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Opinions Monday, September 15, 2003

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JAINE CARTER & JAMES D. CARTER: Sexual advances should be made only with permission

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(SH) - When we were growing up, kissing was an accepted practice. Girls didn't expect boys to ask for permission. Boys tried to take their signals from the girls they dated. In fact, it was considered gauche to ask a girl if you could kiss her. As a result, boys tended to be categorized as "lungers" or "sliders."

Lungers would leap across the car seat and literally knock a girl's breath away trying to kiss her. "Take her by surprise," was their motto. Sliders would inch their way across the car in a seemingly inconspicuous manner. Girls were usually prepared for the sliders. Lungers were another story.

Today, lunging is totally inappropriate. In fact, according to educator Mike Domitrz, author of "May I Kiss You? A Candid Look at Dating, Communication, Respect & Sexual Assault Awareness," a male who doesn't ask "may be on his way to committing a sexual assault."

What applies to boys most certainly applies to men. And it is worth a great deal of thought. How is a male to know if his desire for physical contact is mutual? "Put very simply," said Domitrz, "sexual assault is any sexual contact without consent."

Like other crimes, there can be varying degrees of sexual assault (first, second, third, and fourth degree.) The lowest degree may be sexual contact without consent. "Sexual intercourse without consent would be a higher degree of sexual assault," Domitrz explains.

Most people do not think before touching each other in an intimate area. They attempt to read the signals; deep eye contact, holding hands, leaning toward each another.

According to Domitrz sexual assault is likely to happen on a date where a couple is becoming intimate for the first time.

What happened to spontaneity? While Domitrz's book is intended for young people, it is equally appropriate for anyone who is dating. A woman may be consensual one time and not another. She may have agreed to have sex after a particularly romantic encounter, while later feeling that she doesn't want to carry on with this particular relationship. She has a right to change her mind. Therefore, to be on the safe side, a man should always ask.

There was a time when a boy or man could get away with sexual assault and blaming the victim was acceptable. Defense could include any and all of the following statements: "She asked for it." "That is what happens when you act like a tease." "You can't be getting it on with someone and then stop." Yes, she can.

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No one asks to be assaulted. There is no rationalization for pushing yourself on another human being. To be fair, a girl/woman should attempt to give clear, unmixed signals. However, there may be times when she thinks she may want to get intimate and then decide that it isn't such a good idea. She has a right to say, "No." If a male insists on continuing, he is the one to blame. "The criminal took the criminal action, not the victim," Domitrz points out.

"Our society does not blame the victim in any other crime. We have no excuse for trying to blame the victim of a sexual assault," says Domitrz. "Blaming the victim is a major cause of victims not speaking out about their assaults and not reporting the assaults to the authorities."

When a young man gets away with assaulting one woman who is too intimidated to report the instance, that young man may feel free to continue assaulting women throughout his life. Reprimanded behavior may serve to stop that behavior. Perhaps it is just a matter of education, but we all have to help do our share. Parents need to talk with their children about acceptable and unacceptable behavior with the opposite sex. It is never too early. Children are more sexually aware today than at any time in our history. Television is a powerful influence. While parents are watching, and laughing at, programs like "Sex and the City," their children are acquiring the opinion that the escapades depicted on that screen are acceptable. Pay attention.

Get involved and work at stopping sexism from spreading. When you see sexism or harassment, take action. Speak out to keep schools safe. Create a "buddy" system and insist that young people travel within it. Above all, demolish the double standard. It's time.

Jaine Carter, Ph.D., and James D. Carter, Ph.D. are management consultants and authors of the book, "He Works She Works - Successful Strategies for Working Couples."

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