

# My teen sons are blind to rape culture

By Jody Allard  
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“Oh boy,” my son said, rolling his eyes. “No rape culture again.”

We were sitting around the dinner table talking about the news. As soon as I mentioned the Stanford sexual assault case, my sons looked at each other. They knew what was coming. They’ve been listening to me talk about consent, misogyny and rape culture since they were tweens. They listened to me then, but they are 16 and 18 now and they roll their eyes and argue when I talk to them about sexism and misogyny.

“There’s no such thing as rape culture,” my other son said. “You say everything is about rape culture or sexism.”

I never imagined I would raise boys who would become men like these: Men who deny rape culture, or who turn a blind eye to sexism. Men who tell me I’m being too sensitive or that I don’t understand what teenage boys are like. “You don’t speak out about this stuff, mom,” they tell me with a sigh. “It’s just not what teenagers do.”

My sons are right about that much. Teenage boys, by and large, don’t speak out about slut-shaming or rape culture. They don’t call each other out when they make sexist jokes or objectify women. It’s too uncomfortable to separate themselves from the pack so they continue to at least dip their toes into toxic masculinity. In their discomfort with action, they remain passive, and their passivity perpetuates the

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same broken system that sentenced Brock Turner to only six months in jail.

When I first talked to my sons about enthusiastic consent, they laughed at me. “No one is going to ask a girl before having sex with her,” they said. It’s too awkward and uncomfortable. Besides, they reassured me, you can tell whether a girl is consenting without having to ask her. But then one of my sons texted his sexually active friend to ask him whether he got consent from his girlfriend before they had sex. His friend quickly replied that he had to “encourage” her to do it a lot before she finally agreed.

My son didn’t call out his friend. He didn’t remind him that lack of enthusiastic consent means there is no consent. He didn’t say a word to him about consent at all, other than to ask the initial question, and that inaction hung heavy in the room between us. My sons, who are good



Sofie Karasek, who says she was sexually assaulted by an instructor during her freshman year at the University of California, Berkeley, calls for the removal of Santa Clara County Judge Aaron Persky from the bench because of the six-month jail term he sentenced Brock Turner to for a sexual assault conviction. Paul Elias, Associated Press file

boys and who know all about consent, do not speak out about consent. Not when it’s uncomfortable. Not when it might jeopardize their social standing. My

sons who hate hearing about their own privilege nestle inside it like a blanket and accuse me of making up its existence.

My sons are part of the problem.

I’m a survivor of rape and sexual abuse. My sons know this like they know I was once a reporter and I love curries and coffee. But they have never been sexually abused, and they can’t fathom what it’s like to stand in a scalding hot shower trying to burn away the touch of a stranger’s hands. I’ve told them why dismantling rape culture is so important to me, but they will never truly understand how survivors feel.

I wanted to believe that sharing my experience with them would make them understand. And even more important, that understanding would breed action; but that’s where the disconnect arose. My sons understand, as best as teenage boys can. But they aren’t willing to sacrifice their own comfort for my sake, or for anyone else. When it comes to speaking out against rape culture and questioning their own ideas and behavior, they become angry and defensive. Not all men, they remind me, and my guts wrench as my own sons mimic the vitriol of a thousand online trolls.

No matter how often my sons

remind me that they are good men, they don’t understand that being “good” is an action. You don’t earn the honor by simply shaking your head when you hear about Turner and other rapists being given lenient sentences. You earn it by acting to end rape culture, and by doing it even when it’s awkward and uncomfortable as hell.

My sons are good boys, just like thousands of other good boys in America. They understand consent and they won’t rape an unconscious woman behind a dumpster. But they aren’t allies in the fight against rape culture because they refuse to acknowledge their own culpability when they call a girl a slut or a whore, laugh at a sexist joke or remain silent when their friends talk about their own questionable sexual behavior.

And in this broken system, anyone who isn’t with us is against us. Particularly, and especially, men. Even my own sons — even yours. It’s not enough to teach our sons about consent; we have to encourage them to have the courage to speak out against rape culture, too.