

How to Teach Teenage Boys to Actually Respect Women

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In July, Dutch ad agency and foundation SIRE launched a [campaign](#) that beseeched society to "let boys be boys again." The company is no stranger to provocative ad campaigns, but this time a nationwide uproar ensued: What did SIRE mean by asking children to behave like real boys? What about the stereotypes that boys are raised with, like the pressure to repress their emotions and their tears? What about the pressure they face to single-mindedly pursue sex—sometimes at the expense of their female peers and the girls around them?

[IMAGINE](#) (Inspiring Male Action on Gender Equality in Europe) takes on these difficult questions by talking to boys between 12 and 18 years old, with the aim of ending sexual violence against girls and women. In the Netherlands, instructors hold school workshops to teach boys to recognize and respect the sexual boundaries of others, as well as how to set their own boundaries. (Girls are also invited to participate in these workshops.)

Twenty-four-year-old IMAGINE instructor Gijs Hablous has been talking to teenage boys since January of this year. Broadly spoke to him about sex ed, consent, and the importance of reaching out to young men.

BROADLY: What was sex ed like at your own school, when you were younger?

Gijs Hablous: I can remember approximately two biology classes, I think, in my first year of high school. A regular biology teacher—not someone who specialized in sexuality—talked about preventing pregnancy and STDs. And of course we were taught how to put on a condom. But it was treated like a bit of a joke. Topics like sexuality and gender didn't come up.

Is that what made you think, *This can be done better?*

That didn't happen until later, when I realized I'm a white, well-educated cis man—which in turn makes me very privileged. I wanted to help out when it comes to gender and sexuality, but didn't know if I should get involved in debates about feminism. I didn't want to upset anyone. Then I heard about IMAGINE, and I thought it was great that they were looking for adult men as role models for younger boys—[men] who could educate them about preventing sexual violence and intimidation.

These are pretty big topics for 12- to 18-year-old boys. How do you go about having that conversation?

We focus on actual physical exercises and talk about them afterwards. For instance, there is a boundary exercise, in which we put two groups of boys opposite of each other. One group slowly advances towards the other, and the latter says "stop" when they think the former gets too close. Then that group still takes another step towards the others—they cross the boundary that was just created. This is how we teach them that you need to talk about [boundaries].

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How do these boys respond to that kind of exercise?

They start laughing sometimes. There was this one boy who [acted] tough and said that girls can do whatever they want to him. Then we actually talk about that: Is it truly possible to have no boundaries at all? I notice that respecting boundaries is a difficult theme: How do you know how far you're allowed to go? Many boys think it's not their fault when they go too far and the girl doesn't clearly say "no"—because how could they possibly have known?

So how do they learn to interact with girls, assuming they don't have any bad intentions?

We usually get to that conversation through examples the boys in the classroom come up with. One boy said that he liked this particular girl. He would notice her walking by a lot, so he whistled and called out to her every time. She never responded, so after a while he asked her why. She said that she was really annoyed by his behavior, while he, on his end, had no idea how else to talk to a girl. He didn't notice how she felt about it until they started talking about it.

I can imagine that there's some "tough" talk in these group settings that isn't very useful to you.

We always try to bring it back to a situation that applies to the boys themselves. One boy thought, for instance, that when a girl wears a short skirt, she's asking to be catcalled. Then

a female teacher asked: "How would you feel about men catcalling me, just because I go running in short shorts?" Or: "What would you think of this if someone treated your sister that way?" That made him understand that his reasoning didn't make sense.

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Why is the workshop mostly focused on boys?

Most perpetrators of sexual violence are men, and women are usually the victims—so that's the direction you have to go in. There's a lot to be gained by talking to men about their behavior. You can see that within male friendship groups and the amount of sexist jokes they make. It would be good if one of several men would dare to speak up about that when it happens.

Has that been your experience in male friendship groups?

Yes, especially in the past. I often felt uncomfortable when [people] made misogynistic jokes that were based on certain stereotypes. But I couldn't really get to the bottom of why I felt that way. Nowadays, I speak up when I hear sexist jokes about women, and I think other men should do the same thing. If you're aware of it but you're not doing anything against it, you're a part of the problem.

Do you notice that the boys in these classrooms feel like they have to live up to some stereotypical image of masculinity?

Yes. Up until now I've definitely seen that a few boys notice certain types of behavior—supposedly always being in the mood [for sex], acting tough—within themselves every time we do the workshop, because it's expected of them. Hissing and whistling [at girls] are seen as "normal" within certain male demographics, because they think it's cool. Words like "faggot" and "gay" are used in a negative way a lot. For instance, if you don't feel like having sex, you're "gay"—they don't realize these stereotypes bother them until you talk to them about it.

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Do you feel like they understand the purpose of the workshop?

Of course I'd love for all of them to be completely into feminism after the workshop, and devoid of those stereotypes forever. In reality, though, we usually only have a few hours. It's definitely special that the boys talk to each other afterwards about sexuality, sex, hitting on [girls], and relationships—things they usually aren't very open about. It would be great if this was a regular part of the curriculum, starting at a young age.

