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Josh Hawley's partly right about manliness — but aggression can lead to sexual assault

Opinion

By Susan B. Sorenson *Special to The Star*

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Some boys might use age-old tactics of intimidation, coercion and force to shore up their shaky sense of maleness.

Credit: Jack Gruber-USA TODAY

Much has been made of Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley's concern that men no longer know how to be men or, more to his point, that manliness is diminishing. Others seem to agree that men are a bit lost but disagree about why and what to do about it. If men and boys truly are confused about how to be in the world, one troubling result is that some might use age-old tactics of intimidation, coercion and force to shore up their shaky sense of maleness, especially when it comes to women.

Which brings me to campus sexual assault.

According to a 2019 survey of 181,752 U.S. college students about their experiences, nearly every campus sexual assault on a college girl — more than 98% — is committed by a guy. That same survey found that fraternity houses are a common location of an assault. That seems to make sense: Fraternities are known for alcohol-fueled parties. Their members are providers in this situation, albeit not the kind of provider that Hawley envisions.

Might college boys feel that college girls are gunning for them in the post-#MeToo era? Maybe, but there isn't much evidence for that idea.

Most college boys are never reported to their school, let alone police, for sexual assault or any form of sexual misconduct. This includes boys who actually *commit* an assault — the victim is not likely to report him to authorities. That doesn't mean that she won't confront the boy or tell others, but it does mean that typically she will try to handle it outside of official channels.

What *does* she want? According to the legions of victimized students I've listened to throughout my career as a professor at public and private universities, it's not punishment: She wants him to acknowledge that what he did was wrong, to apologize and never to do it to another woman.

If she does go to authorities, any penalty is not likely to be harsh. Colleges rarely expel those found responsible for sexual misconduct. It's obvious, but the best way to avoid being reported for sexual misconduct is not to do it.

You might be relieved to know that it's surprisingly simple: Consent is necessary. A person must be clear-headed enough to be able to give consent. Don't have sexual contact with someone who is asleep, drunk or drugged. If not, the behavior will violate the code of student conduct that is standard at colleges and universities across the country.

This isn't just some highfalutin university thing. Consent is central in the definition of rape that the FBI instituted in 2013, back when today's college boys were in elementary school. If they don't know about consent by now, they need to.

Talk with your boy as he heads to college. Discuss what can happen when he drinks too much. If he can't even remember a sexual encounter the next day, what was the point? Being too drunk or drugged to remember won't be a valid explanation, let alone a defense. Remind him that he is part of a community. Encourage him to step up if he sees a fraternity brother or classmate, drunk or not, taking an incapacitated girl away from a party. He needn't be confrontational — people, especially those who've been drinking, can be easy to distract. Just interrupting someone can prevent what might have happened otherwise. Acknowledging risk and intervening can benefit the entire campus community — girls, boys, their friends and their families.

In addition, Hawley is right: The influence of pornography can be important to boys' attitudes about sex, maybe even more important than their parents, some research suggests. Young men 18 to 24 say that the single most helpful source of information about how to have sex is not their parents but pornography. Unfortunately, pornography commonly portrays sex as an extreme sport and women as compliant and submissive.

Whether watching pornography is associated with sexual aggression remains an open question. Perhaps the most pervasive outcome of watching online pornography is anxiety, as nationally syndicated sex advice columnist Dan Savage suggests. “These kids are convinced or afraid that things they’ve seen are expected of them,” he writes. The boy, too, might feel pressured at times. He should know he doesn’t have to do what he doesn’t want to.

Our sons needn’t be lost boys. Respecting themselves and women is fundamental to being decent men.

Susan B. Sorenson is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of “After Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide for Parents.”

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