

## How To Stop Boys From Becoming ‘Me Too’ Perpetrators

A new study on teaching middle schoolers about sexual violence and dating abuse yields interesting clues.



By [Melissa Jeltsen](#)

The Me Too movement laid bare the ugly creep of gendered violence into every corner of society, from the classroom to the office to the comedy club. Now the next logical step in our national reckoning is to ask what can be done to prevent men from hurting women in the first place.

One answer is to talk to men — directly, deliberately, honestly — about gendered violence when they are still boys, according to Elizabeth Miller, the director of the Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh.

Miller has spent the last 20 years thinking about how to change the unhealthy attitudes that underpin acts of relationship abuse and sexual violence. The results of her latest clinical trial, published in *JAMA Pediatrics* on Monday, offer the public a lesson worth paying attention to.

Her study evaluated how middle school students were affected by the program *Coaching Boys Into Men*, which was developed by the national nonprofit *Futures Without Violence* and designed to prevent dating abuse and sexual violence.

Conducted between 2015 and 2017, the clinical trial included just under a thousand male athletes in 41 Pennsylvania middle schools.

In schools using the program, athletic coaches spent 15 minutes a week talking to middle school boys about respectful behavior toward girls, covering topics such as degrading language, catcalling, physical aggression, digital abuse and understanding consent.

In guided conversations, coaches challenged regressive ideas about what it means to be a man, such as whether men should get their way in relationships or skip household chores, and promoted gender-equitable attitudes.

Coaches also taught athletes positive bystander skills, encouraging boys to do or say something when they saw their peers treating girls badly, instead of ignoring it or laughing along with it.

By the end of the sports season, students who went through the program reported being much more likely to speak up when they witnessed disrespectful behavior among their peers. When surveyed a year later, those who were dating had 76% lower odds of abusing a romantic partner than those who did not participate in the program. They were also better at recognizing abusive behaviors, and their attitudes on gender equity had improved.

*“The more progressive a young man’s gender beliefs are, the much less likely he is to engage in perpetrating sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating abuse, and other forms of youth violence. Elizabeth Miller, UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh”*

The program was effective because it encouraged positive bystander behavior in addition to challenging harmful norms about masculinity, Miller said.

“The more that young people speak up saying that kind of behavior is not cool, the more it becomes unacceptable to the group,” she said. “It’s what creates social norms change.”

And when boys are able to shed toxic myths glorifying male aggression and superiority, they have lower odds of perpetrating violent behavior, Miller added.

“The more progressive a young man’s gender beliefs are, the much less likely he is to engage in perpetrating sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating abuse, and other forms of youth violence as well,” she said.

Coaching Boys Into Men has already been shown to be effective in reducing dating abuse in high school students. This is the first clinical trial to evaluate its success among middle school boys.

Miller said she decided to study the impact of the program on middle schoolers after discovering that a substantial number of high schoolers in her earlier studies reported that they had witnessed or engaged in abusive behavior.

“The question came up, how much is it a primary prevention program if you’re already working with young people who are engaging in these kinds of behaviors?” she said. “We decided to go younger, to have a better chance of really seeing whether or not this program can work as primary prevention.”

The urgent need for frank conversations about sex and consent with boys is also the subject of “Boys & Sex,” a new book by author Peggy Orenstein.

She noted in a recent New York Times op-ed that a large majority of high school boys and young adult men in a 2017 study said they’d never spoken to their parents about avoiding degrading terms such as “bitches,” how to be “a caring and respectful sexual partner” or how to be sure their partner “wants to be — and is comfortable — having sex with you.” Nearly 90% of girls and young women in the 3,000-person study, conducted by Making Caring Common Project, an initiative of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said they had been sexually harassed.

“Adults may assume those ideas are self-evident, beyond the need for comment, but given the rates of coercion, misconduct and assault among men both young and old, boys are clearly not getting the message by osmosis,” Orenstein wrote.

Jackson Katz, author of “The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help,” said that middle school is a critical intervention time.

“In early adolescence, boys haven’t yet fully absorbed some of the more problematic definitions of manhood that they will increasingly receive as they get older,” he said. “They’re highly impressionable and you can work with them.”

Still, any program aiming to fundamentally change boys’ attitudes about gender must compete with an endless stream of cultural messaging from their friends, family, the internet and movies, Katz added.

“A short conversation every week is not going to dislodge all of that,” Katz said. “It’s not like a vaccination, where you wait in line and get a shot and now you’re counteracting all the negative impacts that culture has been teaching you about men’s entitlement. But these kinds of interventions begin to get at what has to change.”