

Boys and men must do the right thing — it will save female lives

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By Glen
Canning

Rehtaeh Parsons' father, Glen Canning, says the disconnect between what Canadians say they want and what they actually do is literally killing women and girls



Glen Canning, the father of Rehtaeh Parsons, above, is calling on men to challenge other men when they witness inappropriate behaviour toward women. "When it comes to holding other men accountable, we can all agree it's the right thing to do in theory. But it clearly isn't happening in practice," Canning writes. (THE CANADIAN PRESS)

I am a lot of things. I am [Rehtaeh Parsons' father](#). I am an advocate for victims of sexual assault and cyberbullying. But most of all, I am sick of saying, "if a boy or man had done the right thing, a girl or woman would still be alive."

I am sick of urging men and boys to prevent violence against women and then seeing familiar news headlines over and over. Reading about what happened to [Kassidi Coyle](#) earlier this year shook me to my core. I saw parallels between what happened to her and what happened to my daughter: A sexual assault that eventually led a young girl to take her own life.

And so I ask myself, again, why does this keep happening? I've been noticing a deadly disconnect between what Canadians say we want in theory versus what we actually do in practice ... A disconnect that is literally killing women and girls.

Take the latest Canadian Women's Foundation survey, for example. This is the first time the foundation asked Canadians about the role of men and boys in ending violence against women. So what do Canadians say they want?

Ninety-three per cent of Canadians say they want men to take a more active role in ending violence against women. But how many people are working with men and boys to end violence in their own lives and communities? And how many people are talking to the boys in their lives about consent and how to safely intervene in a situation that they know is wrong?

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I hate to say it, but I think we as Canadians often take an "Oh, he's a good kid. I'm sure he'd make the right decision in a situation like that" approach. That's not good enough anymore. It never was good enough.

Three quarters of Canadians feel that men don't challenge other men when they witness inappropriate behaviour toward women in public (75 per cent) and in the workplace (74 per cent). When it comes to holding other men accountable, we can all agree it's the right thing to do in theory. But it clearly isn't happening in practice.

And it especially isn't happening behind closed doors — I know that no one held anyone accountable when young men got into a room with my daughter, raped her, and then circulated a photo around her school. And what did one of the boys say when he spoke with a journalist? "I felt like if she didn't want it, it wouldn't have happened." We are all failing our next generation if this is the way our 16-year-olds think about consent.

Speaking of accountability, thankfully 4-in-5 Canadians (79 per cent) feel "boys will be boys" is an outdated attitude. So that means, from a young age, we must hold our boys accountable for their behaviour. Our boys can be shown how to embody empathy and compassion. We must make no excuse for toxic masculinity to get embedded in our next generation.

And while 71 per cent of Canadians rightly say "locker room talk" is a big deal, I was disheartened to find out from the Canadian Women's Foundation survey that almost half (42 per cent) of millennial men think it isn't a big deal. Language matters. Language normalizes, justifies, and perpetuates a cycle that turns women and girls into objects for men's consumption, rather than positioning them as equals.

One last contrast from the foundation's survey: 72 per cent of millennial men believe there is no reason for a woman to feel less safe in public than a man. Yet almost half (45 per cent) of millennial women report feeling unsafe because of their gender in the past 12 months. If that's not a disconnect, I don't know what is.

So what is the one action I hope every Canadian reading this will take? Ask a teen boy in your life to imagine him and his male friends in a room with a girl, like the situation Rehtaeh and the boys were in. Ask him what he will do. Who will he stand up for? Prepare him for the sad reality that his friends might make fun of him for doing the right thing. Let him know you will be proud of him for it.

*Toronto-based activist, photographer, and writer **Glen Canning** partnered with the Canadian Women's Foundation to draw attention to issues of sexual violence and consent.*

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