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Dear parents: Sexual violence is a reality on college campuses. Here’s what you should know and how you can respond.

Having early conversations about sex and consent, ensuring your child feels comfortable confiding in you and advocating for change on campus are all helpful actions parents can take.

Mila Sanina November 2, 2022

Content warning: This story contains references to sexual violence.

Dear parents,

One day your child will grow up. They may choose to go to college. Everyone hopes that your child is safe and happy there.

But while in college, your child will face new experiences and risks that will inevitably be unexpected, uncomfortable or even traumatic. You may never learn about it. Still you can do things to prepare your offspring even before they move on to pursue a college education.

First, you should know that 13% of college and graduate students overall reported being raped or sexually assaulted through physical force, violence or incapacitation in a 2019 Association of American Universities encompassing 182,000 students from 33 schools, the most comprehensive data available. The majority of sexual assaults and harassment incidents are not reported to the authorities.

Among all undergraduate students, 26% of women, 23% of college students who identified as transgender, gender questioning or nonbinary and 7% of men experienced non-consensual sexual contact. The first semester can be especially vulnerable: More than half of sexual assaults happen in "The Red Zone," between the start of the fall semester and the Thanksgiving break.

Because of the prevalence of sexual violence on U.S. campuses, one day your college-aged child may call you and start a conversation with: "There is something I need to tell you" and then break the news that they have been assaulted.

In hopes of mitigating trauma and raising awareness, PublicSource spoke with experts from Pittsburgh Action Against Rape [PAAR], scholars, universities and healthcare professionals and compiled some tips for caregivers and parents sending their children to colleges, especially in Pittsburgh but elsewhere as well.

How do you respond?

Susan B. Sorenson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote a book for parents whose children experienced sexual violence to explore that exact question. She's talked to many parents who got that phone call.

"They simply weren't sure what to do, didn't know what to do. And they mostly didn't want to do anything to make it worse. And so they were sometimes stuck," Sorenson said.

First and foremost, "they need to be the best parent that they can be," she said. And, it's important for parents to know that even if well-intended, mistakes will be made. But you need to keep going.

And there are many ways to prepare your child so that even if they never experience sexual violence, their response to a friend or roommate who has could be informed and life-changing.

Sex education is important.

As a parent, you have quite a bit of influence over how your children view and, ultimately, lead their sex lives as young adults, said Susie Balcom, a former PAAR victims advocate.

More than half of sexual assaults among college students occur in the fall. Resources, survivor stories and investigation into what's being done to protect those at risk in the Pittsburgh area. Explore the series.

Start talking about consent and body autonomy early. Prevention education and conversations around body boundaries can start as early as elementary school.

"It's about understanding your greetings and when do you want to take that hand, do you want to wave hello, to hug them — giving people really autonomy over their own body and how they're engaging in their relationships," Balcom said.

If you have a son, have a conversation with them. "Parents often feel like they need to talk to their daughters about it and they think that should be enough. And the boys are central in this," Sorenson said.

"So, talk to them about dignity. Talk to them about consent. Consent has been the primary basis for the definition of sexual assault for over a decade."

Make sure they know that no means no from an early age, a key tenet of consent.

It can be a confusing and traumatic time. This guide can answer some questions about medical care, Title IX and counseling.

When children are older, PAAR works with them on understanding consent in the context of sexual activity. It starts with the basic understanding that they're in charge of their bodies and have power to voice what they're OK with and what they're not — especially considering peer pressures or that some youth are exposed to online pornography.

While your child is in high school, ask their high school — health teachers, the principal — what students are learning and ask your high schooler what they know about sex. Parents and trusted adults can also provide context to what is being taught at school and share what it means to be in healthy relationships.

"We're all past the age — if there ever was even an age — in which we can trust our public schools to provide our kids with sex education and consent education like that. It's not the case. And so parents really need to work like years before college to start on that," Balcom said.

Advocate for sexual violence prevention and mitigation of its effects at your student's college.

Parents should ask college administrators what is being done to prevent harassment and sexual assault, what education efforts are being taken to combat rape culture and sexual violence, and what precautionary and support services are available, Sorenson said. If the school has an orientation for parents, that might be an opportune time to ask these questions.

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“Because if you’ve got a place that’s sort of weasely about it, and they don’t want to answer questions and they want to avoid it, they get noticeably uncomfortable, imagine what it’d be like for somebody going in for help,” she said.

To Sorenson, it means that the university has not fully acknowledged and “is not ready to deal in a major way with the reality of college campuses.”

Most higher education institutions in the United States provide an orientation session on sexual violence and harassment and explain how to report it and the essence of the federal Title IX law.

At Chatham, for example, before undergraduate and graduate students start their first semester, Chatham sends them an online sexual assault prevention module. Several weeks later, they get a second module to assess what they learned. Undergraduates at Chatham also receive an alcohol education module. The NCAA also has a mandate for universities to provide programming initiatives specifically for athletes.

It helps to know that danger can come from people you know.

Most student survivors of sexual violence and harassment know the person who assaulted and harassed them, campus surveys show. So conveying that to your child is important.

“Oftentimes our parents and our systems are set up to teach people about the danger that exists from strangers,” instead of talking about “other dangers that exist in our own relationships with people that we trust,” Balcom said.

Your child needs to know before anything happens that it’s OK for them to tell you.

As a college professor, Sorenson has had many students who confided in her.

“Students would talk to me about being sexually assaulted and about their decision whether to tell a parent and how hard it was and how they could approach a parent.

“And if they should even tell the parent, whether the parent would want to know,“ she said.

Balcom said most college students, in her experience, didn’t think they could tell their parents. So, she says, parents need to prepare themselves and their children in advance.

“Before you even think that your kids might experience sexual violence, and I think most parents imagine that it won’t happen to their kids, right? So, they don’t even prepare themselves or prepare the relationships in case this happens,” Balcom said.

How you talk about sex assault survivors and sexual violence matters.

That extends to conversations about celebrity survivors or expressing views about sexual violence.

“Hopefully, ideally, those views are, ‘It is never the victim’s fault,’” Balcom said, adding that it’s productive to connect the topic with your family’s cultural and religious norms.

It matters when the children have seen and heard their parents victim blaming through the years, Balcom said, watching their parents consume social media and the news and dropping judgments.

And then, when it happens to their children, they may wonder, “Well, why would my parents feel any differently about this for me?”

When your college child wants to tell you something, listen to the end. Do not interrupt.

Sexual trauma is rooted in shame and self-blame, experts say. And often as disclosure happens, victims and survivors tend to shut down because parents, at times unintentionally, are enforcing that underlying shame or the blame that survivors will bring against themselves.

“And a lot of parents react in a way that long term is not very helpful. Like: ‘Wait a minute. What happened? Where were you? What were you doing?’ So they’ll ask a lot of questions,” Sorenson said.

Those questions can be interpreted as questioning the person’s judgment and sometimes blaming as well, she said. So, the best approach is to listen, not to interrupt. “I am here for you” is the best response.

And lastly, dear parents, please seek help. If your child or someone you know experiences sexual violence, resources are available locally and nationally for you and your child. Seek a community. Connect your child with the groups that can support them. Do not sit in pain alone.

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This story was fact-checked by Matt Maielli.

Our process:

For this project, conducted over six months, PublicSource held interviews in person, on the phone and via Zoom with survivors and then worked with them to corroborate their accounts to

the extent possible. We asked for any notes, legal documents, journal entries, emails and texts and/or asked to be connected with people in whom survivors confided at the time. The provided documentation was used to further detail the survivors' experiences and provide independent verification for our robust fact-checking process.

Reporting on sexual violence requires journalists to adhere to standards of accuracy and fairness while mitigating harm and the retraumatization of survivors.

PublicSource reporters adhered to industry best practices for trauma-informed reporting, including those developed by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. From the onset, reporters strived to ensure survivors understood how their stories may be shared in the project and remained in touch as the reporting process continued.

They practiced empathetic interviewing and worked with survivors to determine how they'd like to be identified. In journalism, anonymity is typically granted to people who have experienced sexual violence. PublicSource provided varying levels of anonymity to those who have shared their stories of sexual violence with us to respect wishes for privacy and to prevent further trauma. Their identities are known to us, and the information they've shared has been vetted.

The reporters also reviewed the profiles with the survivors, reading back quotes for accuracy, in an effort to ensure they felt in control of how their stories were told. They remained open to survivors' comfort levels with participation changing and, as needed, provided opportunities to decide if they'd like to continue.

PublicSource is grateful to the survivors for going through this process with us and sharing their stories with the Pittsburgh community to improve understanding of the risks of sexual violence and its effects on college campuses.

Explore this series

The Red Zone

More than half of sexual assaults among college students occur in the fall. Resources, survivor stories and investigation into what's being done to protect those at risk in the Pittsburgh area.

Tagged: college, sexual violence, women

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