



Because We're Dads:
Reaching and Mobilizing
Fathers to Promote
Gender Equality

Back to School Toolkit

Written by Rus Ervin Funk

NYSCADV
NEW YORK STATE COALITION
AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

This Guide was supported by Grant # SV19-1107-RO3 and funded by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services. Points of view or opinions in this document do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services.

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INTRODUCTION



School and schooling is not only a place where children learn academically and educationally, it is also one of (if not the) most powerful places where children learn socially – social and gender roles, social norms, and more. Children learn at school (very differently than they do at home) what it means to be a friend and how to relate to people who may be different than them. Children also learn in schools profound lessons about what it means to be a boy or a girl, pressures on how to “appropriately” present themselves as a boy or a girl (1) and often experience significant pressures about how to express their gender and how to interact with others based on their gender presentation and/or perceived gender. They can also learn how to resist these pressures and find ways to express their authentic selves.

The transitions of school are particularly powerful and meaningful opportunities for youth. Transitioning from elementary school to middle school/junior high; from middle school/junior high to high school, and from high school to college are significant transitions, particularly in regards to the shifts they experience socially. Children in these transition periods often experience a great deal of stress, and regardless of the degree to which they are aware and/or express this stress, need and deserve the support of adults in their lives.

Dads have an active role in supporting their children in school and schooling. Beyond supporting them with reading, writing and arithmetic, dads can also have a powerful impact on what children are learning socially from school, as well as how their children integrate these lessons from school with the values and norms that families establish at home. However, dads tend to be poorly supported to feel any confidence or comfort in supporting children in these ways. Society has long held that it is the role and responsibility of moms to attend to, address and teach children about anything and everything related to relationships. Not only can this norm position these roles as a burden, but excluding dads from this aspect of parenting denies dads a profound aspect of parenting and, perhaps more importantly, deprives children of the opportunity to learn a more equitable view and experience of relationships and relationship development.

To the degree that dads are engaged in these conversations and dynamics, it’s possible to over-rely on modeling as a primary means to share their values about treating others with respect. While modeling is a critically important method for sharing values, it is not the only one, and for a host of reasons may not be the most effective.

Admittedly these are uncomfortable and challenging conversations for all of us to have with our children. We may have our own histories that may be “triggered,” and may struggle with the idea of our children flirting and dating. Many of us also feel some embarrassment and discomfort about the topics of flirting, dating and sex. But most men, by and large, have been given even less support and resources to use to engage in these conversations with our children. Most men are limited to a script of “he better treat you with respect” to our daughters and “Do not get her pregnant” to our sons.

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1)NOTE: This toolkit and NYSCADV recognizes that gender is fluid and that the gender binary is problematic. We also recognize that for many children and school systems, the gender binary is still a very real and enforced dynamic. A part of this toolkit is designed to support dads to pay attention to these dynamics and to support their children to maneuver through this as well.

This limitation does not allow for dad's to equip our children with tools to feel safe and confident in their interactions while engaging with each other outside of paternal supervision.

The Back to School Toolkit aligns with NYSCADV's long-standing efforts to prevent teen dating violence by engaging adult influencers and seeks to support dads to develop the confidence and the comfort they need to engage in critical conversations with their children.

The toolkit focuses on how dads can support their children to manage transitions through their youth with an eye towards encouraging and promoting gender equality. These transitions tend to be particularly challenging as within them are different pressures and forces that reinforce traditional gender roles/norms, and gender inequities.

This toolkit also focuses on the current school landscape. Originally authored during the summer of 2020, that landscape was dictated by the dual pandemics of COVID 19 and an ongoing racial justice uprising and represents a moment in time. Updated in the summer of 2021, it continues to reflect the impact of these dynamics on kids in (and out of) school, and the roles that fathers can play in helping children make sense of the world they are navigating.

This toolkit (like most) is an emerging document and will be revised and additional tools will be added as NYSCADV continues to build our capacity, and as we all learn more from our efforts to engage and mobilize dads.





About NYSCADV and the Because We're Dad's Initiative

The New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NYSCADV) is the coalition of agencies, service providers, and individuals in New York working to address, respond to and prevent domestic violence. NYSCADV works to create and support the social change necessary to prevent and confront all forms of domestic violence. As a statewide membership organization, we achieve our mission through activism, training, prevention, technical assistance, legislative advocacy, and leadership development. We promote best practices and broad-based collaboration integrating anti-oppression principles in all our work.

NYSCADV recognizes the impact fathers and father figures have on promoting women's rights, gender equality, and healthy relationships. Fathers play a significant role in the lives of their children and have the opportunity to influence attitudes and behaviors that support healthy and equitable relationships premised on respect, consent and nonviolence. In light of this recognition and with respect to supporting fathers in New York to take a more prominent role in efforts to respond to and prevent domestic violence and promote gender equality, NYSCADV launched the "Because We're Dads" initiative. The initiative focuses on identifying and developing tools, resources and other materials that may assist to develop the capacity of local domestic violence agencies to engage and mobilize dads; and for dads to be more actively engaged in the work to make New York a safer, more respectful and equitable state.

About the Author



Rus Ervin Funk has been an advocate and activist promoting gender equality, racial justice, and preventing violence for more than thirty years. He has had a particular focus on efforts to engage and mobilize men and boys since the early 1990's.

“ I have been talking for the past several minutes about, in effect, being proudly radical and reclaiming our radical edge. Visioning communities that are free of sexist violence is radical visioning – and getting to there is a radical departure from here. I'm not sure what your next, most radical step is, but I hope that you take it, rest assured I'll be taking mine, and that we figure out a way to take our next most radical steps in concert towards that world that we all want, that we all deserve. ”

He is currently a consultant, trainer, and activist who works throughout the US and globally. Rus is the co-founder of the Ohio Men's Action Network (Oh-MAN), the Own It Initiative, as well as the Men for Gender Justice. Rus lives in Louisville, KY with his partner and their child.

Preparing Sons and Daughters from a Gender Equitable Framework

Gender equality is different than women's equality. While women's equality is a critical goal that we all need to be working towards, gender equality refers to the efforts to ensure that human beings across the gender spectrum have equitable access to human rights. A gender equitable framework has at its core the ways that people of all genders benefit from gender equity, and the roles and responsibilities people of all genders have to achieve and work towards gender equality.

A gender equitable framework recognizes that we're all constrained by gender norms, gender roles and traditional gender expectations, but that men and boys also experience and receive considerable forms of unearned privilege. As such, men and boys have unique opportunities and a responsibility to work towards gender equity and justice. In this toolkit (and in the Because We're Dads Initiative more broadly), the focus is specifically on fathers. Achieving gender equity is not the responsibility of women alone.

The focus of this toolkit is on flirting and dating (2) as the entry point to talk with dads, and to support dads in supporting their children. In part, this is because it is through flirting and dating that some gender conditioning and the harms of constraining gender roles that lead to gender equality can be understood. Flirting and dating is also an area in which most dads can be most easily engaged.



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2) We recognize and celebrate that children of all genders flirt and date with children of all genders. As such, we try to write this toolkit in a way that reflects this. We also recognize that dating violence is gender-based, and as such, want to be sure that we're addressing the dynamics that are true to this context.

Flirting and Dating, Laying Expectations

Flirting and dating patterns begin early. Flirting and dating and the lessons about how to flirt and date are ever-present (in children's literature, in media for children, in addition to what's emerging within children developmentally sometime in late elementary school age). While talking about flirting and dating with younger children (children under 11 - 13) is not appropriate, talking with younger kids about some basic premises that also apply to flirting and dating is critically important to laying a foundation for healthy dating behaviors later on. Talking with kids about consent, for example, can (and should) start very early and include not only how they set boundaries and limits for the ways that others treat them, but also how they listen and pay attention to the boundaries that are being set (even if those are nonverbal).

Flirting has a role, often a critical role, in relationship building. As children start entering into the space of flirting and dating, it's important to frame for and with them, what all of this entails. Dating relationships are, after all, first and foremost relationships. They are a unique kind of relationship (with a variety of added complexities), but they are a relationship, even when considered casual. Developmentally, by the time young people start thinking about flirting and dating, they have already had a variety of experiences with relationships. Placing dating relationships in the context of other relationships, such as family and friends, helps children to normalize these new kinds of relationships.

Flirting is a strategy (and a fun one) to begin a new relationship.





Setting Boundaries

Setting, enforcing and respecting boundaries is one of the core facets of any flirting or dating (or really any kind of relationship). Children of all genders need and deserve to learn how to set clear boundaries around who touches them and how; as well as how to respect and honor the boundaries that are set by their peers and friends. Dads can have a particularly powerful role in supporting children before they even begin to think about flirting and dating, to have these boundaries. Some ways that dads can support younger children to develop their burgeoning awareness and skills include:

- Encourage your children to notice when they're feeling any level of discomfort or ambivalence by how someone touches and interacts with them and to say something to someone.
- Create a habit of asking your child(ren) if it's okay to give them a hug or a kiss, rather than just hugging them or kissing them.
- Notice your child's behavior when they pull away or resist a hug or kiss from someone else, and intervene to support both their boundary setting, but also to help them to find the words to say "No, I don't want a hug right now."

Children also need and deserve to learn how to listen for, pay attention to and respect someone else's boundaries. When your child(ren) are playing with you or someone else, and the someone else says "no" or "stop", encourage your child to stop what they're doing even if the other person is laughing or seems to be going along in the midst of their "no" or "stop." Teach your child to check in with the other person when they are getting confusing or conflicting messages. Teach your child(ren) to assume that they *don't* have consent even with their friends, brothers or sisters and other family members. (3)

This is particularly important for boys, as there are so many other messages they're receiving, from a wide array of settings and contexts, teaching them that they get to disregard boundaries, or that a part of their "responsibility" in dating is to challenge someone else's boundaries. In many ways, boys do not get the same messages and lessons that girls get about respecting and attending to boundaries (their own or others). Boys are also receiving a barrage of mixed messages about respecting and listening to the boundaries of others. On the one hand, most boys are taught they are supposed to respect boundaries, on the other, they're taught that it's okay to dismiss boundaries. Rarely are boys taught to acknowledge when they're experiencing mixed messages and how to address that when it happens. Dads can play an important and unique role in helping their sons to figure this out – both in terms of how dads model listening to and respecting boundaries, and by actively teaching them about media literacy- helping their children make sense of the messaging.

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3) NOTE: The *Our Whole Lives* Comprehensive Sexuality Education Curricula (developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association and United Church of Christ) is an excellent resource for teaching your children these kinds of lessons. Developmentally appropriate, this highly evidence-based curricula has content for children from age 5 through college. For more information, go [here](#).

Back to School in Context: the COVID Pandemic and Racial Uprising

The pandemic has many parents wondering and worrying about going back to school. The pandemic, its aggressiveness, and its emerging variants is a significant worry and concern for children, youth and parents alike. While all parents feel some responsibility (often with some urgency) to relieve their child(ren) from causes of worry, concern and fear; it can be a useful life lesson to permit our children to feel their fear and learn that things will work out in the end. Dads often feel a magnified need to protect their children, and much of the masculinity training dads receive enforces the idea and ideal of men's responsibility to "battle" the fears and relieve the worries and concerns of their loved ones. *And* to be stoic and unemotional in the process.

Compounding the worry and concerns generated by the pandemic is the continuing, and long overdue, attention to systemic and institutionalized racism that our communities are engaged in. School boards and administration and parents are battling with, not only mask mandates, but the inclusion of critical race theory in curricula and whole communities across our country have been rocked by uprisings prompted by instances of police brutality and obvious systemic forms of injustice. This may bring a whole new array of fears, pain and anger that is represented by what's going on in the world today and concerns for the safety of our children. For many black and brown parents, this recent uprising only magnifies fears they have as they experience their children transitioning to the next level of schooling. Many white parents, it appears, are experiencing a new level of awareness, sensitivity and compassion to what black and brown families face; often combined with their own feelings of anger, grief and perhaps some guilt or shame.



All parents, it seems safe to state, are feeling a whole lot just now.

This is an opportune moment for dads to model that they, too, feel fear, worry, grief, anger and concern; and that sometimes dads can't protect the people they love. Sometimes the best that a dad can do is be okay being afraid, worried and concerned alongside their child(ren) and partners; and be okay (alright, okay-ish) with our child(ren) also expressing these feelings.

Both sons and daughters (for different reasons) benefit from seeing their fathers express fear, anxiety, grief, worry – without immediately moving into action in order to resolve these feelings. Dads can practice having and expressing these feelings, demonstrating what it is like for men to do so, and create space for our children to also have and express these feelings. It's okay to not be (or feel) okay. For sons, this becomes an important model of being a man who has a full complement of feelings and emotions. For daughters, doing so models a different version of strength; that sometimes being a man (like being human) is not about being "strong", sometimes we all need to be vulnerable and that women can also offer strength. For genderqueer children, having parents



who are able to express fluidity in how they express and perform some of these gender norms is a powerful affirmation and helps them to learn that they can also express themselves with authenticity.

For many parents and kids the pandemic has driven an increasing amount of their social interactions to virtual platforms. We are all spending more time in front of screens than we ever have, and this includes our social, educational, extra-curricular and professional interactions. School, Church/Synagogue/Mosque, parties, friends hangouts...many have largely moved to virtual platforms and continue to rely on those platforms. Even with the lack of clarity we have about the future, one thing seems clear. Virtual social interaction is here to stay.

Most people have different social norms, rules and expectations for interacting in and communicating virtually than they do face-to-face. This includes flirting and dating. As more of our social interacting has moved (and continues) to virtual spaces, there is an opportunity for dads (4) to engage in direct and meaningful conversations about how to communicate virtually that are bound by the same norms of expectations (being respectful, equitable, kind, assertive) as exists in other settings – and how establish and maintain those expectations and boundaries virtually. Communicating and interacting *is* different in virtual spaces than it is in physical spaces; *and* we can still communicate and interact in ways that are based on notions of respect, kindness and assertiveness; and which build on gender equity and justice.

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4) NOTE: This is not to suggest that moms don't also have this opportunity and responsibility, but as a toolkit focusing on fathers, we're focusing on fathers here.

Transitioning

Transition points, or “moving up,” from elementary school to middle school/junior high, to high school, and to college (and/or to workplaces,) are often fraught with anxiety as well as excitement. These can be stressful and utterly confusing times for children and youth as well as for their parents. These transitions are periods of time where questions arise in children about who they are and how they express themselves. It is not uncommon, for example, as a part of these transitions, for children to consciously and strategically choose a new identity or way to express themselves. Children may decide to go by a different name (for example, using their middle name instead of their first name) or ask to be referred to with a different pronoun. A part of this dynamic inherently includes their own growing understanding and expression of their gender identity. Some of this questioning and exploration also includes how they feel and express their attraction for other kids – how they flirt and date.

Each transition involves entering a new social environment, with different kinds of pressures (social, academic, performance, etc.) and social and gender norms. With all of these transitions, your child(ren)

need to first learn what the new social and gender norms are, before they can figure out how to adapt to them. Parents play an integral role in supporting your child(ren) through these transitions by helping them to identify these social and gender norms are and how they can either adapt to them or resist them.

Each of these transitions are an excellent opportunity to address gender, gender equality and gender respect with children and youth. Fathers have a particularly unique opportunity to model and directly communicate with their children how to be comfortable within their own skin and how *they* express their gender (while at the same time acknowledging that developmentally, most children are *not* “comfortable in their own skin” during these transitional times). In addition, fathers can be supportive of their children to consider they interact with others in ways that are (gender) respectful and which encourage gender equity.

Flirting and dating norms, along with practices and rules can change dramatically between these transitions. Flirting and dating in middle school/junior high, high school and college is drastically different than the flirting and dating practices in elementary, middle and high school. Parents can prepare children to navigate these transitions in ways that empower children to be assertive, respectful, respected, and kind.



Transition to Middle School/Junior High

The middle school/junior high years are universally awkward and confusing. As one middle school/junior high principal says, *“the middle school/junior high years are awful. I only want teachers and staff who really want to be here and really want to work and support these kids. If you aren’t here for that, get out.”* He captured the challenge and struggle that are the middle school/junior high years. There are few three-year periods in anyone’s life that are as tumultuous as this period. Children enter a growth-spurt that is matched only by the first three years of life in terms of the depth and breadth of the development. They are seeking more independence, which also scares them; they are being flooded with hormones which not only has its own direct impact, but which also has emotional and social implications; they are experiencing physical changes that they don’t understand or know what to do with; and the ways that they interact with others (both other kids and with adults) may be going through seismic shifts.



This developmental period is, for most children, a time when gender expectations and gender norms are most severely defined and policed. This is also a time when children (biologically and socially) are stretching and experimenting with who they are and how they will present that – including how they express their gender identities. This can create a wildly confusing and paradoxical dynamic. One child development expert describes it as, *“...the collision between the onset of adolescent resistance in students this age with the more stringent demands of middle school/junior high for self-management and social adjustment. ‘The middle school/junior high crunch’ is when there is increasing pressure on the student to live within a more complicated and demanding educational system, but early adolescent determination to act more independently makes this adjustment harder to do.”*

There are several ways that dads can support their children through this transition. It begins before they get to middle school/junior high. Children are likely feeling a lot of hope, excitement, mixed with equal amounts of anxiety, dread and fear. Dads can let them know that all that they’re feeling is both okay and normal. By sharing some of their own experiences about going into middle school/junior high dads can both normalize their feelings and demystify the experience. It’s important for dads, while sharing these experiences, to also acknowledge that their kids are entering middle school/junior high in a world that is vastly different than it was when they entered middle school/junior high. And it’s even more important to *listen!* As dads talk with their children be sure to talk less than they are. When dads find themselves doing most (or all) of the talking, they should take note, be quiet and turn the conversation back to their kids.



Depending on school districts, this transition often starts in mid-5th grade – when children are being encouraged to think about 6th grade more concretely – with school visits and tours, the planning that occurs in school, and the talk amongst their friends and peers about “what it’s going to be like.” Dads can start talking with their kids about what they’re hearing, thinking and feeling. One dad, for example, heard his 5th grade son randomly say (while on a bike-ride) “middle school is a bullying pit.” This comment opened a door for not just one conversation, but many others. Using this point of entry (and the fact that they’re riding bikes) provides a powerful opportunity to explore what he means by “bullying,” explore the difference between bullying and harassment, explore what fears he may have (and share what fears dad has), as well as outline his potential role as an upstander and ally to others who may be targets in this “bullying pit.”

Dads can share their experience of transitioning to middle school/junior high with their kids, particularly looking at the pressures to “fit in” and how those pressures manifest. Dads should be careful to use these story-sharing opportunities as ways to open up the conversation, not just for the sake of sharing the story.

Share your own experiences as a “jumping off point,” and intersperse it with “I wonder” statements:

- I wonder how your friend would handle this kind of situation.
- I wonder how something like that might happen today.

- I wonder how it felt (from all sides of the situation).
- I wonder how you think you might respond if this were to happen to you.

“I wonder” is a great way to involve your child(ren) in the conversation in ways that won’t make them feel put “on the spot.” Kids often appreciate “wondering” alongside their parents. Children will be more likely to explore their own thoughts, feelings and responses, and be more actively engaged in trying to figure things out.

While social pressure is universal, boys, girls and gender queer kids experience pressures in different ways in middle school/junior high. While there are some things that dads can do to support their child(ren) regardless of their gender or gender identity, there are also ways that dads can support their kid(s) through this transition that are specific to their gender/gender identity.

A note to consider: children entering middle school/junior high are entering puberty. This developmental transition often means some shifts in their comfort in receiving and being affectionate with their dads. Sometimes, dads also have their own discomfort about being affectionate, particularly with their daughters. We strongly encourage dads to **continue to be expressively affectionate!** During these years, we also encourage dads to pay careful attention and follow their children’s cues – which, admittedly, will likely be confused/confusing during this time (they may want affection one day, not the next, and want it again the day after). Not only do they need and deserve this from their dads, but this also models, in real time, what it looks like for men to be expressively affectionate while also actively seeking and securing consent.

General suggestions:

- Continue to express your affection for them
- Help them to create a mixed-gender support network
- Watch and critique (*with* them) the media their consuming and the ways gender and gender roles are presented.
- Talk with them about flirting with respect – be concrete about how respect is (or should be) a basic foundation of any kind of flirting
- Help to clarify the difference between flirting and harassment.

How Dads Can Support Their Sons

- ✔ Share your experience of middle school
- ✔ Note and challenge the pressures your son is experiencing about how to “be”
- ✔ Help your son to develop and express their own sense of self
- ✔ Encourage him to be expressive with his friends
- ✔ Talk and practice consent (see “flirting with respect” in the appendix)

How Dads Can Support Their Daughters

- ✔ Note and encourage their strengths
- ✔ Help her to develop resistance to social pressures to be “feminine”
- ✔ Reinforce her assertiveness
- ✔ Support her to explore how she wants to be flirted with
- ✔ Support your daughter to be her own self and the ways she can express herself

How Dads Can Support Their GenderQueer Kids

- ✔ Share your experience of middle school
- ✔ Continue to support them to explore their gender identity
- ✔ Continue to encourage them to explore how they want to express their gender
- ✔ Reinforce their assertiveness
- ✔ Support them to talk and practice consent
- ✔ Use the names and pronouns they ask you to use. Advocate widely on their behalf.

Transition to High School

The transition to high school is as confusing, anxiety-producing and exciting as the transition to middle school/junior high. As with all the transitions, child(ren) need to first learn what these social norms are before they can figure out how to adapt to them. Fortunately, most dads and their child(ren) have already experienced the process of transitioning to middle school/junior high and therefore can reflect on these experiences and the lessons learned as they start the transition to high school. Unfortunately, the pressures are different, come from even more external forces, and in many ways are more powerful than they were in middle school/junior high. In addition, child(ren) are older now and have developed their own sense of Self and their own ways to maneuver through and with these pressures – sometimes in ways that parents are aware of and sometimes in ways that they’re not (remember, a part of the developmental process of adolescents is them separating from their parents and developing their own sense of who they are – a process called “individuation.”)

Since parents were able to lay a solid foundation through their experiences in middle school/junior high, they have a solid place to work from during this transition to high school.



Through middle school/junior high, children gain some experience taking note of social norms and various pressures to conform. They may not themselves even be aware that they have noticed these norms and pressures and have been shaped by them, but they have. They have also had experience in deciding how to respond to these pressures, and both adapting to and resisting the norms; including pressures and norms related to flirting and dating. By this age children have undoubtedly had both positive and negative experiences of flirting and being flirted with, and in dating. Dads can support their child(ren) to reflect on these past experiences as they transition to a new environment and engage in dating and flirting there.

High School age kids tend to have a lot more experience and different experiences with flirting and dating than do middle school/junior high age children. They are also at a different developmental stage. It is still common practice (and as such, a social norm) for upper grade high school heterosexual boys to be “on the look-out” for incoming female students. We’ve all heard of stories (and perhaps experienced them first-hand) of contests amongst groups of upper grade male students as to who can date or “score” first with the “hottest” incoming girl. This dynamic underscores the need for parents, and the opportunity for dads, to have conversations with their child(ren) about how to maneuver through this dynamic. Daughter(s) need to understand the kinds of pressures they are likely to experience and have some ideas and confidence in ways to resist those pressures. Sons need to pay attention to what these social norms and learn some strategies of how to counter them. GenderQueer children need to understand the ways that this pressure can be exerted on them and how to resist them in similar ways with the added pressure of also experiencing bullying and harassment based on gender expression.



Son(s) face different kinds of pressures that are no less severe. There is often a different kind of social pressure and social/gender norms for boys about how to express their masculinity, particular in regards to flirting and dating: both to be differently assertive and how to be assertive in how they flirt; more pressure to have a girlfriend and that ways that “having a girlfriend” is tied to their masculinity (there seems to be less intense pressure for first year high school boys who date boys to “have a boyfriend” but first year boys who date boys face different kinds of pressures and norms). (5)

Dads can have an impact on helping child(ren) of all gender identities, sexual orientations and gender expressions to notice, prepare for, and resist these social norms and pressures. As they prepare for attending high school, dads are encouraged to have open conversations about their own experience of high school, the pressures they faced, and how they handled those pressures. Dads are also encouraged to be willing to share some of the struggles they had and ways that they went along with the social pressures even when they didn’t want to. As with transitioning to middle school/junior high, these stories are most effective when they’re used to open up a conversation with child(ren). Using whatever language feels appropriate to how they talk to their kids, dads can follow these stories with “I wonder:”

- I wonder how you think you would have handled that differently/better than I did.

- I wonder how you’re experiencing pressure to “show up” as a girl/boy in middle school/junior high.
- I wonder what you’ve heard about the pressures that exist in high school.
- I wonder what you expect from yourself as you go into high school.
- I wonder what kinds of supports you’ll be looking for in order to resist the social pressures you’re likely going to experience.
- I wonder how you can be of support to others who want to resist these social pressures.
- I wonder how the ongoing rules around the pandemic- masking and social distancing- will impact the kinds of pressure you are going to feel, and how this pressure will be manifest.

At this stage of development, kids are relying as much (if not more) on their peers and friends for ideas about how to negotiate these kinds of dynamics, and how to “be” in the world. Parents have provided a foundation for their children, who are continuing their “individuation” from parents. Dads are encouraged to consider connecting with the dads of their kids’ friends circle to provide some common language and support. In addition, many adolescent children listen differently to their friends’ parents than they do their own. By connecting with the dads of their children’s friends about supporting all of these children within their sphere of influence we can ensure all of the kids are receiving similar supports and messages from multiple sources.

How Dads Can Support Their Sons

- ✔ Explore different expressions of masculinity.
- ✔ Support your son to find his own way to express his masculinity/ humanity.
- ✔ Review and practice “flirting with respect” (see attached).
- ✔ Continue to be expressively affectionate.
- ✔ Support him on ways he can lead in his school to promote gender equality.
- ✔ Help him recognize bystander/upstander behavior and how to step up and be an ally for justice.
- ✔ Support him to actively seek consent in all his interactions, not just in flirting/ dating.

How Dads Can Support Their Daughters

- ✔ Support her to find and express her own femininity/humanity.
- ✔ Empower her to practice assertiveness.
- ✔ Continue to be expressively affectionate.
- ✔ Support her to define and express her consent.
- ✔ Support her to define and practice respect – both being respectful and being respected.
- ✔ Help her to recognize bystander/upstander behavior and how to act as an ally.

How Dads Can Support Their GenderQueer Kids

- ✔ Continue to be expressively affectionate.
- ✔ Support them to explore different expressions of their gender.
- ✔ Support them to define and practice respect – both being respectful and being respected.
- ✔ Support them to practice “safe flirting” for gender queer kids.
- ✔ Review and practice “flirting with respect”.
- ✔ Use the names and pronouns they ask you to use. Advocate widely on their behalf.

Transition to College

This is an unprecedented experience for families that have a child making the transition to college. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the traditional college experience for most young people. This, compounded by the confusing messages from the federal government with respect to supports for colleges to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (referencing new rules for Title IX protections,) combine to make this transition truly daunting. Within this context, our young adult children are stepping into a time in which they will be (very quickly) much more independent and responsible than they have ever been. The pressures are immense!

To add to this mix, the transition from high school to college with respect to flirting, dating and sex, are perhaps the most exciting and scary for students, and the most terrifying for parents – with good reason. The first semester of college is often referred to as “the red zone” – reflecting a sharp increase in dating and sexual violence during this period. The first few months of the fall semester (particularly for first year students) is a period of time when sexual assaults are notoriously high (Kimble et al, 2008). Dads of daughters and genderqueer kids undoubtedly fear this.

Dads of sons also have plenty to fear. The social pressures on colleges campuses related to gender norms including how men date, are very different and even more intense than the pressures experienced in high school. AND, if sons are going off to college, they’ll be on their own to face those pressures. Some of these pressures include expectations on how male students engage in sex, how they flirt and how they treat women on campus more generally.



The summer before college is a great time for dads along with their child(ren) to review the college campuses resources, services and response to sexual harassment, sexual assault and dating violence. Campuses are required (under “Title IX”) to have clear guidelines accessible to students and parents, about how they respond to and seek to prevent “gender-based violence.” Dads actively engaged in and reviewing this information alongside their child(ren) sets a clear precedent about the role of men in caring about these issues; and how dads will support their child(ren).

Dads are encouraged to have conversations with their children about this transition, what they might experience, and how to handle this new level of responsibility and autonomy. Evidence has shown that parents who have open conversations with their children about the realities of binge drinking on campuses, and how they can manage the pressures to drink, reduces college students binge drinking. It is presumed from other similar studies that parents who have conversations with their college-bound child(ren) about flirting and dating at college, the different dangers and risks that exist on campuses, and the ways that can both reduce their risks of being victimized, or of victimizing someone else can also have an impact on reducing a college student’s risk of being harmed or of harming someone else.

How Dads Can Support Their Sons

- ✔ Double down on discussion about how to flirt and date with respect
- ✔ Research efforts on campus to mobilize men as allies (they exist!)
- ✔ Discuss all the new and various kinds of social pressures that exist on college
- ✔ Expand their resistance to peer pressure about being a “player” and notions of what a “big man on campus” might be
- ✔ Help them to develop their resistance strategies (resistance to social norming and conditioning, and resistance to social pressure to flirt and date in particular ways)

How Dads Can Support Their Daughters

- ✔ Identify resources on their campuses to support them (i.e. “Title IX” resources)
- ✔ Discuss all the new and various kinds of social pressures that exist on college
- ✔ Help them to develop their confidence in setting and enforcing their boundaries
- ✔ Help them to develop their resistance strategies (resistance to social norming and conditioning, and resistance to social pressure to flirt and date in particular ways)

How Dads Can Support Their GenderQueer Kids

- ✔ Continue to reinforce some standards of flirting with respect
- ✔ Help them to develop their confidence in setting and enforcing their boundaries
- ✔ Identify resources on their campuses to support them
- ✔ Help them to develop their resistance strategies (resistance to social norming and conditioning, and resistance to social pressure to flirt and date in particular ways)

Flirting with Respect Recommendations for Men

- **Be Intentional:** Is the way your flirting respecting the person you're flirting with?
- **Pay Attention:** Flirt for the person's attention, not for the reaction of the guys.
- **Flirt with the *Person*:** Focus on the human being, not their sex appeal or attractiveness.
- **Flirt as if your mother is watching:** Okay, not really, but you get the point.
- **Flirt like you'd want your sibling flirted with.**
- **Notice!** How are they responding to your flirting? Do they like it? How do you know?
- **Talk *about* them, like you talk *to* them.**
- **Be Responsive:** Adjust your flirting based on their reactions.
- **Be Open:** your efforts at flirting may not work, accept it and let it go. You're not entitled to a response.

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