



The Talk

Scenarios for Educators

Responding to Misogyny, Sexual Degradation, and Disrespect:
Common, Challenging Student Interactions and Responses

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Many teachers have heard or seen students saying things that are misogynistic, objectifying, insensitive, or disrespectful based on gender, sexuality, or sexual orientation. Because these comments may catch us off guard and are often sensitive in nature, many adults struggle to know what to say in the moment. By thinking through and practicing our responses in advance, we can be prepared the next time we hear these comments in our schools.

Below are practice scenarios for teachers based on real-life student conversations and interactions. These scenarios can be reviewed by individual teachers or as part of a professional development program. It may be particularly powerful for teachers to work in pairs or small groups to discuss and practice potential responses.

While we offer some pointers for responding at the end of this document, the best responses consider context—knowledge of the school, students, and culture. As such, this document serves as a discussion guide for you and your colleagues. We hope it is helpful. Read through, and then imagine how you would approach the situation, using the questions and anticipated student responses to guide you.

*Learn more about Making Caring Common's report *The Talk: How Adults Can Promote Young People's Healthy Relationships and Prevent Misogyny and Sexual Harassment* at <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/thetalk>.*

Scenario 1: “I hit that”

The scene

You hear three seniors from your class talking in the cafeteria—Michael, Steve, and Kevin. They don’t know you’re there. Jane, another senior, walks by and Michael says he “hit that last week.” Sounding unimpressed, Steve replies, “a lot of guys have hit that.”

Kevin says that he doesn’t want to go to a party that Saturday night at Kathy’s house. He just broke up with Kathy, and he doesn’t want to see her “hooking up with other guys.” Michael tells him to go and make her jealous. “Go crazy. Hit on all of her friends. A couple of them are total sluts.”

Scenario 1: “I hit that”

Reflection

- What would you do in this scenario? Would you interject and/or talk to Michael, Steve, and Kevin about their conversation? If so, how? Why would you respond this way?
- What SHOULD you say or do in this scenario? What is the “ideal” response? What are the messages you would like to get across? If there is a difference between what you should and would do, how might you do what you should do?
- How would your response be different if you were a male teacher? A female teacher? How does gender (yours and the students’) affect your response?
- Would you involve other people (students, staff, parents) in your response? If so, who? How would you involve them?

Scenario 1: “I hit that”

How would you respond to these anticipated student responses?

- “I was being ironic”
- “It was funny, it’s a joke”
- “You are taking this way too seriously”

Scenario 2: Online Shaming

The scene

Scott and Eva are sophomores. They have been dating for four months, and seem to be in a respectful, loving relationship. They are very demonstrative, and you assume they are sexually active, though you don't know. Scott is a popular boy in school, and has a lot of friends in other grades. Eva is quieter, with a small group of friends.

It comes to your attention (from one of Eva's friends who would like to remain anonymous) that some of the junior girls have gotten a hold of Eva's information online and are writing inflammatory, slut shaming messages on her profile. This is not happening at school. You ask Eva's friend how Scott is reacting, and she says that Scott got a little mad, but also laughed, saying it "isn't that big a deal."

You can tell Eva is very affected by the experience—she isn't her usual self, and looks like she has been crying. The junior girls are not ones you know to behave this way. You have all of the students in your classes.

Scenario 2: Online Shaming

Reflection

- What would you do in this scenario? How would you address this situation? With whom? Why would you respond this way?
- What SHOULD you say or do in this scenario? What is the “ideal” response? What are the messages you would like to get across? If there is a difference between what you should and would do, how might you do what you should do?
- How would your response be different if you were a male teacher? A female teacher? How does gender (yours and the students’) affect your response?
- Would you involve other people (students, staff, parents) in your response? If so, who? And how would you involve them?

Scenario 2: Online Shaming

How would you respond to these anticipated student responses?

- “It was outside school hours and off campus, so it’s not a school thing”
- “It was a joke, Eva’s our friend”
- “We didn’t do anything wrong”
- “You can’t prove it”
- “It isn’t that big a deal”

Scenario 3: “That’s so gay”

The scene

When you walk into your 8th grade class in the morning, you immediately hear two of your students arguing near the doorway. One of the students, Jamie, is bigger than the other, Matt. Matt tends to sit alone in the back of class most days. Jamie isn’t really bullying Matt, but it is clear he is in control of the argument. His stance is wide and imposing and Matt has his head down.

When you walk all the way into the room, the conversation halts. You can see both boys are upset but they start to walk away from each other. Matt hiccups a little, and you see that he is crying. So does the rest of the class.

“You’re so gay,” Jamie mutters over his shoulder. A few kids in the class begin to chuckle. Matt walks to the back of the class, sits at a table and pulls himself together. He looks at you and his eyes seem to plead to leave the situation alone.

Scenario 3: “That’s so gay”

Reflection

- What would you do in this scenario? How would you address this situation? With whom? Why would you respond this way? Would you speak to the whole class or only those involved?
- What SHOULD you say or do in this scenario? What is the “ideal” response? What are the messages you would like to get across? If there is a difference between what you should and would do, how might you do what you should do?
- What about the phrase “That’s so gay,” is problematic? How would you address this with the class and/or with Jamie and Matt?
- How would your response be different if you were a male teacher? A female teacher? How does gender (yours and the students’) affect your response?
- Would you involve other people (students, staff, parents) in your response? If so, who? And how would you involve them?

Scenario 3: “That’s so gay”

How would you respond to these anticipated student responses?

- “People say that all the time, it just means stupid or weak” –Jamie
- “It was a joke, Matt’s a friend of mine” –Jamie
- “Don’t bring more attention to it, leave it alone” –Matt
- Laughing from the class

Pointers for all scenarios

- Stop harmful or inappropriate conversations in the moment they happen. A simple, “that sort of language or conversation is disrespectful and needs to stop now” is important. True, even if we intervene, offensive comments may not stop, but passivity not only condones these comments, it can also diminish young people’s respect for us as adults and role models and pave the way for more serious forms of degradation. Further, even if teens can’t absorb or act on our words in the moment, they often still register our words and internalize them as they mature.
- Make sure to discuss with involved students why the language or incident was inappropriate or harmful. You might, for example, ask questions that any thoughtful human is hard-pressed to answer affirmatively: “Why is this a way that you and your friends bond?,” or “How is making a sexist or homophobic comment different from making a racist comment?” If additional time or privacy is required to process the incident, you can come back and process it with students later.

Pointers for all scenarios

- Consider what you might say if a student says, “We’re just joking” or “You don’t understand.” You might explain how these types of jokes can come to infect how we think and act towards others and be interpreted by others as permitting and supporting sexual harassment and degradation.
- Encourage young people to think about the nature of real honor, courage, and dignity. There is, of course, no honor or courage in degrading, belittling, or sexualizing others. There can, though, be honor in standing up to your peers when they do these things. There is also dignity in attending to those who might be vulnerable to harassment and intervening to help defend and protect them.
- Talk to young people about the importance of listening to and appreciating their peers of different genders and sexual orientations as a matter of decency and humanity, and work with them to develop empathy. You might ask a teen to think about, for example, both what is positive and what is challenging about being another gender or sexual orientation, or ask students of different genders in your class to explain to each other what it’s like from their perspective to be their gender at school.

Pointers for all scenarios

- Follow up with those students directly harmed or affected by the incident. Where consequences are needed, utilize consequences that teach rather than solely punish. Asking students to do research, write an apology letter, or explain another’s viewpoint can be very effective.
- Encourage and expect upstanding. We should expect students to not only protect themselves when they’re harassed or degraded but also to protect each other. Because they understand peer dynamics, are more likely to witness harassing behaviors, and often have more weight than adults in intervening with peers, young people themselves are often in the best position to prevent and stop sexual harassment and misogyny among their peers. Learning to be an “upstander” is also a vital part of becoming an ethical, courageous person. Yet upstanding can be risky—perpetrators can turn on upstanders. That’s why it’s important to brainstorm strategies for intervening with young people that protect both them and the victim.

Pointers for all scenarios

- Ask your colleagues and school leaders for advice on—and brainstorm with them about how to handle these challenging situations.
- Get others involved as needed—this may include parents or school counselors.

Thank you for taking the time to practice The Talk | Scenarios for Educators. We hope it helped you prepare for when you hear these types of comments at your school.

About Making Caring Common

Making Caring Common (MCC) helps educators, parents, and communities raise children who are caring, responsible to their communities, and committed to justice. For more resources from Making Caring Common, please visit www.makingcaringcommon.org.

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