

Sexual Assault Against Boys Is a Crisis

It's far more common than we think. Here's why we don't talk about it.

By [Emma Brown](#) FEBRUARY 22, 2021

Raising a boy sometimes feels like traveling in a foreign land. When I gave birth to my daughter, three years before my son was born, I had no idea how to be a mother. But after decades of navigating life as a woman, I knew unequivocally what I wanted for her: to see herself as capable of anything, constrained by none of the old limits on who women must be and how they must move through the world. She could be fierce and funny and loving and steely-spined.

“I am strong and fearless,” I taught her to say when she was 2, as she hesitated on the playground, her lips quivering as she considered crossing a rope-netting bridge strung 10 feet above the ground. There was nothing premeditated about that little sentence. It just appeared on my tongue, distilling what I wanted her to be and how I hoped she would think of herself.

I had no such pithy motto for my son. Reminding a boy to be strong and fearless seemed unnecessary and maybe even counterproductive, fortifying a stereotype instead of unraveling it. What could I give him to help him ignore the tired old expectations of boys? I had no idea. I didn't know how to help him resist the stresses and stereotypes of boyhood, because I had never grappled with the fact that boys face stresses and stereotypes at all.

But of course they do. Boys learn that they're supposed to be tough and strong and sexually dominant, according to a massive study of gender attitudes among 10- to 14-year-olds in the United States and countries across four other continents. Girls learn that they're supposed to be attractive and submissive, according to the study, led by researchers at Johns Hopkins University. The global script clearly harms girls, who face disproportionate levels of sexual violence, not to mention greater risk of early pregnancy and leaving school. But Robert Blum, a physician who has studied adolescents for 40 years and is one of the Johns Hopkins scholars leading the study, wants people to understand that it also hurts boys. “The story about boys has yet to be told, and I think it's a really important story,” Blum explained to me. “Our data suggest that the myth that boys are advantaged and girls are disadvantaged simply isn't *true*.”

The movement for gender equality has often focused on empowering girls. But as Blum sees it, achieving gender equality also requires attention for boys. They too need to know they are not circumscribed by ideas about who and how they should be.

Boys are more likely than girls to die in their second decade of life, and they use more alcohol and tobacco, habits that erode their health as they age, Blum said. But even more troubling, Blum's team found that boys suffered higher levels of physical violence, neglect and sexual abuse by adults than girls. And the more a boy was victimized, the more likely he was to do violence to others.

Those findings should serve as a gut punch. We can't solve the problem of violence against girls and women without also addressing violence against men and boys. And we won't succeed in teaching our sons to care for other people's bodies until we learn to care for theirs.

The first I heard of "brooming" was in one of those interstitial moments, a busy day on pause, waiting for my car to be repaired at an auto shop before racing to work. It was pouring outside, so I huddled along with a half-dozen other harried customers in a small room where a television blared a local news show. Five boys, football players at a high school just outside D.C., had been charged with rape and attempted rape in the alleged attacks of their teammates with the end of a wooden broomstick.

Not only had I never heard of such a thing, but I had never even imagined it. Raped with a broomstick? Long after I left, I was still trying to wrap my head around it, and as details emerged in the following days and weeks, I could not look away.

It had happened on the last day of October, Halloween, at Damascus High, a diverse public school with a powerhouse football program in Montgomery County, Md. My colleagues at The Washington Post, where I work as an investigative reporter, reported the wrenching details of the attack. Freshmen on the junior varsity team had been changing in a locker room after school when suddenly the lights went out, and they could hear the sound of someone banging a broomstick against the wall. The sophomores had arrived. "It's time," one of them said. They went from freshman to freshman, grabbing four of them, pushing them to the ground, punching, stomping. They pulled the younger boys' pants down and stabbed the broom at their buttocks, trying — and at least once succeeding — to shove the handle inside their rectums. The victims pleaded for help, the attackers laughed at them, and a crowd of other boys looked on, watching the horror unspool. Whenever I learn of something unconscionable, I find myself looking for clues that it could never happen to me or the people I love. That's human nature, I guess. But like any other kind of sexual assault, brooming is not a phenomenon confined to this one high school, or to any particular type of school or community. It cuts across racial and socioeconomic lines, shows up in elite private boys' academies and coed public schools, in big cities and rural villages and small towns that dot the heartland.

What do you think you know about boys and sexual violence? I thought I knew that boys are victims only rarely, and I automatically equated "child sexual abuse" with adults preying on kids. But I was wrong on both counts.

Many boys are molested by adults, that's true. But there are strong signs that children are even more likely to be sexually abused or sexually assaulted by other children. In one study of 13,000 children age 17 and younger, three-quarters of the boys who reported being sexually victimized said the person who violated them was another child. In a little more than half those assaults, the violator was a girl. Most boys who had been assaulted had never told an adult.

We can't solve the problem of violence against girls and women without also addressing violence against men and boys.

Though sexual violence mostly affects girls and women, male victims are still astonishingly common. I was shocked to learn that as many as 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused during childhood.

About 1 in 4 men is a victim of some kind of sexual violence over the course of his lifetime, from unwanted contact to coercion to rape. LGBTQ men are at greater risk than heterosexual men: More than 40 percent of gay men and 47 percent of bisexual men say they have been sexually victimized, compared compared with 21 percent of straight men.

In 2015, a national survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that nearly 4 million men (and 5.6 million women) had been victims of sexual violence just in the previous year. More than 2 million of those men were subjected to unwanted sexual contact, and more than 800,000 said they were “made to penetrate” another person — an awkward term that doesn’t show up much in the media or in public debate. It means that a man was either too inebriated to consent or was coerced or threatened into sex.

Just as with girls and women, violation of men and boys can involve physical force or emotional coercion. Just as with girls and women, boys and men sometimes have sexual experiences to which they cannot consent because they are underage or blackout drunk — experiences that we might reflexively call sex but that we should really understand as assault. And though the perpetrators in those cases can be other boys and men, they can also be girls and women. The overwhelming majority of male rape victims say that the person who violated them was another male, but most male victims of other kinds of sexual violence say they were violated by a female.

Boys and men who survive sexual violence can experience serious psychological and emotional fallout, including post-traumatic stress, symptoms of depression and anxiety, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse problems and sexual dysfunction.

Yet we rarely hear about any of this on the news. We hardly ever talk about it. Stories of sexual misconduct are everywhere, but the tellers of those stories are mostly girls and women. The stories of men and boys still remain mostly hidden, unacknowledged and undiscussed.

The default in discussions about sexual violence is to think of boys and men as perpetrators and women as victims. But that is an oversimplification that is built on a damaging stereotype about male invulnerability, and it obscures the truth: Boys can be victims, and boys can need help. We’ve just built a world that makes it hard for them to admit it — and for the rest of us to acknowledge it. If we want to raise boys differently, we must start believing that they are equally capable of feeling pain and doing violence.

When I first began learning about locker room assaults, I wanted to know what motivated a boy to hurt another boy in this way. But along the way, I became even more puzzled — and troubled — by the victims’ experiences. They had so much difficulty identifying what had happened to them as sexual assault, and felt too much shame to admit they were hurting.

One boy was so distressed about the prospect of being attacked by his basketball teammates during a tournament trip that he called his mother, intending to ask her for help. As frightened as he was, when it came down to it, he couldn’t bring himself to tell her what was going on. “I was going to tell her when I first got on the phone with her, but I ended up not saying nothing,” he later said. “I was going to tell her, but I didn’t know how to say that.”

I’ll call him Martin. He was a freshman on the varsity team at Ooltewah High School, near Chattanooga, Tenn. In December 2015, he and his teammates drove to a tournament in Gatlinburg,

in the Great Smoky Mountains. They stayed in a cabin where there was a pool table downstairs in the boys' quarters. The coaches stayed upstairs.

By the fourth day, Martin knew the upperclassmen were coming for him. They had already gone after the other three freshmen; every evening, he had seen the brandishing of a pool cue and he had heard the screaming. He knew he was next; that's when he called his mother. And yet he didn't know how to ask for help without embarrassing himself and violating an unwritten code of silence. He just couldn't get the words out.

Soon after the phone call with his mother, three of Martin's teammates assaulted him. Even after the attack — which ultimately landed him in the hospital with a months-long recovery ahead of him — Martin did not immediately tell the truth about what had been done to him. He told his coach that he and his attackers had been “wrestling” and he insisted he was fine — until he peed blood, then collapsed and had to go to the emergency room. It was only because of his extreme injury that the truth came to light.

If we want to raise boys differently, we must start believing that they are equally capable of feeling pain and doing violence.

Later, during a sworn deposition, a lawyer asked Martin if the attack had to do with sexual orientation. Was the older boy gay? No, Martin said. It wasn't that at all. “I feel like he tried to make me — belittle me,” he said. “Tried to make me feel like less than a man, less than him.” (I spoke to Martin's lawyer but didn't speak to Martin. This account is based on court records, media accounts and video testimony.)

The freshman intuitively understood and endorsed the argument that scholars make in academic circles: This kind of sexual assault has nothing to do with sex. It's about power. It's about older boys establishing their place at the top, putting younger players in their place.

This particular way of flexing power depends on the cluelessness or tacit acceptance of the adults who are paid to keep boys safe. It also depends on the silence of victims, who — like most teenagers — want desperately to belong, which means bearing pain, handling it and definitely not snitching. But it's dangerous and unfair to expect boys to bear the responsibility for protecting themselves, Monica Beck, one of the attorneys who represented Martin in a lawsuit against the school system, told me. Boys, like girls, deserve the protection and help of their coaches, their teachers, their parents and their principals.

After Martin collapsed and underwent surgery, he spent six days in the hospital and nine months recovering, including relearning how to walk. One of the attackers was convicted of aggravated rape, the other two of aggravated assault.

Even with these horrifying facts, not everyone agreed that what happened to Martin should actually be considered sexual violence. The police officer who investigated the crime filed charges of aggravated rape, a crime that in Tennessee does not require sexual motivation. But he suggested in state court that what happened was not in fact a sexual assault. It was instead, he said, “something stupid that kids do” that “just happened” to meet the definition of aggravated rape.

Later, Martin sued the school district for failing to protect his civil rights. As the trial approached, lawyers representing the school board asked the judge to prohibit Martin's legal team from using certain terms in front of a jury: rape, aggravated rape, sexual battery, sexual assault.

The judge never had to decide, because the school district's insurance carrier settled with Martin for \$750,000, avoiding a trial. But it's notable that this was even a potential issue of debate. Imagine that a girl was attacked as Martin was. Would anyone doubt that it qualified as a sexual assault?

Sports is a refuge for so many children and an engine for so much good. Kids can learn to communicate and depend on each other. They can learn to push and surpass their own athletic limits. They can learn to win, and to lose, with humility and grace. Kids who play organized sports tend to do better in school than kids who don't, have stronger social skills and higher self-esteem, and are healthier physically and mentally, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

But as anyone who has spent much time on the sidelines of a youth soccer or basketball or football game can tell you, sports can also be destructive. Coaches and parents can be verbally abusive, teaching kids that winning is more important than integrity and that disrespect is part of the game. Kids can learn to prize the use of force and violence.

It's this darker side of sports that turns it into a breeding ground for hazing, initiation rituals that older players use to belittle and humiliate junior teammates. For boys who find themselves on teams with such a poisonous culture, sports are not a refuge. They are a nightmare.

Over the past generation, hazing pranks that once seemed innocuous — think dressing up in silly costumes or singing an embarrassing song in public — have evolved, becoming increasingly dangerous and sexual, according to social scientists who study hazing and consultants to high school athletic teams. Sexualized hazing, some argue, is an expression of a narrow version of masculinity that is celebrated in sports — a version of masculinity that is not just about strength but about dominating at all costs, about hiding pain and enduring weakness, and about degrading anyone or anything that seems feminine or gay. Even as a growing number of alternative niches gives boys places to thrive as proud geeks and artists and gender nonconformists, many sports have remained staunchly macho in this way.

We don't have comprehensive data on how common it is for boys to sexually assault other boys in the context of athletics. In 2000, researchers from Alfred University, a small private school in western New York, conducted the first national survey of high school hazing. They wanted to ask about sexualized hazing, but they were stymied. In those early days of the Internet, they had to send their survey out to students in the mail, and they got access to a database of student addresses only on the condition that they not ask any questions having to do with sex or sexuality. (In general, researchers have trouble getting permission to ask children under 18 questions about anything related to sex, sexual violence or abuse — which is understandable, but which also hobbles our understanding of kids' experiences.)

Norm Pollard, one of the lead researchers on the Alfred University survey, found students' replies to one open-ended question shocking. "They talked about being sexually assaulted at away matches, in the back of the bus and in locker rooms," Pollard said. "It was devastating to read those reports from kids that were just trying to be part of a team or a club."

Psychologist Susan Lipkins has studied hazing since 2003, when she traveled to a small town near her home in New York to interview the parents and coach of high school football players who had been sexually abused by teammates at a preseason training camp. None of the victims reported the abuse to a coach, a parent or any other adult. It came to light only because one of the boys sought medical help — and the cover story he told doctors to explain his injuries didn't make sense.

She and other experts said they have seen noticeably more media reports and court filings alleging ritualized sexual violence among high school boys, leading them to believe that it is becoming more common and more severe. Boys tell each other and themselves that they are taking part in a tradition: This is what it takes to be part of the team, this is what it takes to belong. First you are assaulted; then you become a bystander, watching as others are brutalized; finally, you get your turn at the top, your turn to attack.

Boys who report being sexually assaulted face the humiliation of having to describe how they were violated out loud, to another person, and then they face what Lipkins calls a “second hazing” — a blowback of harassment and bullying not unlike that heaped on female victims of rape. Lipkins noted that she has seen parents and students band together to protect their team, their coach, even local real estate values against allegations of sexualized hazing. “Communities support the perpetrators and say, *You're a wimp, why did you report it,*” she said.

As a result of all that pressure, she said, it's common for boys to remain silent even after being assaulted. Not only do boys not want to tattle on their teammates, but they often don't even recognize that they're victims of an unacceptable violation and of a crime. No one has told them. “Hazing education is in the Dark Ages,” Lipkins said.

| She believes that young people and adults, including parents, coaches and administrators, need much more training to recognize this kind of behavior as an unacceptable form of harm rather than a tradition to be upheld. And Lipkins believes it won't end until groups of players stand up together to stop it, either as active bystanders who protect victims or as victims who together find the courage to speak out.

Of course, when they speak out, they need grown-ups to hear them and protect them. Coaches must understand that building a healthy team culture and guarding players' safety are crucial parts of their job. And we parents must tell our boys the same thing we tell our girls — that their bodies are their own, that no one should touch them without their consent, that we will not tolerate violation of their physical autonomy.

Boys who are raped or sexually assaulted face a particular kind of disbelief. They may not be accused, as girls often are, of reinterpreting a consensual sexual encounter as nonconsensual. They're perhaps less likely to be accused of straight-up lying, or of being crazy. Instead, they're accused of taking things too seriously. Sexual assault? No! It was just messing around. Just a joke. Just boys being boys. Just hazing.

The language we use to describe what happens to boys helps feed the problem, argues Adele Kimmel, who has become one of the leading lawyers for male and female victims of sexual assault. “Terminology matters,” Kimmel, a wiry woman with jet-black hair, told me on a rainy day in downtown Washington at the sleek offices of the nonprofit firm Public Justice, where she is a

senior attorney. “Some of these boys don’t even recognize that they’ve been sexually assaulted because it’s been normalized by the adults. They call it these euphemistic terms — they call it horseplay, roughhousing, poking, hazing. They don’t call it sexual assault. They don’t call it rape.” Kimmel represented an Oklahoma middle school boy who was in music class when one of his football teammates held him down and assaulted him. The principal called it horseplay but acknowledged in an interview with a state investigator that if the same thing had happened to a girl, he would have considered it sexual assault. The boy was branded as a tattletale for reporting what had happened to him and became the target of fierce bullying at school. His father asked for help. “What do you want me to do, hold his hand?” the principal said, according to the lawsuit the family later filed.

When we convey to boys that unwanted touch is a serious issue of sexual assault only when it affects girls and not when it affects boys, we are sending a message that only girls’ bodies are worthy of protection. That message leaves our sons vulnerable to abuse, and it presents them with a knotty question: Why should boys treat other people’s bodies with dignity and respect if their own bodies are not also treated with dignity and respect?

When we convey to boys that unwanted touch is a serious issue of sexual assault only when it affects girls and not when it affects boys, we are sending a message that only girls’ bodies are worthy of protection.

Violence prevention programs often focus on debunking rape myths about female victims. No, wearing a short skirt is not the same thing as consenting to sex. But they less often delve into male victims — particularly those men who are violated by women. The idea that a man would have to be forced or coerced into sex with a woman runs counter to our cultural scripts about how sex works. But that’s just another misleading stereotype, and one that makes it hard for boys and men to recognize and deal with their own experiences. By now, for example, stories about college campus rape have firmly established that some men assault women who are too drunk to consent. There’s no counternarrative about men being raped when they have had too much to drink — usually, that’s just called sex. But whether they consider it assault, men on campus can and do have unwanted sex. One student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology told me for a 2015 Washington Post series on sexual assault how uncomfortable he felt when he was pursued by a woman he wasn’t interested in. He found himself unable to say no to her persistent advances, even though he knew he didn’t want to have sex with her. “You don’t want to be rude,” he said. “You don’t want to be weird.”

College fraternities have a reputation for tolerating and even encouraging sexual violence against women, and there is some evidence that fraternity brothers are at greater risk than other college men of committing assault. But there is also other, perhaps less widely known evidence that fraternity members are at greater risk than other students of being assaulted themselves. In a study of fraternity men at one Midwestern college, more than a quarter — 27 percent — said that someone had had sex with them without their consent, either through the use of force or by taking advantage of them when they were drunk.

But many people do not define a man pushed into nonconsensual sex as a person who has been sexually assaulted. A 2018 survey of 1,200 adults found that 1 in 3 would not quite believe a man

who said he was raped by a woman, and 1 in 4 believed men enjoy being raped by a woman. There's a belief that men cannot be raped because women aren't strong enough to physically force them, and a conviction that straight men want sex so much and so consistently that they just aren't that bothered by a woman who refuses to listen when he says no. These ideas are embedded in our institutions, from media to medicine to law to scholarship.

It wasn't until 2012 that the FBI recognized that men could be raped. Until then, the bureau defined rape as "the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will." Now it uses gender-neutral terms; rape is defined as "the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim."

Scholars studying sexual violence have often asked men only about their own sexual aggression and women only about being violated, an approach that fails to acknowledge — much less measure — the existence of male victims, female perpetrators or same-sex assault. When researchers *have* asked about sexual violence in gender-neutral terms, they have made startling discoveries. One survey of 300 college men found that half had experienced some type of sexual victimization, and an astonishing 17 percent — nearly 1 in 5 — had been raped, meaning they had unwanted sex because they were threatened, physically forced or taken advantage of while too intoxicated to consent.

Lara Stemple, an assistant dean at UCLA School of Law, is a feminist who has focused some of her research on highlighting the large number of men who have experienced sexual violence and the institutional biases that have obscured their experiences. She told me that her efforts to bring attention to male victims — and to the surprisingly high rates of female perpetration of such violence — have at times triggered false accusations that she is aligned with men's rights activists, who are known for anti-feminist and misogynistic language and ideology.

But as Stemple argues, acknowledging the invisibility of men's suffering does not mean dismissing or doubting violence against women. It is not one or the other. Both problems are tangled up in some of the same deeply ingrained notions about what it means — or what we think it means — to be a man.

The #MeToo movement has been built out of stories, one after the other, a flood that helped us see how men in positions of power abuse women and then keep their violence secret. In those stories, the world saw evidence of a sprawling problem in urgent need of solutions. Women found solidarity in acknowledging what had happened to them and in declaring that it was not tolerable and was not their fault.

Now boys need to hear more of these stories from men. Media coverage of high-profile cases of sexual violence against men and boys has helped open Americans' eyes to the fact that the sexual victimization of boys is not just possible but deeply scarring, psychologist Richard Gartner, who specializes in treating male victims, told me. When Gartner began speaking publicly about male victims in the 1990s, he was often greeted with blank stares and disbelief.

But then came revelations about widespread abuse by Catholic priests, by Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, by Boy Scout troop leaders. Those stories forced people to begin to recognize the vulnerability of young boys. When actor and former NFL player Terry Crews came forward to say he had been groped by a male Hollywood executive, it forced people to consider the vulnerability even of strong adult men. And it made room for more boys and men to come to terms with their own experiences as victims of abuse, Gartner says: “Every time that happens, some boy somewhere says, well, if he can come forward, maybe I should be talking to someone.”

Perhaps it is starting to happen more often. Over the past few years, the women who came forward in droves to speak out about sexual violence were joined by men who said they had been abused, including allegedly by powerful, high-profile men such as actor Kevin Spacey and film director Bryan Singer. In one remarkable reckoning, more than 300 former Ohio State University students said they had been sexually abused by an Ohio State doctor, Richard Strauss, and sued the university for failing to protect them.

In 2019, an independent investigation commissioned by the university found that Ohio State officials knew of complaints about Strauss as early as 1979 but allowed him to continue practicing until he retired with honors two decades later. Strauss committed nearly 1,500 acts of sexual abuse, including 47 acts of rape, the university told federal authorities in 2019. The stories Ohio State graduates tell about Strauss bear remarkable similarity to the stories that hundreds of women told about the abuse they suffered at the hands of Larry Nassar, the former Michigan State University physician and former USA Gymnastics national team doctor. If the collective power of Nassar’s victims forced the nation to confront the ways in which institutions ignore girls and young women who report sexual assault, then the graduates of Ohio State may help force us to see how we have dismissed boys and young men.

For now, though, many men still see reasons to keep their stories to themselves. Gartner has written extensively about the shame, trauma and confusion that his patients struggle with as they try to make sense of how they were victimized. Many fear that admitting violation will be seen as evidence of personal weakness. They fear they won’t be believed. And they fear they were somehow complicit.

Boys who report assault or abuse need to hear from their parents and the people close to them that they are unconditionally loved. “The most important thing to say is, ‘I believe you, and it wasn’t your fault ... and we still love *you*,’ ” Gartner says. And parents who want to prevent their boys from being abused, he explains, should be telling their sons all the same things they tell their daughters about their right to control access to their bodies.

When we fail to recognize and address violence against boys, not only are we failing to protect boys, but we also may be stoking violence against women. These problems are to some extent intertwined: While most do not go on to lives of violence, criminality or delinquency, victimized children are at greater risk of doing harm to others.

If you had asked me, before I started this research, whether I believed that boys and men could be victims of sexual assault, I would have said *of course*. If you had asked me whether I bought into

the notion that boys and men always want sex, I might have rolled my eyes: *Um, no*. But listening to the stories of male victims taught me that I didn't completely believe what I thought I believed. I noticed my own knee-jerk resistance to the reality that unwanted sexual contact can traumatize boys just as it does girls — and to the reality that it can *matter* just as much to them. Deep down, somewhere under my skin, I was holding on to some seriously wrongheaded assumptions — ideas so ingrained I did not even notice them, ideas that rendered boys as something less than human.

Clarification: This has been updated to more accurately reflect the nature of Lara Stemple's work. Emma Brown is an investigative reporter for The Washington Post. This article is adapted from her new book, "To Raise a Boy," published by One Signal Publishers/Atria Books.