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Experts advise parents to discuss campus sexual assault with kids

By **Matt Rocheleau**

| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 27, 2014



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SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Students attend a college seminar on safety at Tufts.

The recent cavalcade of headlines about campus sexual assault, and failures by administrators and law enforcement to address the issue, has been inescapable. But, for many parents of college students, discussing the subject with their son or daughter remains taboo.

A mother whose daughter is a sophomore at MIT and whose son is a freshman at a school in their homestate of California said that while she has not spoken with her children directly about the topic of sexual assault, she has spoken to them about staying safe around campus.

But, "I feel like they think I'm lecturing them," she added. "They're typical teenagers. They roll their eyes and say 'mom we know better than that.'"

Still, just broaching the subject, even if students seem annoyed, can be important, experts said.

"By opening the line of communication, they're going to be better

equipped to reach out for help if they need it,” said Katherine Hull Fliflet, a spokeswoman for the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, which this fall released an online list of tips for parents titled “Have you had the talk?”



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“You’re reminding your teen that you’re an ally,” she added. “You’re there for them in this transition and they can talk to you no matter what.”

Experts and advocates said they recommend that — preferably before the school year starts or at least early in the semester — parents, or someone else the student is close with, talks through what they might try to do to prevent sexual assault and what they would do if they were to become a victim, witness, or perpetrator of the crime.

Having the conversation before or early on in the school year is ideal. College students, particularly freshmen, are most likely to be victims of accidental injury, alcohol poisoning, sexual assault, or otherwise in harm’s way during the first several weeks of the fall semester, according to experts, who have dubbed the period between Labor Day and Thanksgiving as the “red zone.”

While many colleges now run sexual assault training and education for students, experts said those programs are not perfect.

And, “These are messages that students need to hear multiple times and from multiple different sources,” said Hull Fliflet. “The way you’re talking to your teen, you know them better than anyone else.”

Experts also said parents should make sure their student knows about national hotlines and campus medical and crime reporting resource and that parents should talk to their child about what consent means.

“While this might be a squemish topic for parnets to talk about sex, having the conversation can really help make a difference for how their student is approaching this,” said Hull Fliflet.

Specialists also said to talk about how victims and perpetrators of campus sexual assault often know each other.

“This is not a crime perpetrated by strangers jumping out of bushes, it’s more likely to be a friend or someone they meet at a party,” said Hull Fliflet.

Parents should remind students about the potential consequences, while emphasizing that it’s never the victim’s fault, said Gayle Jaffe, manager of community engagement at the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center.

“I would encourage parents to focus less on telling their children not to drink or do drugs, and not partying, not going to fraternities, not walking alone at night,” said Jaffe. “Those can ultimately be perceived as victim-blaming.”

And, experts said, parents should tell their students to follow their instincts when in doubt.

“Trust your gut,” said Colby Bruno, an attorney at the Victim Rights Law Center in Boston, a nonprofit that gives free legal services to sexual assault victims. “If it doesn’t seem right, get up and walk out.”

Students’ guardians should also research college policies and reach out to campus officials with questions, said Kyle Elliot, senior research and product analyst at College Parents of America, an alliance of college parents who assist families of college students.

Experts said talking about ways to intervene if they see a friend in trouble or to help anyone they know who is assaulted can also be crucial.

“Many students won’t actually be victims of sexual assault or perpetrators of sexual assault, but they’ll probably end up knowing someone who is,” said Jaffe.

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