **She Was Asking for It: Addressing Victim Blame**

One of the most difficult aspects of talking about sexual assault and violence in girls' lives is the pervasive thinking that girls and young women have some responsibility for an assault that happens to them. I often hear adults make comments such as "She needs to watch what she is wearing. She is sending the wrong message to the boys" or "What did she think was going to happen when she went to that party by herself?" Even girls can be extremely critical of one another when it comes to sexual assault. One 10th-grade girl shared the following:

I know this one girl whose uncle has been having sex with her for like two years. She hasn't told anyone else but me, and I secretly think she likes it. I mean—that's nasty—if she didn't like it, she should just tell him that she's not going to do that anymore . . . or tell her mom or a teacher or something.



This type of thinking, called victim blame, places some of the responsibility on the victim for the sexual assault, rather than on the perpetrator. As a society we tend to have very rigid ideas surrounding who is a sexual abuser and who is a victim. Several studies have shown that up to 59% of mental health, law enforcement, and school professionals often attribute some of the responsibility for sexual abuse to the child victims. Researchers have also found that teachers tend to attribute more blame to the victims than do social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists (Ford et al., 2001).

The following are a few scenarios to help you gauge your own reaction to situations where some type of sexual violence occurred:

## CASE #1: AMANDA AND KANDICE

Amanda and Kandice are friends and classmates in the eighth grade. Both girls are quite athletic and play softball and basketball on the school teams and also on local traveling teams. Kandice has a huge crush on Amanda's older brother, Chad, who is in 11th grade. Amanda thinks Chad is a jerk and sees that he treats his girlfriend horribly, and she can't understand why Kandice has absolutely any attraction for her brother. Amanda gets really annoyed when Kandice constantly flirts with Chad and, as Amanda says, "acts like a ditz" when Chad is around.

After a weekend softball tournament, Amanda and Kandice are at Amanda's house getting ready to go to a dance at the school that evening. Amanda's parents are not at home, and Chad is "in charge" of the girls until the parents arrive. Amanda is completely annoyed at Kandice because she thinks that she is "throwing herself" at Chad. Kandice is laughing way too hard at his jokes, play wrestling with him, and generally being friendly and flirtatious with Chad.

After Kandice gets out of the shower, Amanda takes her turn. Kandice is in Amanda's room in a robe and is brushing her hair and picking out her outfit for the dance. Without warning, Chad bursts into Amanda's

room looking for his sister and finds Kandice there—completely startled and somewhat embarrassed. Chad realizes that no one is around and says, “Wow, Kandice! I’ve never seen you quite like this.” He smiles at Kandice and looks her up and down. She doesn’t know if she should feel flattered or embarrassed, so she smiles nervously clutching the front of her robe. “You don’t need to close that—let me just have a look; I’ve always thought that you are such a cute girl,” Chad says. Kandice is overwhelmed by Chad’s sudden attention toward her and really can’t believe that he is interested in her! She says playfully to Chad, “I can’t do that; you better get out of here!”

Chad takes a step toward Kandice, and she doesn’t know what to do. He leans in to kiss her and simultaneously opens her robe and fondles her breast. She is exhilarated and panicked at the same time! Kandice has only kissed one other person, and that was at a party during a silly game with her classmates. This was very different, and she wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Kandice shakes her head and pushes Chad away, but he pulls her in close to him. He fondles her buttocks and then traces his hand down in between her legs. She jumps away from him and rushes out of the room. Chad follows and catches her in the hallway and says, “Kandice, you are more grown up than I realized. I’d like to see more of you, but we need to keep this between the two of us, ok?” Kandice doesn’t know what to do, so she smiles and nods obediently.

## CASE #2: MACY AND ZOE

Macy is an 11th-grade girl who looks a bit older than her age. She is popular and outgoing and generally does well in school. Her older sister, Zoe, is a sophomore in college and invited Macy to spend the weekend in the dorm with her. Macy was so excited to be spending the weekend on a college campus and hoped that Zoe would take her around the town and to a couple of parties. On Saturday night Zoe and

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Macy were in the dorm getting ready to head out to the party. Both girls were in party mode and were having a few drinks while they were getting dressed. Zoe gave Macy a mini dress to wear and helped her with her hair and makeup. She commented that Macy looked like she was in college and that the guys were going to be all over her! These girls were ready for a party!!

When they arrived at the party, Macy noticed that there were way more guys there than girls. The girls got in free and got plastic bracelets that meant they could drink for free all night. While Macy had been to many high school parties where alcohol was present, this was her first experience at a college party, so she drank slowly at first and took in the scene. Lots of people were dancing, and some were in another part of the house playing drinking games. Macy and Zoe began dancing with the rest of the crowd, and shortly thereafter, a few guys came up to dance with them. Both girls were dancing in openly sexual ways and grinding with the guys. As the night went on, Macy could tell that the one guy, Trevor, was really into her. She couldn't believe it—a college guy was paying attention to her!

Trevor was touching Macy all over as they danced, and she was enjoying the attention. He made sure that her drink was always full, and at one point Zoe looked over and saw Macy and Trevor making out in the corner. Macy was clearly enjoying herself and seemed to be totally into this guy. Trevor takes Macy by the hand and leads her upstairs, away from the other partygoers. He says, "Let's go somewhere a little more private and quiet." Macy is feeling the effects of the alcohol and wants to continue kissing Trevor. She follows him up to his bedroom, where they sit on the bed and continue making out. He starts to unbutton her dress and she pushes his hand away as she continues to kiss him. His hands continue to wander over her body and begin to make their way up her inner thigh under her dress. Macy laughs nervously and pushes his hand away again. "Stop it, Trevor!"

Trevor responds to Macy by saying, "Baby, you've been teasing me all night. You are looking so good in that little dress. I just couldn't wait to get you up here and get that dress off of you." Macy is feeling a little

nervous at this point and is wondering what she has gotten herself into. She doesn't resist when Trevor further unbuttons her dress, but when she realizes that he plans to have sex with her she freezes. "Stop Trevor, I can't do this. I need to find my sister." He tells her to relax, that he's not going to hurt her, and once they are finished he will take her back to her sister. Macy doesn't know what else to do, so she doesn't do anything.

### Self-Reflection

1. My initial reaction to each of these cases is

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2. When I think about who is responsible for the assault, my mind first goes to

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3. If I were working with Kandice, the first thing I would tell or ask her is

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4. If I were working with Macy, the first thing I would tell or ask her is

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When you read each case, did you initially identify each place along the way where Kandice and Macy could or should have done something differently? How easy it would be to say to Kandice, "Why didn't you yell at him and tell him to stop as soon as he came in the room?" or "You should have hit him when he tried to kiss you!"

We could tell Macy that she was irresponsible for going to a college party while she was in high school and that it is illegal for people under the age of 21 to drink alcohol. We could point out that she was wearing a revealing dress, making out with Trevor, and essentially leading him on or “sending him the wrong message.”

The unfortunate reality here is that both Kandice and Macy were sexually assaulted—they were part of a sexual activity that was not consensual. While it seems easy for us to examine these cases after the fact and identify all the seemingly wrong things that each girl may have done, the fact remains that another person overstepped their bounds and took advantage of the girls’ vulnerabilities. While there may have been actions that both Kandice and Macy could have taken, neither is responsible for the behavior of the other person, and neither should carry the burden of responsibility for the assault.

What if Chad had apologized and hurriedly walked out of the bedroom when he realized that Kandice was not fully clothed? What if, after Macy told Trevor to stop, he said, “Oh, I thought we were on the same page here. I didn’t realize you weren’t into this” and then stopped pressuring her? It is likely that these situations would have ended very differently. Sexual violence happens because there is a person who is willing to commit the assault, not because there is flirting, leading on, alcohol, or any other host of variables that are often wrongfully attributed as causal factors.

Our tendency is to analyze every behavior of the girl to determine at what point she brought the assault onto herself. Victim blame can be a particularly hard concept for us to come to terms with, particularly because it is easier for many of us to think that *we* would have responded differently in each case—that *we* could have easily prevented the situation from happening. We think to ourselves that if we were in that situation, we would have yelled at Chad or maybe even punched him if he came close. Then we would have told his sister and parents what happened. Perhaps we would rationalize that we would have never gone to a college party in the first place, let alone get tipsy and then be escorted upstairs to a bedroom. We may easily find fault with every minor decision that the girl made and only secondarily, if at all, find culpability for the abuser. Unfortunately,

in this situation Kandice and Macy, like most victims of sexual violence, also blame themselves for the assault. They continually question what they should have done differently, why they didn't say or do something sooner, and what they did to provoke the other person. Take, for example, the following statement from a young woman, Carrie, who was sexually abused by a soccer coach when she was a teenager. Even as an adult, she struggles to not blame herself for the abuse.

I was 14 when he started paying attention to me. He was probably in his 30s at that point, and he was married, with a baby. I looked older for my age and really hadn't been in any relationships before. I had kissed maybe two boys up until that point but never anything else. I would see him every week at soccer practice, and it started with flattering comments about my body and how sexy and curvaceous I was. At 14 I didn't know what to do with that! It was exhilarating and confusing at the same time, and I found that I liked the attention and wanted it to continue. It was like when we were at practice or at a game, we had this little secret between us, and that felt sort of special. I was really attracted to him and wanted him to like me, but I didn't know what to do when he started to touch me. I mean, there was a part of me that really liked it, but then there was another part of me that knew it was wrong and that it had to stay as a secret. No one could ever find out because I should have stopped it from the very beginning. I should have told him that he needed to stop and that I was going to tell an adult what was going on. I should have reported him to the school. But I couldn't—I knew people would ask me why I didn't do something right away. I let it go on for years. I knew they would say that I could have stopped this earlier if I really wanted to. I couldn't deal with that, or what my teachers' or parents' reactions would be, so it was just easier to stay quiet.

In this situation Carrie was 14 years old and was slowly and purposefully pursued by an adult man. He clearly knew that his behavior was inappropriate and illegal, yet he was able to effectively manipulate the situation so that Carrie kept his secrets and subsequently blamed

herself for the abuse. Unfortunately, this scenario is far too common for thousands of girls and boys, and it keeps sexual abuse hidden and stigmatized.

Let's return to the self-reflection based on the cases of Kandice and Macy. Was your initial reaction to question the behavior of Kandice and Macy or to question the actions of Chad and Trevor? For many of us our initial reaction is to pinpoint all the opportunities that the girls had to make a different decision, get out, or report the event. Our secondary response is to identify the fact that Chad and Trevor could have made different choices as well. If we are to be effective in changing the culture around sexual violence, we must be willing to shift our thinking as it relates to who is responsible for the acts.

If we are fortunate enough to be the adult in a girl's life who she will actually talk to about such a sensitive issue, we must handle her concern with the utmost respect and care. If we fail to do this, she will likely think twice before she ever confides in us again. Responses such as "Now Macy, what did you think was going to happen when you went up to his bedroom?" or "Kandice, do you think that was a good idea to kiss Chad back when he first kissed you—don't you think that could have sent him the wrong message?" sound paternalistic and judgmental. Girls want adults to validate their reality, acknowledge their confusion, and help them make sense of the situation. She probably already blames herself, and we do not want to add to her insecurities.

## WHAT DO I SAY?

### Suggestions for Talking With Girls Who Have Experienced Sexual Violence

"Whatever you did to survive was the exact right thing to do at the time." "You did what you needed to do to get out of the situation, and I am proud of you." "What happened to you is not your fault." This is the language that girls need to hear

when they finally have the courage to share their experiences of assault or abuse with us. They are taking a risk and making themselves extremely vulnerable by sharing the details with us, and our responsibility is to honor their vulnerability and provide support and care. Because survivors of sexual violence are extremely likely to blame themselves (and other people are likely to blame them as well), they will often reconstruct the situation and identify everything that they could, or should, have done differently to prevent the violence from taking place. Here are some suggestions for how we might talk with Kandice or Macy after the events.

### Kandice

- I am sorry that this has happened to you. I can imagine that you felt pretty confused and you might even still feel confused about what happened.
- Sometimes it is easy for us to blame ourselves when situations such as this happen. I want you to know that even though you are attracted to Chad and may have been flirting with him, it does not give him the right to touch you in the way that he did.
- You have the right to decide who can touch you, where they can touch you, and when they can touch you. Chad did not have your permission or your consent to touch you in the way that he did. What he did was wrong.

### Macy

- Macy, I am sorry this has happened to you. I bet it was a pretty scary experience and a difficult place to find yourself.
- I get the sense that you think that you should have prevented this from happening. I want you to know that you are not responsible for what Trevor did.
- I want you to know that even though you made the choice to go to the party and dance with Trevor, you did not make the choice to have sex with him. Dancing and kissing are not an invitation for sex.



## Consequences of Sexual Violence

The impact of sexual violence in the lives of girls varies tremendously. Recently, I read in the paper a story about a young girl who had been sexually abused by a teacher. At the sentence hearing her parents told the judge, “She will never be whole again. He robbed her of her innocence, and she will never get that back. My daughter will never have a normal life again.” While I certainly recognize the horror that parents feel when they learn of a crime against their child, especially a sexual crime, I also believe that people can recover from these situations and grow up to lead healthy and productive lives. Sexual violence affects girls in substantial ways, but I refuse to believe that the impact of this crime ruins a girl for the rest of her life. I refuse to believe that she will never have healthy relationships and will forever lack self-esteem and confidence. Our reactions and responses to girls who have experienced sexual violence are critically important, and to communicate a lifelong sentence of pathology and doom is unfair and unrealistic. We do not want girls to believe that their lives are “ruined” and that they have no chance at a productive future.

Are the impacts of sexual violence far-reaching and intense? Yes, most definitely. Girls who experience sexual violence are more likely than girls who are not victimized to experience low self-esteem, depression, suicidal thoughts, and drug and alcohol use. Additional impacts include eating disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, delinquent behavior, risky sexual behavior or sexual acting out, and even *learned helplessness*—the belief that they do not have any control over the outcomes of different situations or relationships. If girls who have experienced sexual violence are in a relationship that is controlling or where they are fearful, they may have difficulty setting boundaries, making decisions, and being an equal partner. Girls who are involved in violent dating relationships may lack the ability to distinguish between a healthy and an unhealthy relationship and may not have the skills or confidence to change the dynamics and expectations of the relationship, thus exposing themselves to the risk of being victimized in the future.

We additionally know that the greater the degree to which a person blames themselves for the assault, the worse their mental health

outcomes may be and the less likely they are to tell anyone about what happened. Girls who believe that they are responsible for an assault or that there was something they could have done, but didn't do, to prevent the assault have higher levels of depression, anxiety, and self-blame, and they rarely tell anyone that they were assaulted. If they already blame themselves, they are afraid that others will blame them as well.

When girls receive support, encouragement, belief, and care from their friends, families, and support systems, they are more likely to recover more quickly and to have fewer mental health issues and long-term effects. Our response can determine the health of the girl's future—we need to make sure we do it right.

### What Works in Preventing Sexual Violence?

Many schools and organizations are concerned with the safety of their students and implement programs that attempt to decrease the vulnerability of students. There are programs available that provide information and skills to students related to preventing sexual violence. As we consider such programming, we must be cognizant of what actually works, and is research based, when it comes to effective prevention programming for girls.

As soon as I began working in the field of sexual violence prevention in 1997, I began to receive “tips” and “strategies” from friends and family members regarding how to keep women safe. I can't tell you how many email messages I have gotten over the years with directives to girls and women about ways to stay safe, avoid rape, or avoid the “wrong kind” of men. Some of the most unrealistic suggestions were for girls to never wear their hair in a ponytail, to never park next to a white van, to always ask the security guard at the mall to escort her to her car, and to never get on the elevator if a man is on it. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that doing, or not doing, *any* of these things is related to avoiding sexual violence. Often the messages that girls receive on how to keep themselves safe encourage them to engage in elaborate self-protective behaviors and can provide a false sense of security (i.e., “I am headed to the mall to meet someone I have been chatting with online. When I get to the mall, I will not

park next to a white van; thus, I am keeping myself safe”). Girls and women often develop misplaced fears in that they may be afraid to walk alone at night yet have no reservations about being alone with a date. Let’s consider the actual realities of some of the most commonly heard self-protective strategies:

### Myth #1: Never Walk Alone At Night.

While this might be easier for very young girls to follow, from middle school on through adulthood, most girls find that they need to walk alone at night at some point. While there is certainly strength in numbers and having girls look out for one another is great, there has been no research that correlates walking alone at night to an increased likelihood of rape. The available research is to the contrary, indicating that the majority of sexual assaults occur in the home of either the victim or the perpetrator, rather than outdoors or in unfamiliar places.

### Myth #2: Never Talk To Strangers.

Girls are only sexually assaulted by strangers in about 7% of cases. This means that 93% of the time juvenile sexual assault victims know their attacker. About one-third of the time girls are assaulted by a family member (parent, grandparent, sibling, cousin, etc.), and about 60% of the time girls are assaulted by friends or acquaintances (dates, family friends, coaches, neighbors, friends of friends, etc.). So the idea that we only need to teach girls to stay away from strangers fails to account for how sexual assault happens most often to girls.

### Myth #3: Just Go Along With It So You Don’t Get Hurt.

A large body of research over the past 20 years has indicated that girls and women are much more likely to prevent a sexual assault from occurring if they utilize assertive or aggressive verbal and physical resistance and protective strategies. In fact, nonforceful verbal responses, such as begging, pleading, or crying, have actually been associated with an increase in completed sexual assault and an increased likelihood of being injured. Teaching girls to respond assertively or aggressively to potentially threatening situations gives them a much improved chance of getting away and the ability to use their voice and their bodies to keep themselves safe.

## What Can We Do?

***Provide girls with accurate information on how sexual violence happens and how they can respond to potentially threatening situations.*** Girls need to learn the above myths and facts about sexual violence and recognize when they might be vulnerable. Teach girls

who the most likely offenders are, as well as strategies they might use to keep themselves safe. We would use different strategies when we feel uncomfortable or pressured on a date from those we would use if we were confronted by a stranger. Oftentimes, it is actually much more difficult to be assertive or aggressive with someone we know. We don't want to overreact, hurt someone's feelings, or have them think that we are crazy, so sometimes we just let things go instead of speaking up. Help girls think of ways they could respond to the other person in various uncomfortable or threatening situations, such as the following:

- A classmate is giving them an unwanted backrub while they stand at their locker
- A stranger on the bus is sitting too close
- A coach walks in on them in the shower after a game
- A person at the mall keeps showing up at every store they visit
- A date is pushing them up against a wall and forcefully kissing them

Having the chance to think about different situations (girls may have their own, more relevant examples to consider) and practice various responses gives girls confidence in their abilities to actually use the skills when they find themselves in similar situations.

**Teach very young girls that they have a right to set boundaries and stand up for themselves.** Very young girls through elementary school need to learn that they have a right to stand up for themselves. Young children are often expected to follow along with any adult directive and are not given the chance to ever say “no” or not do something that is asked of them. Young girls should be taught that they do not have to hug or kiss people they don't want to hug or kiss—even if the person is a family member or a friend of the family or Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Some parents have difficulty with this and expect that children will obey them at all times. Letting young girls know that people should not touch them on the parts of their body that would be covered by a bathing suit can help them understand what

the “private parts” of their body are. Giving a girl the power to set that boundary and make that decision will enhance her confidence and her sense of having ownership over and respect for her own body. By instilling this idea in younger girls, we will experience less difficulty when we expand on the information with older adolescent girls.

**Know the signs of sexual abuse and violence, and consider the possibility that the distress in a girl’s life could be related to experiencing violence.** There are many different signs that we would look for if we believe that a girl may have experienced some type of sexual violence. Figure 7.1 gives a list of these signs, which while not exhaustive, provides some general information on behavioral and physical indications of abuse. It is important to note that these indicators are

**Figure 7.1** Signs That May Indicate Sexual Abuse and Violence

Younger Children	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bed-wetting, thumb sucking, fear of the dark</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual acting out with peers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nightmares</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tension stomachaches</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separation anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age-inappropriate ways of expressing affection</li> </ul>
Prepuberty and Teenage	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Truancy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alcohol or drug abuse</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessive bathing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxiety or depression</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawn and passive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delinquent behavior/acting out</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual inference in artwork</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual promiscuity</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decline in school performance</li> </ul>	
Physical Indicators	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bruises or bleeding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexually transmitted diseases</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pain or itching in the genitals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pregnancy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty sitting or walking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent sore throats, urinary tract infections, yeast infections</li> </ul>

Source: Child Welfare Information Gateway (2012).

not a confirmation that a child or a teen has experienced violence; rather, they are characteristics that would tell us that there is some level of distress in the girl's life. The distress could be due to many different things, such as parental divorce, being bullied at school, or a behavioral health issue, but the distress could also mean that there has been some sexual violence. So our role, as difficult as it may be, is to consider the possibility that abuse could be present.

### Teach Girls Assertive and Physical Responses to Violence

Girls can learn simple verbal and physical responses to situations of potential threat. However, before any assertive response can be taught effectively to a girl, we must first instill in girls the idea that they are worth defending and that they are capable of defending themselves. Girls have not generally been reinforced for being strong, physical, or loud. When we teach sexual violence prevention to girls, we are asking them to push back against some of the traditional ideas about girls' strength, so that they begin to experience themselves as powerful and as possessing the capacity to influence the outcome of a potentially violent situation. Even the smallest girl can learn skills that can be used on the strongest offender. Effective sexual violence prevention for girls teaches them how to exploit the vulnerabilities of a stronger attacker. As girls get older, they can learn more sophisticated protective skills and can utilize different strategies in various situations. Enrolling girls in girls-only self-defense classes can help them learn and practice these skills.

***Provide girls the opportunity to identify their support systems and the trusting, caring adults in their lives who they could talk to about sensitive topics such as sexual violence.*** Girls rarely tell others when they experience sexual violence because they are often embarrassed or believe that they did something to bring it on themselves. I have worked with many women in counseling who were sexually abused as children or sexually assaulted in college but who have never told a soul because of fear and embarrassment. Helping girls to identify who they could talk to if they were assaulted and who will believe them and support them is critically important. Girls do not want

to be questioned or met with suspicion if they tell another person what happened to them; they just want someone to believe them and comfort them. Sometimes the reaction of the adult can make the girl close up, stop talking, or recant their story. If we, as adults, react with horror, disbelief, or anger, then girls will be hesitant to share their experiences with us. While it can be difficult, we need to meet their disclosures with care, concern, and support.

***Help girls understand that adults and children should not have “secrets” with each other.*** One of the common ways in which child sexual abuse persists for many years is that the adult tells the child that they have a special “secret” that they are not allowed to tell anyone. Often, breaking the secret is associated with threats: “If you tell anyone, I will hurt your mother/kill your dog/send your father to jail,” and so forth. Young children have difficulty knowing that this is a bad secret and one that they can and should tell another person. Talk to girls about the difference between “good” and “bad” secrets. An example of a “good” secret is a surprise birthday party. Overall, it is a good idea to tell girls that adults and kids shouldn’t keep secrets between each other.

***Know your ethical and legal obligations.*** Many of us feel ill prepared to handle situations involving alleged child abuse and feel even less equipped to work in an academic setting with students who have been sexually victimized. We often do not know what our reporting responsibilities might be and don’t understand when we need to call Child Protective Services. Some research has suggested that many school professionals lack the ability to recognize and understand the pervasive effects of child sexual abuse and they report sexual abuse cases less often than they would if they had more and better training. School and counseling personnel need to know their legal responsibilities regarding reporting sexual violence and protecting children, and professional development opportunities can address this requirement.

It is mandatory for educators, counselors, social workers, and other helping professionals to report child abuse. This means that if we have a suspicion that a child is being abused and we do not report

it to Child Protective Services or the police, we can face legal consequences. While educators and counselors are legally required to report child abuse to a child protection agency, any person can freely make a report if they have a suspicion of abuse taking place. Parents, family members, coaches, and friends can notify the police or a child welfare agency if they believe that a child is being abused. Most agencies allow an individual to make an anonymous report if there is a hesitance to identify oneself. When addressing these difficult situations, the first step is to know what to look for, and the second step is to know how to intervene. The goal is to create an environment and a relationship where a child feels safe to disclose the abuse, and then the adult can take action to stop the abuse and protect the child. Schools and organizations should have clear policies and procedures that all staff should follow regarding reporting requirements, chain of command, and documentation of all activities. Allowing child sexual abuse to go undetected or unaddressed is both an ethical and a legal issue for adults who work with kids.