In my work with teenagers and young adults I have witnessed a trend that disturbs me. In recent months I have had to deal with young men—high school and college age—who got involved with female peers and found themselves in trouble and the subject of accusations that shocked them.

I am not talking about boys who assaulted girls or about something akin to date rape or harassment. I am talking about what has always seemed to me to be old fashioned, cat and mouse, sexual exploration between young, inexperienced, clumsy kids. Invariably, when these misunderstandings have occurred, the boys have suffered as much as, if not more than, the girls who used words like “traumatized” and “assaulted.”

As a feminist I am glad that we have moved past the idea that a woman is “asking for it” because she is wearing a short skirt. However, as a feminist I am also dismayed by the impression I am getting that the young women in these situations feel they play no role and have no control. This can go as far as the involvement of lawyers in what seems to be something that can (and should) be settled with a polite apology and a lesson learned. Moving from the idea that a short skirt means you are open to sexual assault, to the idea that throwing yourself at another person gives you the right to be offended by the response it elicits, seems a pendulum that has swung too far. Yes, I should be able to walk down Route 9 naked and expect not to be assaulted, but that may not be the reality. I should also be able to hang around near Yankee Stadium wearing all my jewelry and flashing wads of cash and not be robbed, but I wouldn’t do that either. However we feel things should be, we have to act in response to how they actually are, and take responsibility for those actions.

Let me be clear that I am not using as examples situations where a young lady told a boy to stop, pushed him away, let him know her boundaries, or in any way let these boys know that what they were doing was distasteful and unappreciated, but the boy continued to pursue. These are examples where all parties remained dressed—no actual sex took place, nor was clothing torn, nor were there physical struggles. The examples I have in mind involve two parties engaged in what young people do. There may have been kissing, groping, petting, flirting, I imagine some heavy breathing, but no more. In fact, in a couple of instances, the girls were more aggressive in their pursuit or at least sent a message that made the boy think that their advances would be welcome. At no time did the girls stop the action and say that they had had enough, but for whatever reason they became upset and agitated, ran from the boy or else remained quiet and later told their friends about what was referred to as an “assault” or “trauma.” The girls refused to accept the boys’ apologies, take responsibility for any misunderstanding, and in some cases caused the boys to be shunned by others in the group. These guilt-ridden young men then sat with me wishing they could apologize, wishing they
could understand the messages they felt they read wrong, and going back out into the dating scene not only more cautious, but downright frightened. Let’s not forget that an 18-year old boy with a 16-year old sweetheart can end up a registered sex offender if things don’t go well. I think of a boy, not yet 18, who reported to me, “I would be charged as an adult.” His crime? He clumsily groped a classmate who was sitting in his lap. When his female classmates grope the more popular boys no one bats an eyelash. The message is that the boys should be grateful for such attention, it must prove their virility, but girls should be frightened by such attention because it represents predatory behavior. Believe me, from what I see, the overwhelming majority of 17-year old boys wouldn’t know how to be sexual predators if they tried. In most cases they are more clueless about sex than the girls.

I’m not sure what fate brought a few of these stories to my couch in quick succession, but it has me thinking about my own adolescence and identity as a woman, and why this is happening now. Boys have always pursued girls. It’s cliché to say that “boys only want one thing.” It even sounds quaint now, the image of the Cold War mother warning her pretty daughter on the eve of her first date. But yes, in many ways high school boys are like 11-month old puppies. They are almost fully grown, but not quite, they are still quite clumsy, and become too exuberant if we let them get too excited. So what can we do to help these kids stay out of trouble and make this transition to confident adults a little easier?

I have seen some situations lately where confusion among teenagers regarding dating and sex led to overreactions and difficult consequences. It got me thinking about how I dealt with boys in my youth, how universal some of these issues are, and will continue to be, as long as there are teenagers. I was a cute, outgoing teenager, so I was lucky enough to have my share of boys hanging around. Thankfully, I felt empowered enough to send clear messages and set boundaries with these boys. So, when Patrick Doyle, one of the better looking, and therefore more popular, boys in my group indicated that I possibly owed him more than a goodnight kiss because it was his birthday (and who even knows if it was) I told him to get lost. And guess what? As cute and popular as he was, the insecure, clumsy, decent teenager dropped it. I can remember conversations with my girlfriends about just how to let boys know how far we were willing to go because we accepted that dealing with their advances was a given in the dating scene. Talks of how to position our bodies so our lips were accessible but other parts were not, and reports of how far boys had tried to get were a normal part of our weekend dialogue. In general a gentle nudge of a hand away from our nether regions was all it took to send a message that the place was off limits. I don’t recall any of us having to deal with anything more predatory than the awkward attempts of a skinny teenager, or later in college, the only slightly more suave car ride to a dark street where we could discuss where to have dinner—or not if the young man got “lucky.” Of course rape does happen, and of course it is a crime that can’t be tolerated, but if girls are made to feel that they can say “No” and mean it and be respected, we can eliminate some of the grief that these kids are feeling. Why did I feel strong enough to tell Patrick to take a hike and laugh it off without asking my parents to call a lawyer? One would think that a girl of 25 years ago, raised by traditional parents born before the Second World
War, would be more timid, less bold, and less vocal than the girls of today who wear clothes that flaunt their feminine assets, use the language of longshoremen, go to college in greater numbers than their male peers, compete in sports, and have seen female Secretaries of State, Prime Ministers, astronauts, doctors, lawyers, athletes and entrepreneurs in far greater numbers than I ever dreamed.

I would love to take each girl as she approaches sexual maturity and talk to her about the responsibility that comes with it. And perhaps that is part of the problem. The feminist movement hasn’t lost steam, but its impact on our sexuality got left behind somewhere. Somewhere between “Don’t Let This Happen to You” and “Sex in the City” we lost our minds. Girls tell me they want the sexual freedom of women they see in the media, but they lack the emotional maturity to deal with the consequences. We don’t even know what “sex” is anymore, as virtually every young person I meet views oral sex as no big deal, demoted to the level of mere kissing, yet an excited boy’s clumsy grope is an assault. Music videos show people dressed so provocatively and touching each other in such a way that you would think all good parties end in orgies. Tiger Woods is caught “being a dog” and claims that he has an addiction that caused him to go wrong… the devil (wearing Prada bustier) made him do it. The victim mentality and litigious nature of our society has led people to absolve themselves of responsibility and blame others, particularly those we see as stronger. Well, it’s always been my opinion that aside from upper body strength my gender is the stronger one. And if that makes me sound like a tough chick, then good.

I would love to take each and every girl as she approaches sexual maturity and talk to her about the responsibility that comes with it. This is not to take away the responsibility of the boys, but it’s possibly more important for the girls to understand their responsibility, as this can empower them to take charge, set limits, and accept consequences in a more mature way. We have to teach them that they DO have the power to say “No” and that they SHOULD do so if they are not comfortable with a situation, and the boy needs to hear that and oblige. We also need to teach them that if they ARE comfortable with the situation, or they want to pursue a boy, that it is nothing to be ashamed of. We are so puritanical in our society that we show our children violent action films but nothing sexual. Girls need to know that if they welcome a boy’s advances, that is fine, as long as the situation remains safe and respectful and they feel certain in their readiness. And if, the next day, they have some regrets, both parties need to accept responsibility if both parties were willing participants. We need to teach them that their actions have reactions. If I invite a man to my home and answer the door in lingerie, that sends a message, and it is MY job, not his, to decide if that is the message I want to send, to decide what the response might be and if it’s a response I want to deal with. If a teenage girl sits on a boy’s lap she has to understand that there may be a reaction that comes from this, and to think twice before invading anyone’s personal space. Sadly, our girls are getting such mixed messages about their sexuality that it is no wonder that they can’t figure out if they are the predator or the prey. And that, to me, is scary – both for the girls who feel victimized and the boys who feel confused and vilified.
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