Prevention

a WISE approach to supporting young people

end violence
wise
share hope • change lives

WISE leads the Upper Valley to end gender-based violence through survivor-centered advocacy, prevention, education and mobilization for social change.

Our Vision is a world of freedom, justice, equality and dignity where all can thrive.

We can end violence. The Prevention and Education Program (PEP) engages with people of all ages to become active in the movement to end violence across the Upper Valley. This booklet is written for all adults who know and care about young people. Parents, grandparents, caregivers, coaches, teachers, counselors, and all of us have a role to play in helping kids learn the expectations for healthy and safe relationships. We have opportunities every day to help safely navigate the complexities of relationships, cultural norms, and social pressures.

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Trusted adults

You are likely interested in this booklet because you care about being an adult that young people can rely on, confide in, and trust.

When we talk with students about identifying trusted adults, they share that the adults should be honest, reliable, responsible, and safe. Trusted adults listen, follow through on their promises, and help kids take care of themselves. As children age into teens, it might mean listening without judgement, providing guidance while allowing for choice, respecting their own individual wants and desires, and being consistent and predictable.

When we ask kids about the trusted adults in their lives, we focus on the qualities that make someone trustworthy, not just the relationship. Everyone will have different adults in their lives who have these qualities. Historically, kids have been taught about “stranger, danger” which only focuses on whether or not they know an adult. It can be confusing because some strangers are really helpful – like if we are lost – and some people we have known a long time are not trustworthy or safe. Our hope is that while we support children to identify the qualities and adults in their lives that they trust, we are also helping the adults in their lives live up to those needs.

Throughout this booklet, we will identify tips and strategies that will enrich the work you are already doing to be a trusted adult in the lives of young people.

Bodies

Everyone deserves information about how their body works and what their body needs to be safe and healthy.

Having accurate terminology for all body parts allows children to be more self-aware, able to communicate what their bodies need, and have the proper words to ask for help, all of which can reduce a child's likelihood of victimization in the first place.[1] It is helpful to distinguish between public and private body parts. Public body parts can be visible in public places and private body parts are kept covered in public places. Babies and little children need help from adults to take care of their bodies. Adults and older children can mostly take care of their own bodies. Sometimes, if an adult or teenager has an injury or disability, another adult - like a doctor or caretaker - would help them. Adults do not need help from kids to take care of their bodies.

Adults can set a foundation for healthy expectations by giving young people a standard for how others should treat them. We can model this respect with babies by describing what we are doing during bath time, diaper changes, and other times when we help keep their bodies safe and clean. As they get older, children can have more privacy and responsibility for taking care of their own bodies. It is much easier to identify unhealthy and unsafe behaviors when healthy and safe behaviors are clearly defined and modeled.

Our bodies help us do amazing things! They give us information all the time about how we are feeling, what we like, what we do not like, and when something does not feel quite right. Paying attention to our bodies provides us opportunities to notice and respond to our physical and emotional health in healthy, safe, and productive ways. Listening to our bodies can prevent us from getting sick, can help us react when our internal radar senses danger, and can give us important information about what we need. Noticing emotions and the causes helps us identify and articulate our needs which can set us up for a lifetime of healthy communication with others and, most importantly, with ourselves.

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[1] Elizabeth Jeglic and Cynthia Calkins. *Protecting Your Child from Sexual Abuse: What You Need to Know to Keep Your Kids Safe* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2018).

Healthy sexual development

Understanding and supporting healthy sexual development in children is a part of sexual abuse prevention. Knowing the difference between expected and concerning behavior during developmental stages can help identify abuse and problematic sexual behavior, and provide caring intervention. For example, it is natural for young people to be curious about bodies. It is worrisome for young people to use coercive, secretive, or manipulative tactics around bodies and consent.[2]

Elementary school

- Use the anatomically correct names (penis, vulva, butt, breasts, chest) when talking about private body parts. This helps young people feel connected to and in control of their bodies while reducing shame (and giggles). It also gives them specific language to ask for help.
- Talk about the differences between private and public. Communicate the appropriate times to be naked and when children can touch their own private body parts (bath time, when going to the bathroom, when alone and in a private space after washing their hands).
- Help children identify sensations in their bodies and what they might mean. If we are able to identify when our bodies feel safe/calm/happy, it is easier for us to identify when things are not quite right.

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[2] To learn more, check out the "Healthy Childhood Sexual Development" resource from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center at nsvrc.org.

- Practice with kids to understand the messages our bodies send us to help us take care of ourselves. When we know what makes us feel joy and pleasure in our bodies, we can use those strategies when we need to self-regulate and self-sooth. We also can notice when our bodies are telling us that something is wrong and we need help.
- Be mindful of how you talk about your own body. Talk about how your body feels and what it can do, rather than how it looks.

Middle school

- Point out the things you do to take care of your body. Ask questions like: How do you take care of your body? Encourage young people to think about healthy and safe ways to care for their bodies when they are hungry, sleepy, sick, dirty, or in pain.
- Encourage young people to celebrate the cool things their bodies help them do, and all of the differences that make them, their peers, and classmates unique.
- Share developmentally appropriate information about their body, such as changes that might happen with puberty and growth, and sexual behaviors, such as masturbation and crushes.
- Be engaged and ask questions about messages young people receive regarding bodies and sex from their school and peers.
- Help young people understand and make sense of messages about bodies, relationships and sex from media, books, movies and television.

High school

- Point out objectification, gender stereotypes, and unrealistic examples of bodies and relationships in media. Ask open ended questions about what those messages might be teaching us that are harmful or make us less happy.
- Reinforce the fact that what we do with our bodies is our own choice: what we eat, what activities we partake in, what clothes we wear and what sexual behaviors we are comfortable with and with whom.
- Be open to answering questions about bodies and sex without judgement.
- Offer to learn together. You may not have all the answers, but you can look them up and talk about the new information.
- Reflect on your own experience of your body and sex, and how it has been influenced by others. How is your experience influencing your response to young people, especially when they make decisions that make you uncomfortable?

Consent

Consent is something we do throughout our whole lives. At WISE, we talk about consent with younger children as asking for permission. This instills the positive, pro-social behavior of respecting other people from the very beginning. It is a simple concept: we always ask other people for permission before we touch them and we expect that others will ask us for permission before they touch us.

We can model consent when we interact with children. When talking with younger kids, it is helpful to focus on the reasons for touching when it is necessary for their care (wiping, washing, medical attention, safety).[3] For example, "I need to hold your hand to cross the street to help keep you safe, which hand do you want me to hold?" When there are times that you have to touch your child, and they do not want to be touched, explain the reasoning and try to give as much choice as possible. For example, "You need a new diaper because this one is dirty. Do you want to be changed here or in the other room?" We can also model asking not to be touched and remind children to ask before they touch others. It is okay to tell a child "I love you, and it is too hot to sit on my lap right now. Do you want to sit beside me?" You can also point out how pets show whether they want to be touched or left alone as a fun opportunity for learning nonverbal cues.

It is important that children know that touches should never be secrets. Keeping secrets is often a tactic that abusers use to keep children quiet about abuse. You can help children brainstorm adults who they can ask for help if they feel uncomfortable about a touch or if someone is touching them without permission. Children should know that they can always say no to touches that they do not want, and that there are people they can talk to if someone does not listen to them or if a touch makes them feel uncomfortable.

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[3] Elizabeth Jeglic and Cynthia Calkins. *Protecting Your Child from Sexual Abuse: What You Need to Know to Keep Your Kids Safe*. (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2018).

Practicing letting children say no to touches with trusted people (friends and family) builds their skills and capacity to ask for help if they are ever abused. When children are sexually abused, the abuse that they experience may not physically hurt. Often abuse happens in relationships that make victims feel special, and can be confusing. This is why the language of “good touch, bad touch” is not recommended. Children who have been abused might have all kinds of feelings about what happened that are more complex than good or bad. Adults can help children understand what happened, make sure children know it was not their fault, and support children as they process their feelings about the experience.

When WISE talks with high school students about consent, we focus on four principles: **choice**, **active**, **ongoing**, and **equal power**.

CHOICE: It might seem obvious, but we have to actually ask and talk with our partner. Consent cannot be implied. We need to have an ongoing conversation to figure out what we all want. In order for our yes to be a real, we have to know that it is okay to say no. We both need certain information around what we are agreeing to do: what sexual act, the STI status, what it means for the relationship, and how we might prevent pregnancy. If we are feeling pressured to say yes, are afraid of negative consequences from saying no, or are tricked into saying yes, we are not giving consent because we do not have what we need to make a free and informed choice.

ACTIVE: Active consent means that we are all acting and behaving like we want to hook up. We have said yes, and also seem really into it. Paying attention to our partner’s body language shows that we care about each other and we want it to be an enjoyable experience! We only hook up with people who want to hook up with us too.

ONGOING: Consent is not a contract, or a final answer. Consent is ongoing communication with our partner to make sure that everyone is feeling good about whatever is happening. We have to continue to pay attention to our partner, because sometimes we change our minds, and what we are doing is not working. Sometimes it can seem like there is a script to hooking up, and once certain things happen consent is implied, or anything goes. This is WRONG! Just because we said yes initially or before, or to one particular activity, does not mean we can assume yes to everything else. When we stay attentive and considerate of a partner's experience, we can trust each other and be more communicative about what we like – and what we do not.

EQUAL POWER: There are some people who have more power than others or some situations that create a power imbalance. Sometimes we can work to minimize the impacts of power imbalance, for example when someone has more money or popularity. In these cases, it is the responsibility of the person with more power to make sure consent is active and ongoing and that they are not using their power to pressure the other person into saying yes. Other times there is no way to equalize power, for example in boss/employee or adult/minor relationships. The power that a boss has over an employee does not allow for the employee to make a genuine decision because there are too many potential negative consequences to saying no, or even positive consequences for saying yes.

What you can do

Elementary school

- Greetings and goodbyes are often accompanied by some kind of physical touch. Give children a choice in how they want to say hello and goodbye to others. You might say, “Grammy is here, how would you like to say hello?” or “How would you like to say good night to everyone?” It can be helpful to offer suggestions such as hugs, waves, high-fives, shaking hands, kisses, or blowing kisses.
- Reinforce their right to say “no thanks” when they do not feel like being touched. Ask them to respect you when you ask not to be touched.
- When watching television, movies, or looking at pictures where people are touching ask how can we tell if the person likes being touched? Sometimes we can tell by the person’s face or body language, sometimes we cannot, so we always need to ask.

Middle school

- Take every opportunity to reinforce the message that each person is in control of their own body. Talk about consent using examples that both are and are not sexual.
- Use movies, television, and books to talk about how you see and do not see people getting consent: If they are not getting consent, why are they able to get away with it in the media? How does the media make consent seem implied? What could go wrong in real life?
- Talk with youth about asking proactive questions, paying attention to body language, and making sure everyone is free to say what they want. Our motto is *consent is not confusing*. If they are ever confused or unsure about how someone is feeling or what they want to do, ask or default to not touching!

Some conversation starters:

- Are you comfortable communicating how you feel to this person? Do they respond in supportive ways? How do you make sure they can tell you what they are really feeling?
- Why might someone say yes even if they are not 100% sure? Aside from you, what else could make someone feel pressure to do things they are not ready for? What are some of the things outside the relationship that could make someone feel pressure to do things they are not ready for?
- What could you do if someone says yes but you can tell by their tone of voice or body language that they are not into it?

High school

- Have a conversation with young people about the ways that alcohol can prevent them or someone else from being able to consent. When people are intoxicated, they may not be able to process all of the information that they need in order to make an informed choice. Make sure the conversation is separate from discussing the potential harm of underage drinking. If someone experiences violence while intoxicated, it is not their fault. Understanding this will make survivors less likely to blame themselves and more likely to come to you for help.
- Reiterate the idea that consent should not be confusing. While it is common that people who are still learning each other's signals may start out confused about what the other wants. If they are feeling confused, they do not yet have permission.
- Encourage them to ask you questions. Even if we would not make the same decision, we can show young people that they can come to us with questions or if they need help. If you do not know the answer, create an opportunity to learn together!

- Share your concerns in ways that support their independence. That might sound like, "I am worried for these reasons … and I want you to have this information so when you decide you are ready, you can be safe. I want you to know you can come to me if you have questions."
- Practice asking for consent in your own household – you might say, "you look like you need a hug, can I give you one?" "It looks like you are really overwhelmed, do you want to take a break from this conversation?" or "I notice you have been alone in your room all day, can I come in and chat for a while?"

Some conversation starters:

- Who are the people in your life who have the most power over you? How would that power make sexual activity with them not consensual?
- Do you know the age of consent in our state? Why do you think that law exists? What does it mean?
- What are some ways you might know that someone was too drunk to consent? What if you did not know how much they had to drink? What are other reasons someone might be unable to consent? What do you do if you are not sure?
- How could you make sure your partner knows that you will not be angry if they decide to say no?
- How do you know when you are ready to do something? How can you tell your partner? What could you say if you changed your mind?
- What if you see others doing something that does not seem consensual or is making someone uncomfortable? What could you do to help?

Feelings

We have so many feelings. They change often, they impact us differently, and sometimes they catch us off guard. When we learn how to describe and identify our feelings, we are able to access our individual coping strategies and ask for help if we need it. Learning to connect our emotions with physical sensations is an essential skill for emotional regulation.

We all have different safe and healthy ways to make ourselves feel better, and it is important to consider that something that makes one person feel better might not work for everyone. It can be helpful to model how we take care of ourselves in safe ways and brainstorm coping strategies with children. Teach kids strategies for when they are feeling upset, angry, confused, overwhelmed, etc., and encourage them to notice what works. It is not okay for us – or anyone else – to use our feelings as an excuse to hurt others. When problems arise, we can access the coping strategies we have brainstormed and practiced to respond to conflict in ways that are productive and minimize the potential for harm.

What you can do

Elementary school

- Help children recognize the physical sensations that accompany their emotions. Model naming your own feelings and what strategies you use in response. Some options might be, “I know I am anxious because my stomach hurts, so I am going to take a walk and get some fresh air.” “This conversation is making me very upset, and I feel hot in the face.” “I need a minute to take a few deep breaths to calm down before we keep talking.”
- Keep a list of coping strategies visible in your house, around your classroom, in your office.

- Create a feelings diary where your child writes the following: Today I was feeling ______, because of _______. I can tell that I was feeling that way because my body was ___________.
- Draw feelings with children. What does happy look like? What does embarrassed look like? Offer strategies for connecting with or handling feelings: coloring, dancing, talking, count to ten, etc. Draw those, too.
- Help identify trusted adults who they could ask for help.
- Encourage children to show their emotions, especially ones that may traditionally be discouraged - like for boys to cry and for girls to be angry. Then practice how to get through those feelings.

Middle school

- Help young people describe and name how they are feeling. Be gentle, supportive, and validate their feelings.
- Share ways that you cope and encourage young people to brainstorm healthy, safe, and productive ways to take care of themselves.
- Encourage young people to cultivate emotional bonds with friends. What friend makes you laugh? What friend gives you the best advice? What friend can you go to when you are feeling confused? Sad? Angry?
- Help identify trusted adults, friends, home and school resources in their lives.
- Push back on gender stereotypes that limit emotional expression. Encourage young people to express their emotions. Girls might worry that their feelings will be perceived as being dramatic and boys might worry that expressing emotions is a sign of weakness.

High school

- Talk with teens about your own feelings and how you cope with them.
- Be open about the times when you have felt overwhelmed by an emotion in the past. Explain that it is normal for emotions to feel insurmountable sometimes, but that you are always there to help and will not be angry or disappointed in them for telling you how they feel.
- Ask what they do when they feel angry, sad, lonely, or disappointed. Do they feel like their coping mechanisms are effective and safe? If not, can you help them think of some ways to cope that are?
- Help your teen notice how feelings can change over time. Often time, sleep, food and water can reduce the intensity of feelings. Waiting before responding or reacting can often be really helpful.
- Normalize having different people to go to for support. Some friends are great listeners. Some give great advice. Some are so fun we forget what is wrong.
- Consider finding a professional, like a school or community counselor, who might be able to support the young person with clinical expertise.

Gender identity

Developmentally, children start to understand and try to categorize themselves and others by gender usually between the ages of 2 and 3,[4] so it is never too early to start conversations. Exploring gender expression is a normal part of growing up, and experimenting with clothes, hairstyles, and toys can help young people discover what they like. Without gender stereotypes dictating what we can and cannot do, there will be less connection between the activities we like and the implication about our gender identity or sexual orientation.

Gender is a word that is used to mean many different things to different people in different contexts. Language that people create to describe their experiences with gender is always evolving. Below is a quick list of some language and definitions that might help you to tease apart the different ways that gender influences our individual identities.

- **Gender identity -** the gender you identify as.
- **Gender expression -** displaying visible markers or activities that have traditionally been categorized as gendered and may be used to express gender identity, to fit into a gender expectation, or just for fun. For example, wearing something traditionally considered feminine – like lipstick.
- **Gender stereotypes -** assumptions and expectations our culture makes about a group of people based on gender. For example, girls like pink and boys like blue (see **Gender stereotypes**).
- **Sex assigned at birth -** the sex assigned to someone by a doctor based on physiological markers, like genitalia or chromosomes, usually male, female or intersex. Our

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[4] Stennes, Leif M., Burch, M. M,, Sen, M. G. & Bauer, P. J. "A longitudinal study of gendered vocabulary and communicative action in young children." *Developmental Psychology* 41.1 (2005): 75.

culture assumes that someone's sex assignment at birth will translate to their gender identity but this is not always the case.

- **Intersex –** natural sexual variation in genitalia, chromosomes, hormones, and/or gonads. This may sometimes, not always, be physically visible. Historically people with genitalia that was considered ambiguous were subjected to surgery as babies to more closely resemble one or the other expected sex organs. Variation in sex characteristics is not unusual.

- **Transgender -** someone who is transgender has a different gender identity than their sex assignment at birth implies. Trans men were assigned female at birth but their gender identity is male; trans women were assigned male at birth but their gender identity is female. Some people do not identify as either man or woman, and may or may not identify as trans or non-binary. Trans people, especially trans women, experience some of the highest rates of gender-based violence.[5]

- **Non-binary -** does not identify as a man or a woman, or rejects the male/female gender binary. Someone who identifies as non-binary might call themselves a variety of terms: agender, bigender, gender fluid, genderqueer, trans masculine, trans feminine, etc. These terms might mean different things to different people. The best way to understand someone's unique experience of their gender is for them to tell you.

- **Cisgender –** when someone's gender identity is the same as would be assumed by their sex assignment at birth. For example, a cis woman is a person who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman.

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[5] Wirtz, Andrea L., et al. "Gender-based violence against transgender people in the United States: a call for research and programming." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 21.2 (2020): 227-241.

There are lots of stereotypes and social messages that pressure people to adhere to limited gender stereotypes, identities and expressions. Often, people who do not fit into these norms experience heightened rates of violence and stigma. Encouraging people to live as their full selves, and eliminating the limitations created by gender norms and stereotypes is crucial to ending gender-based violence.

If you or the young people in your life are struggling or interested in learning more about gender identity, there are some statewide organizations that might be helpful. Pride Center of Vermont, Outright Vermont, and Seacoast Outright are good places to start. See if your school has a LGBTQ+ student organization.

Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are the social expectations for men to behave one way, for women to behave another way, and for all people to fit into one of those two boxes. Gender-based violence is used to maintain these as the only two categories, and to create a power difference between people who are supposed to be masculine and people who are supposed to be feminine.

We hear things like: men are leaders and women are supporters; men are strong and women need protection; men are stoic and women are emotional. Stereotypes about women often focus on their looks, bodies, or sex appeal. Stereotypes about men emphasize power, strength, and independence. We tend to think about things happening to women, while we envision men being the ones to take action. These stereotypes make it seem like all men and all women act the same, and leaves no room for people who do not fit these expectations.

Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies one of the primary risk factors for perpetrating violence is being male, while a primary risk factor for experiencing violence is being female.[6] This is because of gender stereotypes. Gender-based violence is used as a way to keep people in their stereotypical boxes and keep gendered power imbalances in place. Societal norms that support male superiority, female inferiority, male sexual entitlement, and female submissiveness are most likely to result in communities with high rates of violence.[7]

Gender-based violence is not based on the gender identity of the perpetrator or victim, it is based on gender stereotypes. Anyone can experience violence that is meant to keep them in their gendered box, and maintain the imbalance of power based on gender.

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[6] Tharp, A. T., DeGue, S., Valle, L. A., Brookmeyer, K. A., Massetti, G. M., & Matjasko, J. L. "A systematic qualitative review of risk and protective factors for sexual violence perpetration." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 14.2 (2013), 133-167.

[7] Ibid.

Once you start noticing gender stereotypes, you begin to see them everywhere: slogans on clothing, in music, movies, television, and in casual everyday conversations. It can feel overwhelming, but it also means that there are countless opportunities for us to influence our culture every day. By challenging gender stereotypes, we can dramatically reduce gender-based violence. Eliminating them makes the world a safer and more joyful place for all of us.

What you can do

Elementary school

- Allow young people to try new things. It is normal for young kids to categorize people by gender. Use these moments as opportunities to point out that all different kinds of children might like pink, wearing tutus, or playing with trucks. Let them experiment with things they love like sports, toys, and clothes, and question assumptions about who can and cannot participate in various activities based on gender. Encourage young people to do things that make them happy!
- Encourage children to have a healthy relationship with their emotions and expression, such as giving space for children to cry, be nurturing, energetic, smart, artistic, etc., regardless of their gender.
- Allow kids to be friends with people of all genders without an underlying expectation of romance. Encourage kids to play in mixed groups without making jokes or comments about them being boyfriend and girlfriend.
- Share books and movies that defy gender stereotypes and show youth doing what they love.

- Counteract messages in movies, books, with peers, and at school that reinforce gendered expectations. Ask questions about what you see as girl or boy things in their friend group and remind them that anyone might like a particular color/toy/game. Change story lines that have mom washing dishes and dad mowing the lawn.

Middle school

- Gender stereotypes are so common in our culture that it might feel impossible to not reinforce them. It is okay when you realize something you have done or said is actually a gender stereotype. You can learn with young people by having conversations about gender stereotypes. Talk with young people about the qualities and characteristics that you value in yourself and other people, regardless of their gender.
- Open up conversations around house rules about dating, parties or sleepovers that are consistent regardless of the gender of your child, their friends, or who they like.
- Encourage young people to participate in activities that make them happy.
- Eliminate gendered insults from your language – like saying someone is acting like a princess if they are picky - and address it when people around you use them.
- Notice and point out stereotypes you observe in media, advertising, movies, and books.

High school

- Tell teens about the times when you felt restricted by gender stereotypes. Ask if they have ever felt ashamed of liking, doing, or wearing something because it did not fit the stereotype for their gender. Ask about how they might follow those interests. Encourage them to make connections with friends who support their interests and personality, rather than make them feel limited.
- If you hear anyone using gendered insults or slurs, explain why they are harmful. Most insults have a history of putting down women, gay people, people with disabilities, and racial groups. If you do not know the history of the word, you might find the information online. Think with them about why they are using insults to express their feelings, and help them to consider what is really behind their negative feelings.
- Think about the ways you may have upheld gender stereotypes and work to counteract those gender stereotypes in your household. One example may be to expect that all members of the family, regardless of gender, share equally in household chores like cleaning, cooking, or laundry. Mix up chores so that all people learn to do all things useful for living.
- Sometimes people resist expectations by hating the things they are pressured to like. Have a conversation about why it is not bad to like activities, colors, etc. that conform to your gender stereotype. You do not have to hate pink just because you are a girl and are expected to like it! Gender stereotypes are harmful because they limit who we can be.

Clothes

Clothing choices can be fraught and intertwined with gender stereotypes and rape culture (more in **Sexual violence**). For some, clothes are simply to stay warm and covered, but for most, clothes are a way of communicating something about yourself. Young people are often influenced by the clothing choices of their peers and those represented in the media they consume. Retailers work hard to make clothes seem deeply connected to identity, inclusion, and self-esteem to keep people purchasing.

Clothes for babies often have cutesy phrases that subtly reinforce gender stereotypes and some messed up ideas about relationships, like little boy onesies that say "flirt" and little girl onesies that say "cute like my momma." Stereotyping starts young, where boy clothes seem to focus on adventure, animals, and independence while girl clothes sparkle and use words like "pretty" and "princess."

As young people get older, the clothing expectations for boys typically become a kind of uniform that does not attract much attention. Instead, the emphasis seems to fixate on what girls are wearing. Girls end up simultaneously feeling pressure to be pretty and attractive, then shamed for showing too much. Girls are ridiculed for wearing clothing that is too tight or too baggy, too short or too frumpy, too revealing or too prude.

The message that girls end up with is that their bodies – no matter what they look like – are wrong. Girls are often the targets of school dress codes that frame clothing as distracting or attracting too much attention (presumably from boys). They are told that distracting boys is worthy of being sent to detention or home, which makes it seem like girl's learning is not as important as boy's learning. Disturbingly, they grow up absorbing the idea that their bodies are responsible for other people's reactions and behaviors towards them.

How we think about and talk about clothes often impacts the ways we think about and talk about girls and women and violence.

What you can do

Elementary School

- Find non-appearance related things to appreciate about a child. Focus on skills, kindness, empathy, creativity.
- Be considerate of the way you talk about your own body and clothes, and other people's body and clothes, in front of your child. Comment on the amazing things that bodies can do, instead of how they look.
- While you have more control over the clothes your child wears, take the opportunity to offer clothes that prioritize activity, function, and creativity while trying to avoid stereotypes.

Middle School

- As young people develop more independence and preference over what they wear, try to avoid power struggles or arguments. Instead, share your values and preferences, what is important to you in clothing (price, ethics, functionality, etc.).
- Notice when young people start disparaging their own or other people's clothing choices. Be curious about why we seem to be so quick to judge people over their clothes, and encourage them away from casual insults.
- Talk to your school about their dress code. Does one exist? Does it include gendered stereotypes about what is not allowed? Some universal standards – like not encouraging violence, drugs, or racism – make sense. Rules like spaghetti straps or skirt length typically focus on girls and are more harmful than helpful.

High School

- Give your child as much autonomy as possible in choosing their clothing. It is normal for young people to literally try things on to see how they fit and experiment with different styles.
- Go out of your way to compliment young people on what you most admire about them, try to avoid focusing on appearance or clothes as much as possible.
- Be open and curious about how clothes are impacting young people. Do you hear them making comments about what is cool? Making fun of others for their appearance? Complaining about the double standards and pressures? Finding clothes that fit their bodies and their style? These are great opportunities to start conversations that redirect focus to what makes people special, unique, important, and help young people to notice cultural forces that impact their lives.
- Be clear that inappropriate or sexual comments or behaviors are NOT because of what someone is wearing. It is never okay to be disrespectful or harmful, and there is nothing that someone could wear that would make it their fault if they were mistreated.

Dating violence

As in adult relationships, dynamics of power and control can be present in teen relationships. The tactics might be hard to notice at first. Often, abusive behaviors escalate slowly, so they might be minimized or excused as one-time incidents. It is also common for abuse to take place over technology, which makes it harder to notice from the outside. Helping young people identify abusive behaviors in a relationship early sets them up for a lifetime of healthy, fulfilling relationships, and supports them to do the same with their peers.

The two biggest warning signs of an abusive relationship are jealousy and insults. Jealousy in particular can sometimes feel good. It can be masked as love ("I just want to spend all of our time together" or "you're all mine!") or a lack of trust ("You act crazy when you're with those friends" or "that person never liked me, they're always trying to break us up!"). Jealousy is used to isolate someone from their friends, family, and other support systems by controlling who the person can see or how they are supposed to behave.

Insults may only come out during arguments, or might be played off as just joking ("you wouldn't be able to do anything without me!" or "you're so dumb sometimes!"). Over time they may start to pick on vulnerabilities or secrets that were shared, become meaner, and make people start to doubt their worth or feel like they deserve to be treated this way.

What you can do

Elementary school

- Point out harmful portrayals of love in movies and books. Point out jealousy and put downs as you see them in friend groups or media. Talk about how trying to control someone you care about or saying mean things about them is hurtful.
- Encourage conversations with children about how they want to be treated. Who are people you love? How do they make you feel good about yourself? How do you show other people that you love and care about them?
- Sometimes in response to teasing and bullying between girls and boys, kids are told, “he does that because he likes you.” These types of comments normalize the idea that it is acceptable to be mean and hurt people because we like them. It is also weird to romanticize friendships between children.
- Remind children that they deserve to feel safe, cared for, and loved in all relationships.

Middle school

- While you might believe that middle school is too young for romantic relationships, starting conversations before youth start dating can help young people process the developing curiosity and peer conversations about relationships.
- Support children of different sexes and gender identities to hang out as friends. If they are hanging out with someone of the opposite gender, try not to assume or tease that hanging out equals dating.

- Reassure young people that it is okay to disengage and take a break from friends and peers who are being mean. One benefit of online platforms is the ability to block and limit interactions with people. It might feel harder to do in person with small social circles. Brainstorm together about options to disengage that feel protective and safe.

- Connect with young people about their online lives, while letting them make mistakes. Help them to come up with their own strategies and solutions to problems that arise. It helps them feel confident coming to you for support, and helps them make the best decisions for themselves about safety.

High school

- Model healthy ways to be in relationships. Share the times when you have faced challenges or conflict, what worked well for you, or what you wish you had done at the time to prioritize your safety and happiness.

- Express your concerns about behaviors that are controlling, insulting, or dismissive. Reinforce your values and encourage teens to be kind and respectful of others.

- If abuse is a concern, it is helpful to focus on the person and behaviors that are harmful, and not make the victim feel blamed for putting themselves in harm's way. You can show support by helping them process what happened without them feeling shame or responsibility for the abuse. You can encourage them to think about what will work best for them to keep them safe moving forward, and ask them how you can help.

- Remind young people that they do not have to date if they do not want to, and they can end a relationship for any reason.

- If you are worried, try to stay curious with teens. Explain the behaviors that are concerning, and ask open ended questions.

Some conversation starters:

- What do you like about your crush? What are the great parts of your relationship?
- How does it make you feel when a person does ...?
- What are the things you worry about in your relationship? How do you talk about your concerns with your partner?
- Do you ever feel like there are expectations or assumptions about your relationship that you never agreed to? Where did they come from? How do you bring those up with your partner?
- What do your friends/peers think about your relationship? Do you think those opinions are accurate? What are they based on?
- What are the trends at school about dating? How do you feel about those?
- What relationships do you look up to? Why?

Sexual violence

Sexual violence is anything sexual that is unwanted. You might also hear the term sexual abuse. If there are concerns about sexual violence or abuse, having already started the conversation about our private and public body parts with young children may be particularly useful (see **Bodies** section). When children experience sexual abuse, they might have all kinds of feelings about what happened or is happening. Having a strong foundation of talking about feelings regularly is so important (see **Feelings** section).

Older children and teens can articulate the ways that sexual violence can be physical, verbal, or can happen over technology. One of the most common forms of sexual violence happening over technology involves sexting – either receiving unsolicited nude photos or sharing nude photos without permission.

Adult instincts are often to warn young people about all of the terrible potential consequences of sending naked pictures in hopes of discouraging it from happening. Young people often say that adults do not understand the social expectations and dynamics surrounding their decision to ask for or send pictures, and instead make youth feel ashamed, embarrassed or stupid for participating. Sexting on its own, while illegal for minors, might not be experienced as sexual violence. Coercing others to send nudes, sharing photos without permission, or sending unwanted nude photos is sexual violence.

We often advise young people to ask adults for help when they need support, but in the case of sexting, sometimes adults make it worse. The law may not distinguish between individuals taking pictures of themselves, viewing pictures of others, taking pictures of others, or sharing pictures of others without their permission. In practice, it can mean that people who are harassed into providing pictures can receive the same criminal charge and sentence as people who coerce and distribute images of their classmates. A 2018 study found that less than 8% of girls share explicit pictures because they want to; the rest did so because of a desire to please, acquiesce to, or avoid conflict with a boy.[8] We all have a responsibility to make sure no one feels pressure to send pictures or see pictures that make them feel uncomfortable.

Rape culture

Rape culture describes all of the little and big ways our society makes sexual violence seem normal, inevitable, or not that big of a deal. It includes jokes about sexual assault, excuses made for perpetrators, myths about the reality of sexual assault, and gender stereotypes. Rape culture creates an environment that normalizes violence especially against populations who are considered *less powerful* such as women,[9] trans and non-binary folks,[10] LGBQ+ people,[11] Black and Indigenous women,[12] people with disabilities,[13] and more.

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[8] Thomas, Sara E. "'What should I do?' Young women's reported dilemmas with nude photographs." *Sexuality research and social policy* 15.2 (2018): 192-207.

[9] Smith, S.G., Zhang, X., Basile, K.C., Merrick, M.T., Wang, J., Kresnow, M., Chen, J. (2018). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2015 Data Brief – Updated Release. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[10] Wirtz, Andrea L., et al. "Gender-based violence against transgender people in the United States: a call for research and programming." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 21.2 (2020): 227-241. James, Sandy, et al. "The report of the 2015 US transgender survey." (2016).

[11] Messinger A.M., Koon-Magnin S. (2019) Sexual Violence in LGBTQ Communities. O'Donohue W., Schewe P. (eds) Handbook of Sexual Assault and Sexual Assault Prevention. Springer, Cham.

[12] Smith, S.G., Chen, J., Basile, K.C., Gilbert, L.K., Merrick, M.T., Patel, N., Walling, M., & Jain, A. (2017). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 State Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[13] Kathleen C. Basile, Matthew J. Breiding, and Sharon G. Smith, 2016: Disability and Risk of Recent Sexual Violence in the United States. American Journal of Public Health 106, 928-933.

Rape culture excuses certain behaviors and covers up for people who cause harm. When sexual assault happens within familiar cultural norms about relationships and sex - like when people are drinking or if the people were in a previous relationship - it is dismissed as normal romantic behavior rather than recognized as violence. Rape culture often makes us doubt our gut instinct that something is wrong.

Without the camouflage of rape culture, abusive behavior and sexual violence become obvious. Rape culture is all around us, which means every day we have an opportunity to create change. What we say and do makes a difference, and we can all play our part in ending rape culture.

What you can do

Elementary school

- See suggestions under **Bodies**, **Consent**, and **Feelings** sections. Making sure young children know the proper names for their body parts, understand giving and asking for permission, and can talk about their feelings are all preventative factors against sexual violence.
- Define sexual abuse with children and remind them that they can always ask for help.
- Remind children that touching should never be kept a secret.
- Help them brainstorm trusted adults who they can ask for help if they feel mixed up and confused about a touch or if someone is touching them without permission.

Middle school

- See suggestions under **Bodies** and **Consent** sections.
- Build media literacy to identify how messages are being communicated about cultural norms and expectations. Help young people to question if those messages are healthy or not.
- Help young people identify the trusted adults in their lives both at school and at home.

Some conversation starters:

- What does flirting look like? What does flirting feel like?
- What is the difference between good uncomfortable and bad uncomfortable?
- When you like someone, how do you want them to feel? How can you tell if other people feel good or not?
- Has there ever been a time someone made a comment about your body that made you feel uncomfortable? Who could you tell about it? What could they do to help?
- How do you know when someone likes you? How do you want to be treated?
- What are the ways boys are expected to treat each other in friend groups? Do those seem like healthy relationships?
- What are the messages girls receive about their bodies? What about trans people? Do those messages help people feel good and safe in their bodies? Why are there so many messages that make people feel bad about themselves?
- How are boys expected to feel about their bodies? Use their bodies? Are there messages that boys get to use their bodies in ways that scare or hurt other people?

High school

- What is the conversation about dating and sexual violence like at school? Does it come up in any of their classes? How do their peers react to those conversations?
- Often rape culture can be fostered in small, tight knit groups as a form of hazing or bonding. Have you noticed examples of that? How can you respond when in a group if you are uncomfortable with some of the jokes or activities?
- One of the key ways to combat casual rape culture is to focus on empathy. If our go-to response is to empathize with people who are being harmed, it becomes much more difficult to excuse or dismiss them. Notice and encourage empathic responses from young people, and try to model them yourself.

Some conversation starters:

- Are there different expectations for people of different genders around sex and dating? What is the impact of those expectations?
- Have you seen or experienced rape culture – jokes or casual harassment - at school? What does it look like when it happens? How do you see people respond? How do you think the person it happened to felt?
- Have you noticed people making excuses or justifications for why something that happened might not have been a “real” sexual assault? Why do you think it is so hard to believe that sexual violence happens to people that we know? What might change if we were more open to believing that sexual violence is going on around us?

Media and young people

Gender-based violence is often depicted in books, movies, and television shows. Even if there are no scenes that explicitly show dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking, nearly all stories include some form of gender stereotypes. Characters are often limited by the expectations of their gender or are forced to deal with the consequences of pushing back against these assumptions. We have endless opportunities to have conversations with young people about gender, power, violence, and its impact on all of us.

Modern technology also gives young people easy access to mainstream pornography. Curiosity about bodies, sex and relationships is developmentally appropriate, but turning to pornography to satisfy curiosity in the absence of inclusive, safe, and healthy sexuality education can do more harm than good.

Studies of mainstream pornography show that the majority of content does not emphasize love, intimacy, and consent. According to a review in 2018, 90% of the top porn websites contained explicit violence against women.[14] Even content that is not physically violent often contains gender stereotypes that objectify and degrade women and girls, and emphasize male domination, usually at the expense of women. This has an impact on the expectations of young people who increasingly say they turn to porn to learn about sex and relationships.[15] Boys who have early access to porn are at an increased risk for coercive attitudes and behaviors towards girls and women, as well as depression and anxiety, stress, and social anxiety.[16] Without intensive education to counteract these harmful messages, they become normalized and cause real harm.

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[14] Bindel, J. "How to Talk to Your Kids about Porn (before the pornographers do)," The Guardian (October 25, 2018).

[15] Zimbardo, P., Wilson, G., & Coulombie, N. "How Porn Is Messing with Your Manhood," Skeptic (June 22, 2016).

[16] Perry, D. L. "The Impact of Pornography," The American College of Pediatricians (2015).

Having conversations with young people about sex and sexuality, including the impacts, experiences, and perspectives about media and pornography, is important. These conversations let young people know you value and trust their perspectives, and they create open communication so that you can help them process all of the messages swirling around them. Ask about the book in their backpack, the TV show or movie they are watching, and their browser history, and see where the discussion takes you!

Some conversation starters:

- How were characters influenced by the expectations of their gender? How are women treated in the media? How are men encouraged to act?
- What kind of violence happened in this book/TV show/movie? How was that used for the plot?
- How did witnesses react to the violence? Did those reactions seem to help the situation or make it worse? How might you have reacted in that situation?
- Were there parts of the book/TV show/movie that related to your own life? If it were rewritten, how might things be the same? How would they be different?
- What do you know/think about porn? Have you ever accidentally gotten a pop-up while online? What are the conversations among your friends and peers?
- How do you think porn can be useful? Why does it exist? What are ways it could be harmful or set unrealistic expectations? Do you see the values that you have about sex and relationships portrayed in pornography?

Some things to consider:

- Do your own work first. Self-reflection on what you learned about sex and relationships as a kid can be helpful as a starting point. Think about how that information served you and how it did not. Set aside what you do not want to pass on.
- Start the conversation about sex before porn becomes their primary resource. Make sure young people have accurate information about bodies, relationships, and sex, so that they are not relying on porn to get the information. Include consent, gender, and social pressures as part of your ongoing conversations about sex.
- Take every opportunity to point out healthy, positive examples of relationships, love, body positivity, and consent.
- Ask if they have seen porn. Maybe a pop up surprised them on the computer, or someone in a video game sent a link. Maybe it has been put on or passed around at parties. Ask what they thought, how it made them feel, and if there were things that made them uncomfortable or they did not understand.
- Stay curious. Ask teenagers to explain how porn is talked about in their inner circle and if there is any social pressure to act like porn is cool. Help them think about how the messages might not fit in with the kind of person they want to be, and strategize what to do if it comes up.

Resources: articles, books and resources to spark more conversation. WISE educators are always interested to hear what you find helpful or want to discuss.

Sexting

Sexting Panic by Amy Hasinoff

“Why Kids Sext,” The Atlantic, 2015

“Teenagers, Stop Asking for Nude Photos,” New York Times, 2018

“I Think He Might Be Using Me. What Should I Do?” Scarleteen, 2015

“He’s Pressuring Me: How Do I Tell Him?” Scarleteen, 2013

“What to Do If Your Partner Is Trying to Convince You to Send Nudes,” Teen Vogue, 2017

Pornography

Website *Culture Reframed*

Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality by Gail Dines

Girls and Sex and Boys and Sex by Peggy Orenstein

“Overexposed and Under-Prepared: The Effects of Early Exposure to Sexual Content,” Psychology Today, 2012

“Sex Education in the Digital Age,” Internet Health Report, 2019

“What Kids are Learning from Online Porn,” New York Times, 2018

WISE Book Guides

Educated by Tara Westover

Big Little Lies by Lianne Moriarty

The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson

Check our website wiseuv.org for more!

Books to spark more conversations about gender, bodies, and consent

Ages 4-7

Hands Off Harry by Rosemary Wells

I Loved You Before You Were Born by Anne Bowen

It's Not the Stork by Robie Harris

It's Okay to Be Different by Todd Parr

It's So Amazing! by Robie Harris & Michael Emberley

Miles is the Boss of His Body by Abbie Schiller

More, More, More by Vera B. Williams

On Monday When It Rained by Cheryl Kachenmeister

Uncle Willy's Tickles by Marci Aboff

The Color Monster by Anna Llenas

Ages 8-10

Sex is a Funny Word by Cory Silverberg and artist Fiona Smyth

Ages 8-12

Alan Cole Is Not A Coward by Eric Bell

George by Alex Gino

Princess, Princess: Ever After by Katie O'Neill

The Witch Boy and The Hidden Witch by Molly Knox Osterag

Ages 9-12

Star-Crossed by Barbara Dee

The Pants Project by Cat Clarke

Ages 11-13

The Importance of Being Wilde at Heart by R. Zamora Linmark

Books to spark more conversations about gender-based violence

Ages 16+

East of Eden by John Steinbeck

Dominicana by Angie Cruz

Know My Name by Chanel Miller

Passing by Nella Larsen

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

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