**How to Help Kids Disrupt ‘Bro Culture’**

By Ana Homayoun

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When [women in the tech industry](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/technology/women-entrepreneurs-speak-out-sexual-harassment.html) came forward recently with accounts of sexual harassment and assault, their reports exposed the harmful underbelly of a [strain of toxic behavior](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/07/business/google-women-engineer-fired-memo.html?action=click&contentCollection=Technology&module=RelatedCoverage&region=Marginalia&pgtype=article) that has come to be known as “bro culture.” Over the past few years, the term has become a label for the dangerous normalization of sexual objectification, harassment, assault and [homophobia](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/technology/uber-workplace-culture.html?mcubz=0&_r=0).

Bro culture uses the formidable elixirs of power and status to create a toxic social environment, and tends to be characterized by manipulative charm, entitlement and a so-called “rules don’t apply attitude” — as well as an inability to express emotion, show remorse or be vulnerable.

Although the culture is typically associated with college fraternity life, evidence suggests that its seeds are planted in elementary school or earlier. The ways we [talk to and interact with boys](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/15/well/family/talking-to-boys-the-way-we-talk-to-girls.html) — the language we use, potentially celebrating masculinity at the expense of empathy — can limit boys’ social and emotional development. How can adults help break the pattern?

Listening to how boys talk about others in the company of their friends is a start. The role of fathers, father figures, and other adult male role models — including coaches, teachers and school administrators — can be crucially important in counteracting media and other cultural messages, said Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA, the national association for student affairs administrators at colleges and universities.

Social media is part of both the problem and the solution.

Photos, messages and videos sent via Snapchat, Facebook messenger and other popular apps now regularly expose incriminating behavior and help put bro culture on notice. But social media can also feed the growth of bro culture, because communicating through a screen can make interactions — such as adolescents and teenagers pressuring one another to send nudes, sharing private photos and messages — seem more transactional than real-life relationships and thwart social and emotional growth.

Furthermore, a [lack of comprehensive sex education](https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/2015/nhpc-press-release-schools-teaching-prevention.html) focused on healthy sexuality, consent and overall well-being can send middle and high school students to their smartphones and, more specifically, [online pornography for sex ed](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/opinion/sunday/when-did-porn-become-sex-ed.html).

Though few research studies have examined the [impact of online pornography](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/05/well/family/the-other-talk-parents-avoid-pornography.html) on teen relationships, some teenagers misinterpret explicit images that are increasingly demeaning and violent toward women as examples of intimacy. In her 2016 book “Girls & Sex,” the journalist Peggy Orenstein cites [a 2010 study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20980228) that analyzed 304 scenes from popular porn videos and found that nearly 90 percent of the scenes included physical aggression and almost half had some form of verbal abuse, with women overwhelmingly the targets of aggression. It’s unlikely that many parents want violent, aggressive images to be part of their children’s formative ideas about sex.

Programs that work to promote healthy sexuality, communication, consent and responsibility are crucial because even students who want to talk about relationships and sex might not know how.

One such program, [Our Whole Lives,](http://www.uua.org/re/owl) works to meet or exceed national standards for sex education core curriculum for kindergarten through 12th grade. It provides age-appropriate exercises focused on promoting self-worth, sexual health, responsibility, and inclusivity and justice. The program, created in a collaboration between the Unitarian Universalist Association and United Church of Christ, offers both a secular curriculum for use by public schools and organizations, and additional tools to help facilitators put teachings in the context of religious values if they so choose.

Another resource, [Peer Health Exchange](http://www.peerhealthexchange.org/), trains college student volunteers to help fill the gap for mental and sexual health education in under-resourced high schools around the country. Since its founding in 2003, the organization has trained 8,500 college students to provide culturally relevant, medically appropriate health education to over 115,000 public high school students. Louise Langheier, its co-founder and chief executive, said that talking with young people about consent can help them confront issues around bro culture.

[GLSEN, a national organization focused on creating a safer school climate for all students,](https://www.glsen.org/)provides educational materials and resources to encourage greater conversations around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning students, who can also be bullied or targeted. Its ThinkB4YouSpeak lesson plan provides exercises to help students understand the impact behind homophobic slurs that can be used in bro culture, and guides students on how to move from being a bystander to being an ally when they witness hateful or discriminatory behavior.

And [a study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine](http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797%2817%2930027-2/abstract) in May found that schools that used a violence prevention program called [Green Dot](https://www.livethegreendot.com/) had more than a 50 percent reduction in the self-reported frequency of sexual violence by high school students. For the study, the University of Kentucky researcher Ann Coker and her team looked at the results of nearly 90,000 student surveys at 26 Kentucky high schools from 2010 to 2014.

The program works with students to shift responsibility from victims to bystanders. Teaching young people that members of a community look out for one another may help reduce the spread of bro culture.

Years of working with teenagers and young adults has taught me that bro culture develops out of a social and emotional insecurity that uses a group dynamic as a safety blanket and excessive drinking and partying as a shield.

Youth sports, once thought of as a critical tool for developing key social and emotional skills, may also inadvertently contribute to bro culture. A [2013 review article](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3871410/#b5-oajsm-4-151) published in the Journal of Sports Medicine suggested that early and excessive emphasis on youth sports and early sport specialization – or participating in one sport year-round – can shift youth focus from fun or “deliberate play” to performance and has been linked to increased psychosocial problems, antisocial behaviors and negative peer interactions.

“When you have young athletes who at very young ages are identified as special, as unique, as having a particular kind of talent that very few people have access to,” said Mark Anthony Neal, professor and founding director of the Center for Arts, Digital Culture and Entrepreneurship at Duke University. “They are granted a certain level of entitlement because of that — what kinds of classes they get to miss, what kind of opportunities to travel they get — all of this gets embodied into this notion of bro culture.”

Educators trying to counteract it can start by giving all students more opportunities to openly discuss and reflect on cultural norms. For high school and college students, that might also mean finding subtle ways to encourage students — young men and women — to improve empathetic communication through face-to-face conversations free from technological distractions.

Kerry Cronin, a philosophy and theology professor at Boston College, said: “Parents and educators have no clue what’s going on,” as far as “the extent of bro culture and the coarseness of it.”

Dr. Cronin created a “dating assignment” for her students at Boston College after she realized that college students were desperate for tools to navigate what she calls the “nighttime culture.” Students on a “[Cronin date](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxurOz4lbb8)” ask a person of genuine romantic interest out on date that lasts between 45 and 90 minutes. The date is one-on-one, during the day, and involves no alcohol, phone use or physical intimacy. Most notably? Students ask their date out in person, instead of over messaging or social media apps, which encourages an in-person, face-to-face vulnerability virtually nonexistent in today’s world of digital communication.

In follow-up class discussions and reflection papers, Dr. Cronin’s students often reveal how much they genuinely enjoyed the experience, despite any initial awkwardness or hesitation, and also admit they likely would have never gone on such a date otherwise.

Dr. Cronin says students are often searching for permission and guidance on how to interrupt “the social script they take as given.” Understanding that, she said, is the key to disrupting bro culture.

[Ana Homayoun](http://www.anahomayoun.com/about/) is the author of the new book “Social Media Wellness: Helping Tweens and Teens Thrive in an Unbalanced Digital World.”