

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: Do you have any suggestions about how to talk to my middle school daughter about sexual harassment, especially now that it's so prevalent in the news?

ANSWER: I would start by selecting a good time that is free of distractions where both parents (if possible) can present a united front. It might sound something like this:

"Susie," I hope you know just how much we love you and want to prepare and equip you to grow into a godly woman. You may have heard a lot on the news these days about sexual harassment. It might be somewhat uncomfortable to talk about, but we think it's very important because our world can sometimes be a not very nice place."

(At this point, you might want to ask your daughter just how much she knows about sexual harassment before you continue. If she is not quite sure, explain in detail. Tell her that you aren't trying to embarrass her, just educate and equip her, so she can recognize sexual harassment and know what to do.)

"Sexual harassment happens when someone makes repeated, unwanted and unasked for inappropriate advances (It feels like an attack,) on you. The person might touch you, pinch you, hug you or grab you in a personal and private way that makes you feel uncomfortable, intimidated, afraid, ashamed, helpless or humiliated. No one should ever touch you that way. Your body belongs to you, and you have the right to say "No!"

Sexual harassment is not just inappropriate touch. It can be verbal threats, insults, sexual jokes, notes, comments or even rude noises. Sexual harassment can be non-verbal, like staring at your body and smirking, drawing sexual pictures and showing them to you, winking, mouthing words or actions, or suggestive body movements directed at you for the purpose of intimidating you. You might say it is sexual bullying. It can occur when someone in a position of power (in authority or simply size and strength) tries

to force you into doing some sexual action that you don't want to do. Sexual harassment can be done by adults or your peers."

(At this point you might want to stop and make certain she understands and has the opportunity to ask questions. Let her know that she can ask questions any time. There are no secrets in your household.)

"Sexual harassment is not funny or some kind of joke. It is not just "normal kids stuff." It is a crime and can be reported to the police. If you believe you have been sexually harassed, don't keep silent. Tell us; we will listen and we will help you. You can also tell a trusted adult like a teacher, coach, school counselor or pastor. If you have a friend who is being sexually harassed, tell a trusted adult until you get help for her/him. We will help you in that situation too."

(At your daughter's age and in her culture, you might want to talk about the difference between "flirting" and sexual harassment. Middle school is a time when kids are experimenting with sexuality...this includes flirting.)

"You might be wondering if "flirting" is some kind of sexual harassment. Flirting is between people who have equal power. Generally, both people want to flirt and both people enjoy it. If flirting ever changes to intimidation, it has crossed the line into sexual harassment. At that point in time, it's important that you let the person know that what he/she is doing is not OK, that you want him/her to stop, and that you will report him/her if the behavior continues."

By the way, as School Counselor, I speak with our Shepherd 7th and 8th graders every fall about sexual harassment. Although far less common, I let them know that sexual harassment can and does happen to boys too.

Talking to your daughter is yet another opportunity for you as parents to solidify your relationship with her, creating a parent/child environment where there is open trust, and information about life is openly shared. Such times are also great opportunities to pray with and for her in an on-going way.

Jack Lipski, M.A., Shepherd School Counselor

