A Letter To My Sons About Stopping Rape

March 16, 2013

Dear Boys,

Some really horrible things happened to someone who could be one of your friends, and it was done by some
people who could be your friends. You're 11 and almost-8 now, so the incident that made me write this letter isn't something you've heard about, but this stuff keeps happening, unfortunately. So I need to talk to you about it.

First of all, I know we talk all the time about how special your bodies are, and how you’re the only one who gets to decide what to do with your body. I’ve never made you put anything in your mouth that you didn’t want to, or touch anyone you didn’t want to, or talk to anyone you didn’t want to, because I wanted you to understand that you and you alone control your boundaries. We worked on blowing a kiss so you could show that you liked someone without having to touch them, and high fives if you were ok touching them but only with your hand. We talked all the time about not letting people tell you that what you wanted was wrong or that they knew better, and that you should always always tell your dad or grandma or me if anyone makes you feel uncomfortable.

And we talk all the time about making sure that if you’re touching someone else that they want you to be touching them. That if they say “No” you have to stop right away (even if it’s just fake-punching your brother) and that even if they aren’t saying “No” you need to make sure they’re still enjoying it. You know how sometimes you like to be tickled and sometimes you don’t? Well, everyone’s like that, so even if they liked it when you did it yesterday, you should still make sure they really want you to today, whatever kind of touching it is.

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I also write at When The Flames Go Up (a blog about co-parenting after divorce with my ex-husband) and at
Now I’m going to talk about sex. I know you know “how it works” because we’ve been talking about it ever since you two were little, since before you could read, and you know all about sperm and eggs and penises and vaginas and vulvas and orgasms and condoms and all that. And I know I told you it feels good and you had a hard time seeing how that could be true but took my word for it. Well, the thing I didn’t tell you is that it feels unbelievably amazing when you’re doing it with someone who really wants to be doing it with you. Like, better than popcorn followed by ice cream, or a Supah Ninjas marathon, or two snow days in a row. You know how excited I get when I get a new pair of shoes? It’s like 500 times better than that, when the person you’re doing it with is so excited to be doing it with you that they start asking you for it.

This is what I want you to wait for. I want you to wait to have sex until the person you’re with asks you for it. Tells you they need you now, and that they can’t wait, and they want it. Calls you by your name and asks for it.

If you’re ever in a situation in which someone is asking you for it and you don’t want to have sex with that person, don’t do it. And if you’re ever in a situation in which you want to have sex but the other person doesn’t ask you for it, don’t do it. It’s only good if you both want it, and can tell each other you want it, and are sure you both want it. Otherwise someone’s going to get hurt. And romance is weird enough without hurting other people when you can stop yourself (and you can always stop yourself--that goes along with having opposable thumbs).
This letter is almost over but this next part is superimportant: Not everyone you know has been taught all the stuff we’ve talked about. You are going to know people, and maybe even be friends with people, who think it’s ok to hurt other people in a lot of ways. One of those ways is sex. I know you’re going to hear other boys say things about girls, or sometimes about other boys, that means they don’t care about those girls’ feelings or bodies. When you do, I need you to step in. All you have to do is say something like, “Dude, that’s not cool” or something that lets the person saying something nasty know that it’s not ok. Remember that everyone wants to fit in. If you can take control of the mood in the room by letting them know nasty talk isn’t ok, they’ll stop so they don’t look like an idiot.

Remember how we talk all the time about how we’re the people who help, who fix things when there’s a problem or someone’s in trouble? You may get the chance to do that someday. Because those boys who say nasty things about girls may actually do something to those girls. If you are ever anywhere where boys start hurting a girl, or touching her in any way that she doesn’t want, you need to step in. If she’s asleep or drunk or passed out or drugged and can’t say “no,” you need to step in. Remember, it’s not good unless both people can say they want it. If a girl isn’t saying anything, that doesn’t mean she wants it. If she isn’t saying specifically that she wants it, then it’s wrong.

Here’s how you should step in:

1. If it’s safe for you to say something, say something. In
a loud, commanding voice, tell the guy who's doing it to stop, and make sure he knows it's not ok and he can't be an asshole (sorry to curse, but by the time you're in this situation you'll be cursing, too). Then help the girl get to someplace safe, and call her parents. (Even if she thinks she's going to get in trouble, call her parents. If they're mad at her, I can talk to them and take care of it.)

2. If it's not safe for you to say something, leave the room quietly and calmly and call me. I do not care if you're someplace you're not supposed to be, or not the place you told me you were, or in Canada or someplace that would normally get you in a lot of trouble. You get immunity if you're calling for help. My phone is always on, and it does not matter what time of day or night it is. If I don't pick up right away, call your dad, and the same immunity rules apply. Call one of us and give us the address of where you are and we will come help. Then hang up and call 911. Tell them the address and that there's an assault going on. They might want you to stay on the line with them until the police get there.

3. Even if you don't like the girl, step in. Even if she's been mean to you or snobby, or someone told you she did something you think is gross. No matter what she did, no one should hurt her. If you step in, the next day you can go back to hating her. If you don't step in, well, how are you any different from the loser who's hurting her? You know who you are. Step in.

4. Do not worry that everyone will hate you if you stop the cool kids from doing something. Stopping someone
from hurting another person makes you a hero. This is what you’re here to do. And if there are people who don’t like it, screw them. Your dad and I will do anything it takes to make sure that anyone who doesn’t like your being a hero stays away from you and keeps their mouths shut.

We have been practicing for this for a long time, for being the ones who help. Remember when we were in the middle of the knife fight on the subway and we got the other mom and kid out of the way? Remember when we helped my friend move away from her scary husband? Remember all those times we took pictures of those freaky dudes staring at the little kids at the playground? We’ve been practicing to step in and help someone else. You can do it. I have faith in you.

Love,

Mom
Tears are rolling down my cheeks, Magda. You are an amazing mom and an amazing woman.

Yes. This. THIS! And this: "You get immunity if you’re calling for help."
I love this so much.
You've been practicing for this for a long time, and I think you've made Carnegie Hall. Makes me cry and sends chills. Everyone should copy.

Sonal  about 10 months ago

This moves me so much!! As two sisters, a "letter" from our mom to us was very different, more on the lines of "protect yourself because there are a lot of beasts out there". But as a mom of a son, this is exactly what I wish every mother would tell their sons. I don’t know if I ever will be quite as eloquent or clear as you are, but I now know how to approach this when my son is old enough. One question though - at what age did you start talking to your boys about their bodies and sex and in general the physical touch? Just wondering when would be the right time for me to initiate this type of conversation.

P.  about 10 months ago

*tears* So beautiful.
Sonal, I started talking to them about their bodies from the very beginning. People in NYC would want to reach out and touch their faces even when they were in a carrier on me! So I started reinforcing verbally to them before they could even talk that they never had to let anyone touch them that they didn't know or want to, and we started blowing kisses instead of touching people when they could, maybe around a year or so.

This is the message I hope gets passed on from the parents of the boys with whom my daughter will eventually socialize. You ROCK!
Thank you, Magda! Elizabeth Mosier
Bryn Mawr ’84

Lisa about 10 months ago

Awesome. Thank you for this. You are a role model for me as I raise my boys. Thank you for (often) giving me words to use with them.

Maureen Basedow about 10 months ago

Add: If someone is asking for it, but he or she is looking incapacitated by alcohol, drugs or anything else - don't do it. It is not technically or legally rape, but it can be pretty close.

Indigo Felle about 10 months ago

Magda, this is wonderful. Thank you -- the tips
at the end, in particular, and your rule about
immunity if you need help will be adapted for my
6 and 3 year olds immediately!

Wokie  about 10 months ago

This is so right. Thank you, Madga.

Erin  about 10 months ago

This is absolutely amazingly well said. Thank you
for sharing and for inspiring so many of us.

Melanie  about 10 months ago

Another mom who cried. Thank you again for
giving us a voice when we can't find the words.

Alice  about 10 months ago
I am so glad you are raising boys! I hope I can also communicate to my girls that they are helpers, and they can help other girls, and boys, but I am hopeful that they will meet boys and girls raised by mothers like you.

Wonderful piece! It makes me think of how proud we all were of my niece when she stepped in to stop a gay bashing. She was just a month or two into her freshman year of high school, and one day she rounded a corner and came across two football players beating the c*^p out of a boy simply because he was gay. She didn't think twice, but immediately stepped into the middle, got up in the face of the guy throwing the most punches, and loudly and forcefully told him to stop. (Granted, it helps that she's 5'10" and kind of punk in her appearance, but still a brave move.) She attracted the attention of a teacher, who was able to intervene. Later, she rather sheepishly admitted to her mom that she'd used some curse words when confronting the bully, and she was relieved when mom said she was cool with that. You're raising your boys to have that same sense of justice and empathy that...
makes my niece such an amazing young woman.

Melanna  about 10 months ago

I have 3 girls. I hope the boys they hang out with are helpers too and have learned these things. I really like the idea in general about teaching our kids to be helpers. My oldest is not a natural leader (as I am) so I can't use the same approach of "be a leader" that my mom used with me because it just terrifies her and goes against her natural nature. But she's a helper by nature, so using that phrase with her would bring about the positive result I'm looking for. Thank you!

Stefanie  about 10 months ago

I agree with you on most of the things your letter says, but I have trouble with the enthusiastic description about sex. My mother told me the same about sex (she talked The Talk very often, too often for my liking), how amazing wonderful it is and blah blah until I could no longer stand it. When it was my time to be sexual active, I was very disappointed in sex, as it was blown up so much by my mother.
I tell my daughters that sex is different for everybody. Some like it very much and want it all the time, others not so much. I also tell them that you have to learn sex, and that it is different with every new person.

I don't want to put pressure on them to like sex, as in our families there are some people who you could describe as asexual.

Excellent piece and one which I look forward to sharing. One friendly suggestion: Boys are also victims, far more than I think we realize. Might you consider editing/tweaking this most powerful letter to make it clearer that we should speak out whenever someone is being victimized, regardless of who or why and that boys can be victims too? (I tell you, some of what my students have reported to me re: what happens in the context of organized sports just chills me. And it too, is so very wrong. We need to socialize our young people to speak up when it happens.)

best, jeanne

Cindy about 10 months ago
Wonderful piece. Thank you for sharing. Two weeks ago, I saw a "game" on my 17-yr old nephew's FB page where you think of your favorite band, and then substitute the word "rape" for one of the words in the band's name (Rape Maiden or Iron Rape was the example given). Thousands had commented. I sent my nephew a private msg telling him how wrong this type of game is. He hasn't spoken to me in two weeks. I will be forwarding this piece to my brother so they can talk about it. Thanks again.

Marissa  about 10 months ago

Moxie, question: I've got a baby boy who I'm planning to teach the whole "your body, your choices" ethos. But one thing has me stumped: when it comes to medical care, it really isn't up to them what happens to their bodies. Much as I dislike thinking of it this way, I can imagine my boy as a 2-year old who adamantly chants, "No shot, no shot!", but this would not move me at all when it comes to the immunizations he needs. When he's older, he'll be able to understand stuff like, "This might hurt now, but it needs to happen," but I can't imagine he'll be able to wrap his little head around that till he's school-aged. How do you teach "your body, your choices"
while still enforcing (sometimes painful) medical care??

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**John D Salt**  
about 10 months ago

You're doing it exactly right. Carry on.

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**Erin**  
about 10 months ago

@Marissa - I think it's pretty straight forward. Even small kids can understand that they have autonomy most of the times but that some things are non-negotiable. The doctors' office isn't the only situation - they also cannot break away from you and run across the street. They have to wear their car seats. Their diaper needs to be changed. All of these are situations in which they may be man-handled against their will. I think if you explain the rule to them (simply and clearly) then they get it, and get the difference between someone kissing them and someone giving them a shot. Believe me, I had to help physically restrain my toddler while he screamed & struggled as he got stitches. It felt terrible to take away all his autonomy, but it wasn't a choice type
@Marissa - Actually, a 2-year-old can begin to understand the idea "This might hurt now, but it needs to happen" about the immunizations that protect us all. There is a wonderful children's show on PBS called "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood," for children ages 2 to 4+. My kids, who are 3 and 5, recently watched a great episode on this very topic called "Daniel Gets a Shot" -- http://schedule.wttw.com/episodes/258106/Daniel-Tigers-Neighborhood/Daniel- Gets-A-Shot/A-Stormy-Night/ There is also a fabulous episode on "Be a Vegetable Taster" that got my kids to ask to try some new foods. TV gets a bad rap on the internets, but current research shows that educational programming, such as age-appropriate PBS shows like "DTN", has been shown to help curb aggressive behaviors in at-risk boys.
this is a great post that i will pass along to the kids in my sex ed class.@Maureen in many states being asleep, drunk etc is considered unable to consent and therefore it is rape. I think the FBI definition also reflects this. regardless of the legal definition, too, it is vital to teach boys--and girls--that some classes of people cannot consent and therefore it is always rape. Children, animals, people who are drunk/high, people who are asleep, and people with some forms of cognitive disabilities cannot consent. We also need to teach the concept of "enthusiastic consent" e.g. waiting to hear yes instead of waiting to hear no. Finally, I strongly suggest tht anyone interested in these issues find your local Unitarian Universalist church. We have a program called Our Whole Lives that teaches comprehensive, research based sex ed. It is a truly amazing program. The main class is for 7-9th grades (just 8th graders at big enough churches, small churches may have mixed grade classes) but OWL is usually offered at different levels. We teach not only about contraception, STIs, etc but also relationship and decision making skills, peer pressure etc, all in a very safe and supportive environment with specially trained teachers. We talk a lot about consent, rape, abuse etc. Our kids LOVE this class. We usually see teenagers happy to show up at church at 9am on a Sunday! It is a really life changing class and most churches will happily take non UU kids.
Also this: http://canyourelate.org/2011/05/24/rape-prevention-tips/

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**Kirsten**  about 10 months ago

I'm saving this for when I have kids, hopefully soon. One of my concerns as I ready myself to be a parent is addressing exactly these sorts of things and preparing my children to be independent, and healthy with appropriate boundaries - but still ready and willing to help others in need. Cried a lot while reading it and just passed it on to my fiance.

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**Jennifer**  about 10 months ago

This was beautiful and very well written. Thank you. I have a 14yr old son and 7yr old daughter and have been trying to teach them about these issues their whole lives. I plan on printing this letter for my son to read- as a starting point for conversation. I think the personal responsibility message is huge, but I love how you have brought the idea of stepping in when you see a wrong being committed. We always think of the negative influences other kids can have on our
kids, but if we give our kids the tools, they can become positive influences on the lives of their peers. Thank you, and I hope this continues to be shared.

Kate  about 10 months ago

Ugly cry.

Maggie  about 10 months ago

This is so much what I wish my rapist's mother would have said.

Rachel  about 10 months ago
Thank you for this. Thank you so much for sharing these thoughts, and thank you so, SO much for talking to your kids about this and helping to make the future a better one. I hope to someday see a world in which every single person's life is full of role models who do the same.

Foster  about 10 months ago

If more boys were raised like this, less women would have to be afraid.

Ann  about 10 months ago

*Love* so much of what you said. It's spot on, but agree with the PPs about the too-broad breadth of stepping in. Having also lived in and around NYC for many, many years, I tell my kids to call 911 FIRST, then try to think on your feet. My dear friend lost her son to a hold-up in a bodega--he tried to step in instead of calling the police. Help, yes, but always be careful and don't put anyone's life at risk. What if YOU had been stabbed and killed when you intervened in the
knife fight? What impact would that have had on your family, especially on your young children who would have witnessed their mom being attacked? What would their ensuing life be like without you?

Thanks Moxie. As a woman, a mother of a boy and a feminist, I loved reading this letter. I've stashed a copy away for when the time comes in our family.

You are brilliant. Thank you.
You are going to get your kids stabbed, just sayin

**Slim** about 10 months ago

I love that you're teaching your kids to step up, but could you explain the logic of having them call you or LOD first and 911 second? Am ignoring the troll, perfect illustration of certain things though he is.

**Stefan** about 10 months ago

Lovely all round. You omit suggesting your boys ask for sex - they are to wait for other to ask. Its important we all feel ok to ask, and are prepared to listen to and observe any answer. Well done :)

**Robin** about 10 months ago
Typing with gentle tears rolling and a heart expanding! Having the talk with my son & daughters! Sharing with my friends!

**Hill** about 10 months ago

Great letter-- I just wish you had told them to call 911 FIRST and then to call you. If a woman is being raped, every second counts... and the cops can get there faster (don't have to obey traffic laws) and have better training for this situation.

**Miriam** about 10 months ago

You are amazing Magda! I love it. I hope to share with my two boys.

**Ellen** about 10 months ago

Lovely -- will be sharing. For posters with younger children asking about boundaries, the book "I Said No!" is written from a young boy's
perspective and does a nice job talking about what parts of their bodies are private and how to assert themselves if anyone wants to touch them, bribe them, etc., including one of their friends. If kids are secure and understand boundaries with respect to themselves (especially how to discuss those boundaries), it can be easier for them to understand respecting the boundaries of others -- at least, it gives us as parents a vocabulary and base with which to discuss such things, which is helpful too.

http://www.bouldenpublishing.com
/prodinfo.asp?number=076496

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**Kate**  about 10 months ago

Wonderful. Thank you.

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**Tine**  about 10 months ago

Magda. You are amazing. I want everybody I know to read this, and I'm going to annoy them until they do!
Thank you for writing this. I have two little boys. One of them was adopted. He was conceived as a result of rape. I want nothing more than for them to understand how vitally important it is to respect both women and themselves, even when others do not.

You're an amazing Mom, I work with my boy on these things as well. Sharing your post.

Wow. Thank you for writing this.
Thank you.

**MemeGRL**  
about 10 months ago

Not enough "like" in the world for this. Thank you for giving many of us the words!

**tracey**  
about 10 months ago

Perfect. As a mom of boys, this is perfect. May all of our boys become the men we hope: heroes and not assholes.

**Kate @ SuburbanSweetheart.com**  
about 10 months ago

Not a mom. Cried anyway because I hope that
when & if I am, I have it in me to be the kind of mom you are. Your sons - & the world who receives them - is so luck you have you. THANK YOU for this.