

# Training Boys vs. Girls

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Data tells us that girls are more likely to become victims of child sexual abuse than boys. This raises the question: "Should we be putting more emphasis on training girls about sexual predators or somehow training the sexes differently?"



The question is understandable. After all, in recent months, the reality of what women have been dealing with for many centuries has become a public conversation. Women are finally starting to speak out about the ways they have been, and are, sexually harassed and assaulted and how they have put up with it over the years in order to survive and make something of themselves—but almost always in spite of the dismissive attitudes they confronted. The #MeToo movement, as it has become known, is giving voice to the pervasive nature of this situation. Without getting into the politics of the movement, it is still helpful for us to take a look at what has happened as a result of people having the courage to speak up through the hashtag usage.

If #MeToo has taught us anything, it is that women of any age are vulnerable to harassment, abuse, and assault. If you are on Facebook, you have probably seen the number of women who simply said, "Me too!" to denote that they have been a victim of harassment or assault. It points to the fact that our culture has been so accepting of this behavior that most women never told anyone. In recent months, a number of powerful, high profile men have lost their jobs and positions in the community because of allegations about their sexually inappropriate behavior.

Women often just "took it" because either they did not know how to speak up without being punished for it or because they had been conditioned to accept this kind of treatment by both the men in their lives and the women they had grown up with. It was just the way things were and they just needed to deal with it. Many good men are now acknowledging that they looked the other way and are apologizing for being willing to allow the abuse and harassment to continue. They are confronting the part they have played in this cultural reality.

Yet this data and continuing revelations about abuse of women is not justification to lessen training for boys nor even to change the nature of it. It is a sad reality that boys get molested and men also are victims of harassment and some have even had the courage to speak up as a result of the #MeToo movement. While it is true that the statistics tell us that more girls are being molested, the experts are also clear that reports of sexual abuse of boys are grossly underreported for a number of reasons. At the end of the day, no one should be molested, so it is important that we look at the issue from that perspective.

Today, as was said at the Golden Globes, "A new day is on the horizon." This new day is not just for girls. It is a new day for boys and men too. At VIRTUS<sup>®</sup>, that means a renewed effort to draw attention to the behaviors that indicate that children, male and female, are at risk. It means a recommitment to "Speak Up and Speak Out!" when these behaviors are observed, regardless of

the gender of the child. We must redouble our efforts to say "No!", get away, and tell somebody what they saw and/or experienced. This is true for all our children—girls and boys.

Men grew up in an environment that usually gave a pass to sexually harassing behavior. They even joke about it and many have excused the behavior as "men being men." Even those who were appalled by the behavior and would never have committed those acts were expected to keep quiet and let it go. The young boys who are victims of child molesters are also victims of this attitude. If they are molested by a woman, they are supposed to be proud of that—not a victim of "her." If they are molested by a man, they are labeled as homosexual and become the subject of ridicule—regardless of their sexual identity. They too have been victims of this cultural attitude toward women, just in a different way.

If we decide that this history and the data means that we need to raise the bar in training girls and put more effort into training girls than into training boys, we will only be addressing half the issue. Unless we do both—educate and train our young girls and our young boys—we risk raising only half our children to become part of the solution and we place our boys at greater risk of harm.

Young boys need to know that they do not have to tolerate being molested by anyone. They also need to know that young girls are victimized, too, and that it is up to all of us to interrupt this behavior and stop predators no matter who they are targeting. Boys have to see the risk to the girls in their lives as well as the risk to themselves—the same is true for our girls.

The VIRTUS® Children's programs do not differentiate between risks to girls and risks to boys. They teach children that the potentially risky behaviors of adults are the problem, no matter who is being impacted by those behaviors. It is important for those teachers presenting these programs to reinforce the message that we must all look for, identify, and call attention to the risky behavior exhibited by ANY adult toward ANY child.

In fact, it might be a good idea to make sure that message is clear for all the children in our care. Let them know that it is up to all of us to watch and to speak up when we see something that seems risky—no matter who is involved. Much is made of speaking up for yourself. Now is a good time to remind our children of the Christian value of speaking up for others who are at risk. There is a popular saying that has permeated the fundamentalist Christian culture in the last few years. "WWJD" means What Would Jesus Do? This question could be the basis for an emphasis in the training on being willing to stand up for yourself and others in the face of inappropriate, risky or abusive behavior.

Training for boys and girls is not different. It is a way to empower all our children to protect themselves and others in the environment from the risky adults who might prey on them. It is also a way to reinforce the message that sexual abuse is wrong and not to be tolerated from anyone. Treating the girls and boys the same in training is one way we can help to change the culture and create a future where this kind of behavior stops.