

TELLING AN AWFUL TRUTH

BY MELINDA MURPHY

Living in “utopian” Singapore, we sometimes forget that bad things do happen. Children are particularly insulated here. Still, our kids do sometimes hear about terrible things and ask questions. What if you have something awful in your own past? Should you tell your kids? If so, when? How much?

It was bound to happen. There’s been so much attention in the media about rape and male aggression towards women. The #MeToo across the globe. The accusations against Cristiano Ronaldo. The US Supreme Court Justice confirmation hearings. Allegation after allegation has littered the media, even reaching Singapore. So, when Elbee’s* 10-year-old daughter said, “Mummy, what’s rape?” she wasn’t surprised. She answered it in a straightforward way: “It’s when one person forces another person to do things sexually they don’t want to do, and usually it’s a man forcing a woman.”

Then Elbee heard the question she had dreaded for years. “Mummy, have you ever been raped?” She froze, changed the subject and practically bolted out of the room.

“How am I supposed to tell my daughter what happened to me? I want her to know me. I want to prepare and protect her. Yet at the same time, I don’t want to terrify her or for her to look at me differently. Everybody else I tell looks at me differently. I should use my real name for this article. So many other people are coming forward with their stories, but I can’t. I just can’t do it.”

When Elbee was in college, she went to her ex-boyfriend’s dorm the night after they broke up to return his things. “His dorm mate felt sorry for me

and asked me to dinner. He drank a lot. I didn’t have even one sip because I was hungover from drowning my sorrows the night before with all my friends. On the way home, he took a wrong turn and drove to the middle of nowhere in a field and raped me in the car. I remember thinking, ‘If I get out of the car, where will I run? Just give in. It’s safer to give in. He’ll kill me in the field.’ It really was brutal, too. I was bleeding and bruised when he dropped me off. He stopped at the curb to let me out and said, “Thanks for a nice night.”

Sharing your secret

Later, Elbee’s roommate found her in the shower, fully clothed, reading the Bible. She didn’t tell her what happened. In fact, she didn’t tell anybody what happened for a very long time because it took her a long time to see it as rape because it was somebody she knew. Now the thought of telling her daughter is torturing her.

“I want to be honest with her, for her to know me, and for her to learn from my life. But if I do tell my daughter, how much do I tell her? All of it? Every awful detail? Do I tell her about confronting him years later? Do I tell her how it screwed up the rest of my life and all the terrible choices I made that probably stemmed from that one night?”

“In the wake of the #MeToo movement, some children and teens may ask questions that should not be ignored,” says Marcia Capon, a Singapore-based therapist who specialises in coaching parents and mentoring teens. “We should support them to break down the central issues, and provide key safeguarding and harm-prevention messages.”

Of course, the trick is talking to children in an age-appropriate way. Too many details can overwhelm a child because by telling her that you’ve been harmed, she may feel you aren’t able to protect her either. This reaction might not be obvious or immediate either. And this is true about all traumatic situations an adult may have been through, not just rape.

Capon advises, “Responding to a direct question to a child younger than late teens is best done with talk about trust

being broken and the parent having been in difficult situations where there has been a need to say ‘No’, or where ‘No’ was ignored. If handled incorrectly, unnecessary uncertainty, confusion or even trauma could unwittingly be the result. Hearing of mum’s experience usually causes high anxiety in young children.” All to say, you don’t want to totally ignore that your child is asking questions, but less is more with younger children.

Telling teens

When Sarah’s* date asked her to go back to his university room after a few drinks, she said yes. She liked him. She wanted to spend time with him, but didn’t know him well enough to sleep with him. Once she was in his room, everything changed. Even though she kept saying no, he said, “Why did you come here then?” She didn’t know what to do apart from screaming and running, which seemed a bit over the top, so she eventually let it happen.

Like Elbee, she didn’t really think of it as rape at the time. “I felt like I had asked for it because I had gone to his room.” It was only years later, when she let the memory bubble up to the surface, the realisation sunk in that it wasn’t consensual sex. The night haunted her. Years later, a therapist helped her realise she’d been raped.

Once Sarah had come to grips with what happened to her years before, she knew she needed to tell her teenage daughters. “I could see they were putting themselves in an unsafe position with alcohol and I wanted to make it real by telling them what had happened to me. It wasn’t just something that happens to other people or in the news.”

Sarah’s daughter remembers the conversation well. “When mum told, she was trying to tell me how important it was not to put myself into an ‘unsafe’ situation. It scared the hell out of me. I was always pretty aware of date rape before, but I hadn’t realised that just going back to someone’s place could give them the ‘go ahead’ message.”

At first, Sarah's daughter was initially annoyed she hadn't told her sooner, but she explained it was hard to talk about her rape, especially to her daughters. The conversation led to more conversations and was ultimately something that brought them closer together.

"As parents, we want to equip our children with the resources to prepare them and protect them," says Capon, "but telling teens will probably not protect them the way we hope. We're familiar with the teenage refrain: 'It'll never happen to me.' The feeling of being invincible and immortal arises from how a teenager's brain works, which literally blocks the ability to learn from someone else's experience. So, will this particular conversation be effective with teens? Unlikely, and definitely not as a standalone, uncomfortable chat."

Elbee also has a son. "I find I'm a bit over the top when it comes to 'No means no' with him. I want him to learn to respect women early. I don't want him to be an offender. Nor do I ever want him to be falsely accused. I really struggled with the Kavanaugh hearings. I believed her. Of course, I believed her. No woman comes forward and ruins her life over false accusations – not like that. Listening to her story brought every awful detail of my rape rushing back. I couldn't sleep for weeks. But, at the same time, I found myself worrying that my son would one day be accused falsely."

Steps and support

So, what's the answer? Capon suggests two areas where parents can have the most immediate and lasting impact with their girls and boys:



#1 Conversation as immunisation

From the toddler to teenage years, teach the concept of "consent" to both boys and girls, discuss bodies and boundaries such as letting the child decide who to kiss/cuddle among family and friends. Teach "No means NO!" Demonstrate it through your own actions, such as stopping tickling when the child requests.

Use the PANTS Rule as a starting point:

PPrivates are private.

Always remember your body belongs to you.

No means NO!

Talk about secrets.

Speak up about anything that makes you sad, anxious or scared.

#2 Raising and supporting boys

The environment we create and the example we offer is the map and compass to our boys' path through life.

- **Teach consent:** As stated above.
- **Emotions:** Develop the awareness and expression of emotions. Refrain from saying "toughen up" or "man up". Identify the emotion you see, such as "It looks like this is hard/frustrating/making you angry," and offer support.
- **Verbal and non-verbal cues:** Teach how to identify these cues to reinforce "No means NO!" An example would be, "Your friend looks like he/she doesn't want to play this anymore. What do you think?"
- **On-going dialogue:** The process requires reinforcement. Encourage open and honest conversations.
- **Equality:** Discourage gender-based entitlement.
- **Role-modelling:** By demonstrating respect and integrity in all our relationships, we reduce the potential for harassment, bullying, aggression and abuse.

Elbee is trying to use it all as a teaching point for herself. "I've come to realise if I give my children guidelines and discuss it, they are less likely to put themselves in unsafe situations and perhaps fight a bit harder or speak up afterwards. That's my hope anyway. And I do think all this talk has been good. It's started a conversation that needed to happen.

Talking about it is the start of changing it." *e*

** names have been changed*

It's usually best to discuss personal situations with a counsellor or therapist. For support with these and other complex parenting issues, contact Marcia Capon at iqueqltd@gmail.com. For more information about preventing abuse, visit aware.org.sg or nspcc.org.uk.