

**Because We're Dads:
Reaching and Mobilizing Father's to
Promote Gender Equality**

Back to School Tool Kit

Written by Rus Ervin Funk

School and schooling is not only a place where children learn academically and educationally, it is also one of (if not THE) most powerful places where children learn socially – social and gender roles, social norms, etc. Children learn at school (very differently than they do at home) what it means to be a friend, how to relate to people who may be different than them and profound lessons about what it means to be a boy or a girl. They also experience significant pressures about how to express their gender, and how to interact with others based on their gender.

The transitions of school are particularly powerful and meaningful opportunities for young people. Transitioning from elementary school to middle school/junior high; from middle school/junior high to high school, and from high school to college are significant transitions, particularly in regards to the shifts they experience socially. Children in these transition periods often experience a great deal of stress which they may or may not be aware of, and need support through.

Dads have an active role in supporting their children in school and schooling. Beyond supporting them with reading, writing and arithmetic, dads can also have a powerful impact on what children are learning socially. As well as, how their children integrate these lessons with the values and norms that families establish at home. But dads tend to be poorly supported to feel any confidence or comfort in supporting their children in these ways. Societal norms have long held that it is the role and responsibility of moms to attend to, address and teach children anything and everything related to relationships. Not only does this tend to position these roles as a burden but excluding dads from this aspect of parenting denies dads a profound aspect of parenting. Perhaps, more importantly, this also robs children the opportunity to have an equitable view of relationships used in forming the way they will develop and experience relationships in their own lives.

To the degree that dads are engaged in these conversations and dynamics, they may tend to over-rely on modeling as a primary means to share their values about treating others with respect. While modeling is a critically important method for sharing values, it is not the only one, and in many ways is not the most effective.

Admittedly, these are uncomfortable and challenging conversations for all of us to have with our children. We have our own histories that may be triggered and often struggle with the idea of our children flirting and dating and coming of age around their sexuality. Many of us also feel some embarrassment and discomfort on the topics of flirting, dating and sex. But men, by and large, have been given even less support and resources to use to engage in these conversations with our children. Other than “he better treat you with respect” to our daughters and “don’t get her pregnant” to our sons, the scripts most men have for these conversations is limited.

The Because We’re Dads Back to School Toolkit is designed to help dads develop the confidence, capacity and comfort they need to engage in challenging yet critical conversations with their children. It focuses on how dads can support their children to manage transitions with an eye toward encouraging and promoting gender equality.

This toolkit also addresses current events, including the COVID 19 pandemic and the ongoing nation-wide uprising around systemic racism, police brutality, racial inequity and injustice. Resources reflect the impact these dynamics have on youth in (and out of) school, and the roles that fathers can play to discuss these issues with their children.

This resource is an evolving document. NYSCADV will be providing additional tools, resources and opportunities as we learn more from our collective work and efforts to engage and mobilize dads.

About NYSCADV and the Because We're Dad's Initiative

The New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NYSCADV) is the coalition of agencies, service providers, and individuals in New York working to address, respond to and prevent domestic violence. NYSCADV works to create and support the social change necessary to prevent and confront all forms of domestic violence. As a statewide membership organization, we achieve our mission through activism, training, prevention, technical assistance, legislative advocacy, and leadership development. We promote best practices and broad-based collaboration integrating anti-oppression principles in all our work.

NYSCADV recognizes the impact fathers and father figures have on promoting women's rights, gender equality, and healthy relationships. Fathers play a significant role in the lives of their children and have the opportunity to influence attitudes and behaviors that support healthy and equitable relationships premised on respect, consent and nonviolence. In light of this recognition and with respect to supporting fathers in New York to take a more prominent role in efforts to respond to and prevent domestic violence and promote gender equality, NYSCADV launched the "Because We're Dads" initiative. This initiative will focus on identifying and developing tools, resources, other materials to develop the capacity and confidence of local domestic violence agencies to engage and mobilize dads; and for dads to be more actively engaged in the work to make New York a safer, more respectful and equitable state.

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Preparing Sons and Daughters from a Gender Equitable Framework

Gender equality is different than women's equality. While we agree that women's equality is a critical goal that we all need to be working towards, gender equality refers to the efforts to ensure that all human beings have equitable access to human rights across the gender spectrum. A gender equitable framework has at its core ways that people of all genders benefit from gender equity, and the roles and responsibilities of people of all genders have to achieve and work towards gender equality.

A gender equitable framework recognizes that we're all constrained by gender norms, gender roles and traditional gender expectations, but also that men and boys experience some great forms of privilege.

The focus of this toolkit is on flirting and dating as the entire point is to engage with dads, and to support dads in supporting their children. In part, this is because it is through flirting and dating that some of these gender inequalities, gender conditioning and the harms of constraining gender roles can be viewed. Flirting and dating is also an area in which most dads can be most easily engaged. Finally, as the state-wide Coalition Against Domestic Violence, this focus aligns with our other work to prevent teen dating violence.

Flirting and Dating – Laying some Expectations

Flirting and dating patterns begin early. Flirting and dating and the lessons about how to flirt and date are ever-present (in children's literature, in media for children, in addition to what's emerging within children developmentally sometime in late elementary school age). While talking about flirting and dating with younger children (children under 11 – 13) is not appropriate, talking with younger kids about some basic premises that can also apply to flirting and dating is critically important. Talking with kids about consent, for example, can (and should) start very early and include not only how they set boundaries and limits for the ways that others treat them, but also how they listen and pay attention to the boundaries that are being set (even if those are nonverbal).

Flirting has a role, often a critical role, in relationship building. As children start entering into the space of flirting and dating, it's important to frame for and with them, what all this is. Dating relationships, after all, are first and foremost *relationships*. They are a unique kind of relationship (with a variety of added complexities), but they are a relationship. Developmentally, by the time children start thinking about flirting and dating, they have already had a variety of experiences with having relationships. Placing dating relationships in the context of other relationships helps children to normalize these new kinds of relationships.

Flirting is a strategy (and a fun one) to begin a new relationship.

Setting Boundaries

Setting, enforcing and respecting boundaries is one of the core facets of any flirting or dating (or really *any* kind of relationship). Children of all genders need and deserve to learn how to set clear boundaries around who touches them and how; as well as how to respect and honor the boundaries that are set by their peers and friends. Dads can have a particularly powerful role in supporting children, before they even begin to think about flirting and dating, to have these boundaries.

- Encourage your children to notice when they're feeling any level of discomfort or ambivalence by how someone touches them and to say something to someone.
- Create a habit of asking your child(ren) if its okay to give them a hug or a kiss, rather than just hugging them or kissing them.
- Notice your child's behavior when they pull away or resist a hug or kiss from someone else, and intervene to support both their boundary setting, but also to help them to find the words to say "No, I don't want a hug right now."

Children also need and deserve to learn how to listen for, pay attention to and respect someone else's boundaries. When your child(ren) are playing with you or someone else, and the someone else says "no" or "stop", encourage your child to stop what they're doing even if the other person is laughing or seems to be going along in the midst of their "no" or "stop. Teach your child to check in with the other person when they are getting confusing or conflicting messages. Teach your child(ren) to assume that they *don't* have consent even with their friends, brothers or sisters and other family¹.

This is particularly important for boys, as there are so many other messages they're receiving, from a wide array of contexts, teaching them that they get to disregard boundaries, or that a part of their "responsibility" in dating is to challenge someone else's boundaries.

Back to School in Context: the COVID Pandemic and Uprising to Address Systemic Racism

The pandemic has many parents wondering and worrying about going back to school in the fall of 2020. The pandemic and its aggressiveness is a significant worry and concern for children, youth and parents alike. While all parents feel some responsibility (often with some urgency) to relieve their child(ren) from causes of worry, concern and fear; it is sometimes better to allow children to feel their fear and learn that it's okay anyway. Dads often feel this need to protect their children in magnified ways, and much of

¹ NOTE: The *Our Whole Lives* Comprehensive Sexuality Education Curricula (developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association and United Church of Christ) is an excellent resource for teaching your children these kinds of lessons. Developmentally appropriate, this highly evidence-based curricula has content for children from 5 through college. For more information, go [here](#).

masculinity training enforces the idea and ideal of men's responsibility to "battle" the fears and relieve the worries and concerns of our loved ones. *And* to be stoic and unemotional in the process.

Compounding the worry and concerns generated by the pandemic is the racial uprising and the whole array of fears, pain and anger that is represented by what's going on. For many black and brown parents, the recent uprisings only magnifies fears they have as they experience their children transitioning to the next level of schooling. Many white parents, it appears, are experiencing a new level of awareness, sensitivity and compassion to what black and brown families face; often combined with their own feelings of anger, grief and perhaps some guilt or shame.

All parents, it seems safe to state, are feeling a whole lot just now.

This is an opportune moment for dads to model that they feel the fear, worry, grief, anger and concern; and that sometimes dads can't protect the people they love. At times the best that a dad can do is be okay with feeling afraid, worried and concerned alongside their child(ren) and partners; and be okay (alright, okay-ish) with our child(ren) expressing these feelings.

Both boys and girls (for different reasons) benefit from seeing their fathers express emotions and feelings such as fear, anxiety, grief, worry – without immediately moving into action in order to resolve these feelings. Dads can practice having and expressing these feelings, demonstrating what it is like for men to do so, and create space for your children to also have and express these feelings. It's okay to not be (or feel) okay. For your sons, this becomes an important model of being a man who has a full complement of feelings and emotions. For your daughters, doing so models a different version of strength, and that sometimes being a man (like being human) is not about being "strong", sometimes we all need to be "weak" and women can sometimes be the strength.

For many parents, and kids, the pandemic has driven an increasing amount of their social interactions to virtual platforms. All of us are spending much more time in front of screens than we ever have, and this includes our social and other interactions. School, Church/Synagogue/Mosque, parties, friends hangouts, parties...have all largely moved to virtual platforms. Even with the lack of clarity coming into the 2020-2021 school year, one thing that does seem clear is that this trend towards increasing virtual social interaction will be a part of at least the foreseeable future.

Most people have different social norms, rules and expectations for interacting in and communicating virtually than they do face-to-face. This includes flirting and dating. As more of our social interacting has moved (and continues) to virtual spaces, there is an

opportunity for dads² to engage in direct and meaningful conversations about how to communicate virtually using the same norms of expectations (being respectful, equitable, kind, assertive) as exists in other settings. Communicating and interacting is different in virtual spaces than it is in physical spaces; *and* we can still communicate and interact in ways that are based on notions of respect, kindness and assertiveness; and which build on gender equity and justice.

Transitioning

The transition points are important, often stressful, and utterly confusing for children and their parents. The transitions between elementary school to middle school/junior high, to high school and to college all are periods where questions arise in children about who they are and how they express themselves. A part of this includes, inherently, their understanding and expression of their gender identity. Some of this questioning and exploration also includes how they feel and express their attraction for others – how they flirt and date.

Each transition involves entering a new social environment, with different kinds of pressures (social, academic, performance, etc.), social and gender norms. With all of these transitions, your child(ren) need to first learn what the new social and gender norms are, before they can figure out how to adapt to them. You can help your child(ren) through these transitions by helping them to identify these social and gender norms are and how they can either adapt to them or resist them.

As a part of the preparation for and during these transitions, addressing gender, gender equality and gender respect are crucial. As a dad, you have a particular opportunity to model and directly communicate with your children how to be comfortable within their own skin and how *they* express their gender identity; as well as how they interact with others in ways that are (gender) respectful and encourage gender equity.

In addition, the flirting and dating norms, practices and rules change dramatically between these transitions.

Flirting and dating in middle school/junior high, high school and college is drastically different than the flirting and dating practices in elementary, middle/junior high and high school. Parents have a role and a responsibility to prepare children in navigating these transitions in ways that empower children to continue to be assertive, respectful, respected, and kind.

Transition to Middle School/Junior High

² **NOTE:** This is not to suggest that moms don't also have this opportunity and responsibility, but as a toolkit focusing on fathers, we're focusing on fathers here.

The middle school/junior high years are universally awkward and confusing. As one middle school/junior high principal stated, “the Middle school/junior high years are awful. I only want teachers and staff who really want to be here and really want to work and support these kids. If you aren’t here for that, get out.” He captured the challenge and struggle that are the middle school/junior high years. There are few three-year periods in anyone’s life that is as tumultuous as this period. Children enter a growth-spurt that is matched only by the first three years in terms of the depth and breadth of the development that occurs during this period. They are seeking more independence, which scares them; they are being flooded with hormones which not only has its own direct impact, but which also has emotional and social implications; they are experiencing physical changes that they don’t know how to understand or what to do with; and the ways that they interact with others (both other kids and with adults) are changing.

This is also a period where, for most children, gender expectations and gender norms are most severely defined and policed. But it is also a time when children (biologically and socially) are supposed to be stretching and experimenting in how they express who they are and how they express their gender identities. This, clearly, creates a wildly confusing and paradoxical dynamic. As one child development expert puts it, “...the collision between the onset of adolescent resistance in students this age with the more stringent demands of middle school/junior high for self-management and social adjustment. ‘The middle school/junior high crunch’ is when there is increasing pressure on the student to live within a more complicated and demanding educational system, but early adolescent determination to act more independently makes this adjustment harder to do.”

As a dad, there are crucial ways that you can support your children through this transition. It begins before they get to middle school/junior high. They’re likely feeling a lot of hope, excitement, mixed with equal amounts of anxiety, dread and fear. Let them know that all that they’re feeling is both okay and normal. Share some of your own experiences about going into middle school/junior high as a way to both normalize their feelings and demystify the experience; while acknowledging that they are entering middle school/junior high in a world that is vastly different than it was when you did. *Listen!* As you talk with your children about their going to middle school/junior high, be sure you’re talking less than they are. When you find yourself doing most (or all) of the talking, take note, be quiet and turn the conversation back to them.

The “transition” often starts in mid-5th grade – when children are being encouraged to think about 6th grade more concretely – with school visits, the planning that occurs in school, and the talk amongst their friends and peers about “what it’s going to be like.” So as a dad, start talking with your kids about what they’re hearing, thinking and feeling. One dad, for example, heard his son (who was just entering 5th grade) randomly say (while on a bike-ride) “middle school is a bullying pit.” This opened a door for not just one conversation, but many others. Using this point of entry (and the fact that they’re riding bikes) provided a powerful opportunity to explore what he meant by “bullying,” and space

to explore the difference between bullying and harassment. As well as explore what fears he may have (and share what fears dad had), and outline his potential role as a preventionists in this “bullying pit.”

Dads, share your experience of transitioning to middle school/junior high with your kids, particularly looking at the pressures you felt to “fit in” and how those pressures manifested. Use this story-sharing as a way to open up the conversation, not just share your story. As you share your experience, intersperse it with “I wonder” type statements:

- I wonder how your friend would handle this kind of situation
- I wonder how something like that might happen today
- I wonder how it felt (from all sides of the situation)
- I wonder how you think you might respond if this were to happen to you

“I wonder” is a great way to involve your child(ren) in the conversation in ways that don’t have them feel “on the spot.” Your kids will want to “wonder” alongside you and will likely want to figure this out.

Boys and girls experience pressures in different ways in middle school/junior high. While there are some things that you can do with your child(ren) regardless of their gender or gender identity, there are also ways that you can support your kid(s) in this transition that are specific to their gender/gender identity.

A note to watch out for: Children entering middle school/junior high are entering puberty. This developmental transition often means some shifts in their comfort in receiving and being affectionate with their dads. Sometimes, dads also have their own discomfort about being affectionate, particularly with their daughters. As a dad, **continuing to be expressively affectionate is crucial!** During these years, pay careful attention and follow the clues set by your kids – which admittedly will likely be confused/confusing during this time (they may want affection one day, not the next, and want it again the day after). Not only do they need and deserve this from you as a parent, but this also models, in real time, what it looks like for men to be expressively affectionate while also actively seeking and securing consent.

Here are some general suggestions for being expressively affectionate:

- Continue to express your affection for them
- Help them to create a mixed-gender support network
- Watch and critique (*with* them) the media their consuming and the ways gender and gender roles are presented.
- Talk with them about flirting with respect – be concrete about how respect is (or should be) a basic foundation of any kind of flirting
- Help to clarify the difference between flirting and harassment.

How Dads Can Support Their Sons

- Share your experience of Middle School
- Note and challenge the pressures your son is experiencing about how to be “masculine”
- Help him develop and express his own sense of self
- Encourage him to be expressive with his friends
- Talk and practice consent (see

How Dads Can Support Their Daughters

- Note & encourage her strengths
- Support her to be her own self and how and the ways she can express herself
- Help her to develop resistance to social pressures to be “feminine”
- Reinforce her assertiveness
- Support her to explore how she wants to be flirted with

Transition to High School

The transition to high school is as confusing, anxiety-producing and exciting as the transition to middle school/junior high. As with all the transitions, your child(ren) need to first learn what these social norms are before they can figure out how to adapt to them. Fortunately, most of you and your child(ren) have already experienced the process of transitioning to middle school/junior high and so you can reflect on these experiences and the lessons learned as you transition to high school. Unfortunately, the pressures are different, come from more forces, and in many ways are more powerful than they were in middle school/junior high. In addition, your child(ren) are older now and have developed their own sense of Self and their own ways to maneuver through and with these pressures – sometimes in ways that you’re aware of and sometimes in ways that you’re not (remember, a part of the developmental process of adolescents is them separating more and more from you as their parents and developing their own sense of who they are – a process called “individuation.”)

Since you were able to lay a solid foundation through their experiences in middle school/junior high, you have a solid place to work from as you transition to high school.

Through middle school/junior high, they’ve had some experience of noticing the social norms and pressures to conform. They have also had experience in deciding how to respond to these pressures, and both adapting to and resisting the norms; including pressures and norms related to flirting and dating. By now, your child(ren) have no doubt had both positive and negative experiences of flirting and being flirted with, and in dating. You can reflect on these experiences as you support your child(ren) to transition to this new environment and engage in flirting there.

Flirting and dating in high school is very different than flirting and dating in middle school/junior high. High school age kids tend to have a lot more and a lot different experiences with flirting and dating than do middle school/junior high age children, and they are at a different developmental stages. It is still common practice (and as such, a social norm) for upper grade high school heterosexual boys to be “on the look-out” for incoming female students. I’m sure we’ve all heard of stories (and perhaps experienced them firsthand) of contests amongst groups of upper grade male students as to who can date or “score” first with the “hottest” incoming girl. This dynamic underscores the need for parents, and the opportunity for dads, to have conversations with your child(ren) about how to maneuver through this dynamic. Your daughter(s) need to understand the kinds of pressures they are likely to experience and have some ideas and confidence in ways to resist those pressures.

Your son(s) are going to likely face different kinds of pressures that are no less severe. There is often a different kind of social pressure and social/gender norms for boys about how to express their masculinity, particular in regards to flirting and dating: both to be

differently assertive and how to be assertive in how they flirt; more pressure to have a girlfriend and the ways that “having a girlfriend” is tied to their masculinity (there seems to be less intense pressure for first year high school boys who date boys to “have a boyfriend” but first year boys who date boys face different kinds of pressures and norms).

As a dad, you can have an impact on helping your child(ren) (of all genders) to notice, prepare for, and resist these social norms and pressures. As they prepare for attending high school, have open conversations with them about your experience of high school and the pressures you faced. Be willing to share some of the struggles you had and ways that you went along with the social pressures even when you didn’t like what it was you were doing. As with transitioning to middle school/junior high, use these stories to open up a conversation with your child(ren).

Follow up these stories, for example, with “I wonder”:

- I wonder how you think you would have handled this differently/better than I did;
- I wonder how you’re experiencing pressure to “show up” as a girl/boy in middle school/junior high...
- ...And what you’ve heard about the pressures that exist in high school;
- I wonder what you expect from yourself as you go into high school;
- I wonder what kinds of supports you’ll be looking for in order to resist the social pressures you’re likely going to experience;
- I wonder how you can be of support to others who want to resist these social pressures;
- I wonder how the pandemic, and the increasing level of your work being done virtually, will impact on the kinds of pressure you are going to feel, and how this pressure will be manifest.

At this stage of development, your kids are relying as much (if not more) on their peers and friends. You have provided a foundation for your children, and they are continuing their “individuation” from you. Consider connecting with the dads of your kid(s) friends circle to provide some common language and support. In addition, many adolescent children listen differently to their friends’ parents than they do their own. By connecting with the dads of your children’s friends about supporting all of your children in similar ways, then your kids are receiving similar supports and messages from multiple sources.

How Dads Can Support Their Sons

- Explore different expressions of masculinity.
- Support your son to find his own way to express his masculinity/humanity.
- Review and practice “flirting with respect” (see attached).
- Continue to be expressively affectionate.
- Support him on ways he can lead in his school to promote gender equality
- Help him recognize bystander behavior and how to step up and ally for justice.

How Dads Can Support Their Daughters

- Support her to find & express her own femininity/humanity.
- Practice assertiveness.
- Continue to be expressively affectionate
- Support her to define and express her consent.
- Support her to define and practice respect – both being *respectful* being *respected*.
- Help her to recognize bystander behavior and how to act as an ally.

Transition to College

This is an unprecedented year for families making the transition to college. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on most plans for college, and the lack of clarity from the federal government in regards to supports for colleges to prevent and respond to gender-based violence combine to make this transition truly daunting. Within this context, children are stepping into a time in which they will be (very quickly) much more independent and responsible than they have ever been. The pressures are immense!

To add to this mix, the transition from high school to college in regards to flirting, dating and sex, are perhaps the most exciting and scary for students, and the most terrifying for parents – with good reason. The first semester of college is often referred to as “the red zone” -- the high increase in dating and sexual violence during this period. The first few months of the fall semester (particularly for first year students) is when sexual assaults are notoriously high (Kimble et al, 2008). Dads of daughters undoubtedly fear this.

But dads of sons also have plenty to fear. The social pressures on colleges campuses related to gender norms including how men date, are very different than the pressures experienced in high school. AND, if sons are going off to college, they’ll be on their own to face those pressures. Some of these pressures include expectations on how male students engage in sex, how they flirt and how they treat women on campus more generally.

The summer before college is a great time for you, as a dad, along with your child(ren) to review the college campuses resources, services and response to sexual harassment, sexual assault and dating violence. Campuses are required (under “Title IX”) to have clear guidelines accessible to students and parents, about what they do to respond to and prevent “gender-based violence.” Reviewing this information alongside your child(ren) sets a clear precedent about the role of men in giving a damn about these issues; and how you will support your son and/or daughter.

You are undoubtedly having a lot of conversations with your child(ren) about this transition, what they can experience, and how they can handle this new level of responsibility and autonomy. Evidence has shown that parents who have open conversations with their transitioning children about the realities of binge drinking on campuses, and how they can manage the pressures to drink, reduces college students binge drinking. It seems likely that by having similar conversations with your child(ren) about the different ways flirting and dating happens on college, the different dangers and risks that exist on campuses, and the ways that can both reduce their risks of being victimized, or of victimizing someone else can also have an impact on reducing your child(ren)’s risk of being harmed or harming someone else.

How Dads Can Support Their Sons

- Double down on how to flirt with respect
- Research efforts on campus to mobilize men as allies
- Review the new kinds of social pressures that exist on college
- Expand their resistance strategies

How Dads Can Support Their Daughters

- Identify “Title IX” resources
- Review the new kinds of social pressures on campus
- Expand their resistance strategies
- Support them to enforce their boundaries of being respected

Flirting with Respect Recommendations for Men

- ✓ **Be Intentional:** Is the way your flirting respecting the person you're flirting with?
- ✓ **Pay Attention:** Flirt for the person's attention not for the reaction of the guys.
- ✓ **Flirt with the *Person*:** Focus on the human being, not her/his sex appeal or attractiveness.
- ✓ **Flirt as if your mother is watching:** Okay, not really, but you get the point.
- ✓ **Flirt like you'd want your sister flirted with.**
- ✓ **Notice!** How is s/he responding to your flirting? Does s/he like it? How do you know?
- ✓ **Talk *about* her/him, like you talk *to* her/him.**
- ✓ **Be Responsive:** Adjust your flirting based on her/his reactions.
- ✓ **Be Open.** your efforts at flirting may not work, accept it and let it go. You're not entitled to a response.

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