

16 Hooking Up with Healthy Sexuality: The Lessons Boys Learn (and Don't Learn) About Sexuality, and Why a Sex-Positive Rape Prevention Paradigm Can Benefit Everyone Involved

BY BRAD PERRY

STEAL THE BEER, meet the girls, get them drunk, and try to get some—that was the plan. I was thirteen years old, and my friend Jon and I were sleeping over at our buddy Zach's house. What we heard that night made every cell of our newly pubescent bodies crackle with electricity. Zach's older brother informed us that he had recently experienced the most mysterious and most desired pinnacle of male teenage existence—ejaculation caused not by his own hands, but by a real live girl. He "got some."

Tellingly, the specifics of exactly how Zach's brother was able to achieve this milestone were far more interesting to us than hearing what "getting some" was actually like. We'd all learned about the wonders of masturbation by this time, so we thought we had a decent reference point for the physical rewards. The fact that girls could like sex hadn't even crossed our minds. We knew sex was supposed to involve some type of mutual appreciation for each other's genitals, but we didn't understand why—after all, it was us boys who were doing the "getting" of the "some" right? And growing up in white-bread, middle-class, suburban Virginia, we no doubt received plenty of messages in our social environment casting sex with girls (and *only* with girls) as a one-sided affair where the

boy makes the moves and calls the shots. We were intent on learning these moves. So most of what Zach's brother told us about his encounter—and all we really wanted to know—revolved around *how* the pre-ejaculatory events unfolded.

Zach's brother was a fifteen-year-old punk-rock skateboarder, and was totally badass as far as I was concerned, since I aspired to be a similar brand of aloof cool guy. Through this lens of awe, I listened to him recount key events over the previous few months. It seems that one afternoon Zach's brother stole a twelve-pack of beer from a neighbor's garage and invited his neighbor Cheryl over to drink it while his parents were out of town. At some point they started making out. Zach's brother told us he thought the beer had made her really "into it," so he started taking off her clothes. He then recounted a litany of sexual acts in which they engaged, culminating in that most cherished of naked heterosexual activities: actual penile/vaginal intercourse. This same scenario played itself out several more times over the weeks following the first encounter, usually with the aid of beer or pot.

We listened to Zach's brother with rapt stares and took copious mental notes. All three of us came to basically the same set of conclusions: 1) It is possible for girls to actually want to do "sexual stuff" with you; 2) Getting a girl to do sexual stuff with you usually requires some "loosening agents," such as alcohol or pot; 3) The guy usually has to make the first move.

I wanted so badly to be convinced that Zach's brother—along with innumerable commercials, TV shows, movies, pop songs, church sermons, and strong opinions from adults and peers—had given me the final clue I would need to reveal the secret of how to get some. I wanted to be comforted that this whole romance-with-girls thing wasn't as staggeringly mysterious as I had initially feared. A host of anxieties were stirring in my hormonal tween psyche around

this time. Adolescence was upon me, and with it a host of powerful new pressures and rules that made no sense—especially the stuff about gender and sexuality. My parents at least had the insight to have several "talks" with me, and they even sent me to "sex-ed camp" for a weekend, so I was certainly more knowledgeable about the basics than many of my peers. But none of that information could help me negotiate the demands of manhood and emerge as a well-adjusted man with a positive and organically formed view of sexuality. Back in 1988, like now, there were very few places in America where young people could receive the knowledge, skills, and opportunities to gradually develop their own unique feelings about gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships. Thus, we all looked—and continue to look—for oversimplified answers like those provided by men's magazines, church-based abstinence-only programs, and Zach's brother.

As it turned out, Zach's brother's "insights" were timely, because we had already planned to meet up with three girls from our class later that very night. We couldn't get any pot, so we'd have to use beer. Zach assured us he knew how to break into the neighbor's garage (a.k.a. beer lending library), and since it was on the way to the construction site where we were meeting the girls, everything seemed to be coming together. The only thing left to do was figure out which girl each of us was going to attempt to "seduce." I don't remember how, but I actually got my first pick: Janice. Once we were sure Zach's parents were asleep, we snuck out into the night. We stopped at the neighbor's house, and I kept lookout while Jon and Zach broke into the garage. A few minutes later they returned with beaming smiles and a cold case of Nasty-Brau.

We arrived at the construction site, and after sitting there for about fifteen minutes, we cracked open some beers. We started to think we might just be getting drunk by ourselves—though I didn't even know what getting drunk felt like, as this was the first time

I'd ever attempted to drink alcohol. Nevertheless, I resolved to act natural so no one would sense my rampant inexperience. When the girls finally showed, Jon, Zach, and I enacted the *pièce de résistance* of our plan. We'd each stowed unopened beers next to us, and when the girls walked up, we each nonchalantly (at least, *we thought* we were being nonchalant) called "our" girl's name and offered her a beer in order to get her next to us. When I said, "Hey, Janice, you want a beer?" she at least humored me and replied, "Sure," sitting down next to me, just as I had hoped.

After my first beer, I decided I really didn't want to drink much more because, like most cheap beer, it tasted like cat piss smells. Janice, however, seemed to not have this aversion to cat piss, and put away three beers in the time it took me to force down half of my second can. I think I might have been aware that I was supposed to feel like less of a man for being outchugged by a girl, but before I could castigate myself, a new masculine archetype popped into my head. He looked a lot like Zach's older brother—complete with a detached confidence and a vibe of unfathomable sexual prowess. Without even removing the cigarette from his imaginary lips, he breezed, *Hey, man, it's cool if she gets drunk quicker than you. After all, you already know you want to get some, but she needs the alcohol to realize that she wants to help you out with that.* It seemed like good advice at the time, so I put my arm around her waist to see what would happen. Amazingly, she didn't recoil. In fact, she actually seemed to relax and lean into me a bit. At this point, all of the three couples had started talking between themselves more than with the entire group. It was really dark, so I couldn't see what was going on with everyone else, but I naturally assumed that, given my inexperience, I was probably not as "far along."

In my anxious, overly literal, and self-centered thirteen-year-old mind, all I had to do was give the beer a few more minutes to work and then bust my move. In no time Janice would happily

come with me behind one of the parked bulldozers to engage in all sorts of naked pawing. I don't think I even wanted to have sexual intercourse. I just wanted to see and touch a naked girl, and experience a naked girl touching me (and my penis). When she opened her fourth beer, I busted said move, which first consisted of trying to stroke one of her breasts. She sat up straight as soon as I did it, but she kept talking with me as if everything was okay, and so I, in all of my single-minded self-absorption, interpreted that to mean, *Go for it!* I began to slip my hand under the waistband of her pants and underwear.

Fortunately for all involved, Janice knew what she was and was not comfortable with, despite having pounded four beers. She promptly removed my hand from under the waistband of her underwear. Confused, but still foolishly hoping that Zach's brother's advice was *the key*, I tried once more. Again, Janice removed my hand, stopped midsentence, and quietly but assertively said, "Stop it." I mumbled, "Sorry . . . I . . . I don't know why I . . ." but no words would come. Then I realized: I had been acting like a dick. I set down my unfinished beer, put my hands in my lap, and tried not to make Janice more ill at ease than she already was. Janice didn't move away from me, probably because she didn't want to make a scene, or maybe because she realized I meant her no harm and was just deluded and clueless. Maybe both. In any case, I was responsible for the awkward silence between us. We sat there a while longer and listened to the others whisper to each other several yards away. Eventually it got late, and everyone just kind of went home.

I, like most people in our sexually myopic culture, wanted one quick and easy answer to a host of profound questions that are best considered over the course of many years. It is this drive to oversimplify and distort the intricacies of gender and sexuality that enables us to minimize the existence of sexual violence, while

simultaneously blocking healthy affirmations of human sexuality and oppressing people with nontraditional sexual and gender identities. It is crucial that young people be empowered to explore their own experiences of gender and sexuality with the help of their schools and families, yet such developmental opportunities are rarely present in the form or amount needed. For example, in our educational systems, language and math skills are taught at every achievement level, every school day. But navigating the gender/sexuality pressures of adolescence is equally complex as, if not more complex than, understanding transitive property or the use of animal imagery in *Madame Bovary*. Most educational systems in the United States devote a minimal amount of hours per year (and for only a few years) to gender and sexuality. Likewise, the relatively small amount of quality education that does exist has been artificially divided into two camps: sexual violence prevention and sexual health promotion. If we can bridge these disciplines and saturate our culture with their messages and methods, then we might have a shot at realizing a grand vision: a culture where people experience sexuality in a state of well-being—a culture incompatible with sexual violence because of a deeply shared belief that sexuality is a precious part of everyone's humanity.

If there's one conclusion I've drawn in more than twelve years of doing sexual violence-prevention work, it is this: Rapists are created, not born. While female sexual empowerment is an important factor in the struggle to end rape, it will not succeed without corresponding shifts in how boys are taught to experience sexuality and gender. My insights are, admittedly, limited by my relatively narrow experience of the world as a straight, white, middle-class, male U.S. citizen, though I strive to offer ideas that are as generally applicable as I can muster. I'm hoping my experiences as an "insider" of the demographic most responsible for perpetrating rape and fucking up sexuality (pun intended) will coalesce with my background as a

sexual violence-prevention specialist to provide one more helpful piece in this huge jigsaw puzzle of a problem.

Boy Meets Rape Culture

Janice didn't seem to hold my uninvited touching against me—she and I continued to be friendly for the next five years, until we graduated high school and went our separate ways. I always felt guilty about that night, though, because there was no getting around the fact that I had acted disrespectfully. Then, when a close friend of mine was raped by her boyfriend and tried to kill herself, I started connecting the proverbial dots. The pressure tactics employed by her boyfriend seemed an awful lot like a different twist on the same plan I had tried with Janice. I took no for an answer, while my friend's boyfriend had not—other than that, there was a lot of overlap. A host of unrelenting questions laid siege to my mind around that time, and while they've become more nuanced with years and knowledge, I'm still trying to find some answers. Those questions all boil down to this one: Why aren't we all socialized to expect and proactively ensure that every sexual interaction is marked by mutual enjoyment and respect? My experiences growing up male in America helped me start formulating some answers to that question.

Thankfully, I learned my lesson from Janice and abandoned the notion that sexuality should be reduced to a boys-versus-girls, winner-takes-all game, but I still struggled with the day-to-day boys-will-be-boys stuff. While I like to think I avoided the overtly harmful extremes of that mindset, I was also a chronically horny young man, and compounding my permaboner was the fact that other dudes were playing the get-some game as intensely as they knew how. It wouldn't have been a big deal, except that most of the girls I knew were hot for the guys rocking some type of badboy/meathead/dickbag persona. I'll never forget hearing this from a girl I really liked: "You're sweet . . . you're like the kind of guy I might marry,

but you're not the kind of guy I want to have sex with." I suppose I just wanted an "I can be respectful *and* make you come" option that simply didn't exist in this stud/husband dichotomy. Of course, had my senses been less clogged with an omnipresent cloud of teenage angst, I might have realized that girls are pressured to play their side of this craptastic get-some game, too. It was in trying to make sense of these frustrations that I started seeing the bigger picture of what drives this madness. Understanding how boys are socialized to view sexuality can show us where to blend the approaches of sexual violence prevention and sexual health promotion, and how to enhance the effectiveness of programs rooted in these fields. But first we have to pull back the curtain on our unhealthy sexual status quo.

At the heart of countless American neuroses is the nonsensical, pervasive belief that sexuality is derived from a weakness in humanity. This idea likely came from the paranoid Christian extremists who exerted a powerful early influence on this nation. They would no doubt be gratified to learn that four hundred years later, sexuality has become quite detached from personhood. In other words, we've been taught to objectify sexuality itself, and see it only as a "thing" to act upon, or that acts upon us. We don't recognize it as integral to our own humanity, nor as a beautiful and important link among all humanity. This detachment shames us out of embracing our sexuality as a positive part of ourselves, and constrains sexual expression to certain "permissible" *physical* acts.

Consider how this objectification of sexuality plays out with the socialization of boys in the United States. My friends and I learned quickly that our sexuality was to be characterized by action, control, and achievement—certainly, familiar themes to us by the time we hit puberty. We ascertained that sexuality is tied to a boy's ability to play and win the get-some game. Sexual violence is one of many inevitable negative outcomes in this adversarial climate, which also gives rise to unwanted pregnancies, STIs, and an

abundance of shitty sexual encounters that can unfavorably impact the way any of us experience sexuality in general.

This game places special emphasis on boys' learning to control every possible variable surrounding sexual interactions, and thereby sends the clear message that sexuality should be expressed and enjoyed only in the context of a power dynamic. (Note: This is not a new idea, and has been the topic of numerous feminist-authored books and articles over the past forty years.^{1,2}) My account of the night with Janice is replete with examples of this push to control. We had a plan accounting for every detail our thirteen-year-old brains could conjure. Our attention to detail in trying to dictate the progression of the sexual interaction—and our assumption that there was going to be sexual interaction in the first place—was not uncommon. During adolescence it became as clear as a bottle of cheap vodka that a lot of guys seemed to have an angle on how they could control the situation and get some.

Boys' control strategies seem to become only more elaborate as we pass through adolescence and into our twenties. Domination over the sexual autonomy of others can almost become fetishized, and operates from a societal level (e.g., restrictions on reproductive freedoms, forced sterilization policies, inadequate laws against rape, etc.) down through the interpersonal (e.g., a greater concern for the number of bedpost notches than for the people involved in the experiences, or the experiences themselves). Feminist activists realized this a long time ago, which is why they created the concept of rape culture(s), and pointed out that rape is as much about power as it is about sex. Some fascinating research by Dr. David Lisak³ supports this observation.

Lisak found that acquaintance rapists tend to be men who buy strongly into "the game," usually targeting women they perceive to be younger, more naive, and easier to manipulate. Dr. Lisak's subjects also demonstrate an utter lack of awareness that this entitled,

self-centered system and its potential results are problematic, or are anything other than “the usual” manner in which men seduce. These men firmly believe “no” means “try harder,” and never think of themselves as rapists, despite a self-admitted pattern of ignoring and suppressing verbal/physical resistance, and forcing intercourse on semiconscious women. Of course, not all men buy into “the game” to such an extent that they commit rape. But follow public reaction to rape cases for a few years—especially acquaintance-rape cases—and you’ll quickly realize that Lisak’s subjects have a lot of support for their shared belief that women shouldn’t be allowed any sexual autonomy. Most of us have inherited enough shares in the rape culture(s) to perpetuate the disastrous results from previous generations.

The good news is that there are some promising strategies that can impact the whole of our rape-supportive, sexually unhealthy landscape. As previously mentioned, I propose playing matchmaker with two disciplines that have always seemed to be like ships passing in the night: sexual health promotion and sexual violence prevention. They’re the perfect couple—philosophically complementary, yet with their own things going. Whether they’re engaged in stimulating research comparisons over dinner, flirting about the REAL Act⁴ on a walk through the park, or making sweet, back-arching, toe-curling collaboration at home with the lights on, our society can only benefit.

Chemistry Between Two Great Bodies (of Work)

Sexual health promotion is usually known by its most visible component here in the United States: sex education. And *effective* sexual health promotion—that is, the kind that actually leads to low rates of STIs, abortions, accidental pregnancies, and so on—is medically accurate and based on science, rather than on one group’s version of morality. Unfortunately for U.S. citizens, former senator John

Ashcroft (yes, *that* John Ashcroft) smuggled a sneaky little amendment into some mid-1990s welfare “reform” legislation, ensuring precisely the opposite of effective sexual health promotion. Some call it abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) education, but I prefer to call it a goddamned travesty.

AOUM programs reinforce many of the harmful norms about gender and sexuality that perpetuate “the game.” They shame girls who choose to engage in premarital sex, and blame survivors of sexual violence through an obsessive contention that just saying no is the solution for everything—there is no consideration of what happens when no is ignored. Meanwhile, male volition is left largely unexamined. Fanning this growing inferno of outrage are findings released in April 2007 by a nonpartisan policy-evaluation firm.⁵ This congressionally commissioned, decade-spanning report concluded that kids who received AOUM education were just as likely to have sex as kids who didn’t.

Sadly, these findings also mean that tens of millions of dollars have been flushed down the crapper on this fallacious, dangerous approach. Could my heathen ass come up with a better use for the \$1.76 million currently allocated for sex education? Yep, and I would start by looking at three countries in Europe that have some of the best sexual health statistics in the world. Not coincidentally, these countries use an approach that makes the United States look like some sort of fiendish bizarro-world where faux morality is allowed to trample reasoned, useful approaches.

The Netherlands, France, and Germany all use a similar model of sexual health promotion, and Advocates for Youth, a Washington, D.C., based nonprofit, compiled the elements that have allowed these countries to be so effective. Among these keys to success are:

- Governments support massive, consistent, long-term public education campaigns [that are] far more direct and humorous than in the U.S. and focus on safety and pleasure.
- Sexuality education is not necessarily a separate curriculum and may be integrated across school subjects and at all grade levels. Educators provide accurate and complete information in response to students' questions.
- Families have open, honest, consistent discussions with teens about sexuality and support the role of educators and health care providers in making sexual health information and services available for teens.
- The morality of sexual behavior is weighed through an individual ethic that includes the values of responsibility, respect, tolerance, and equity.
- [All programs] work to address issues around cultural diversity in regard to immigrant populations and their values that differ from those of the majority culture.
- Research is the basis for public policies . . . political and religious interest groups have little influence on public health policy.⁶

This valuable type of sexual health promotion is like a smart, dynamic woman who gets gossiped about far more than she ever gossips. She gives invaluable advice and makes everyone's day better without even trying. Likewise, sexual violence prevention—or, more specifically, primary sexual violence prevention—is the cool, misunderstood chick who used to sit in the back of the class in high school. People are a little unnerved by her assertive intelligence and multiple piercings, but anyone who actually takes the time to get to know her ends up adoring her. A lot of folks still mistake her for “safety tips” (don't walk alone, don't drive at night, don't drink, don't ever come out of your room), or sometimes even self-defense, but she knows who she is. She's the intentional focus on *perpetration* prevention—

learning how and why our society grows people who are capable of violating another person's sexual autonomy, and discovering how to stop it. She's the application of tested public health theories/methods to the development of new prevention initiatives. She's the engagement of male allies who work within their peer groups to counter rape-supportive attitudes and behaviors. And though she might still seem shy about it, she's also the affirmation of all that is positive about human sexuality.

The fields of sexual health promotion and primary sexual violence prevention are clearly complementary, which is why we should root for these two to fall in love and get married in Massachusetts or California—or at least become BFFs. Happily, both fields do seem to be borrowing from a similar set of methods and incorporating parallel program content. Consistent with the elements of the effective European sexual health promotion model, primary sexual violence-prevention strategies have become savvier by learning to engage multiple levels of our social environment (e.g., policies, community institutions, and parents). Both fields in the United States are also gradually recognizing the importance of avoiding one-size-fits-all models, opting instead for the more flexible and pluralistic “community mobilization” approach. And as for content, proponents of sexual health promotion have integrated issues of respect, coercion, gender roles, and healthy relationships into their work (e.g., the International Planned Parenthood Federation's “Framework for Comprehensive Sexuality Education”⁷), while sexual violence-prevention specialists (e.g., Care For Kids⁸, and statewide anti-rape coalitions in Virginia⁹ and Vermont¹⁰) have started tinkering with the idea that promoting “healthy sexuality” can foster—among numerous other positive outcomes—safe, respectful sexual relationships.

Such a “healthy sexuality” program would counter our society's superficial, achievement-obsessed framing of sexuality by

helping people to make a deeper connection with all of our sexual domains: emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social, and physical. These five areas of sexuality correspond to the ways in which we exist as human beings in this world. Experiencing sexuality across these various domains helps us form our sense of who we are and who we want to be. Segmenting our experiences of sexuality to only the physical realm constrains us to an artificially rote understanding of humanity in ourselves and others. It's like trying to connect with music by listening only to top 40 songs. Sure, there can be a pleasurable aspect to it, but you're missing out on other worlds of sonic delight, and you're sure as shit not gaining any deeper insights into your own musical proclivities.

Connecting more deeply with these various aspects of our individual sexualities also benefits anyone with whom we might be sharing a sexual experience. Thus, healthy sexuality programs would facilitate the viewing of sexual interactions as things adults share with one another, instead of do to one another. This means teaching people the value of—and how to practice—honest, proactive communication about one another's likes, dislikes, and expectations, and respect for sexual expression in any consensual, subjectively affirming form it takes. These programs would also exhibit all of the previously described methods and content elements currently in use by the two disciplines.

So how would a healthy sexuality program have been experienced by guys like me and my friends? By men like the ones in Lisak's study? I suppose we won't know for sure until we're able to realize some approximation of this vision. However, I'm confident that we would see the rates of sexual violence plummet if we, as a society, committed to teaching boys the aforementioned values and skills in developmentally relevant ways throughout the first twenty years of their life. To realize this vision, our government has to get with it and allocate money and mandates for this type

of work, and key corporations and community institutions have to put human welfare first and support these efforts through their policies and practices. Parents, teachers, and older siblings have to learn how to become allies in modeling and teaching these values, and all schools have to provide the corresponding knowledge and skills throughout all grades and curricula. At the moment, many of these forces are either disengaged or actively working against healthy sexuality. Boys learn little about sexuality that is accurate or affirming, and this void is filled by ignorant teammates, MTV's *Next*, and sexually abusive politicians and their often detrimental policies concerning sexuality. We must work to pull these levers of influence in our direction.

A society in which everyone is allowed and encouraged to become genuinely connected to a complete experience of their own sexuality will naturally facilitate a widespread understanding of sexuality's vital status in everyone's humanity. It is a society incompatible with sexual violence, but ripe for positive human experience. It is the society I hope we'll build.

If you want to read more about ELECTRIC YOUTH, try:

- An Immodest Proposal by **HEATHER CORINNA**
- Purely Rape: The Myth of Sexual Purity and How It Reinforces Rape Culture by **JESSICA VALENTI**
- Real Sex Education by **CARA KULWICKI**

If you want to read more about MANLINESS, try:

- Toward a Performance Model of Sex by **THOMAS MACAULAY MILLAR**
- Why Nice Guys Finish Last by **JULIA SERANO**