

# THE TIMES

## Two American women confront British boys about sex

Deana Puccio and Allison Havey present the RAP project at the City of London Boys School Times Newspapers



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Mission impossible: one hour to re-programme teenage boys' sexual manners so they are fit for a feminist world. We begin at ten o'clock with more than a hundred 13 and 14-year-old boys. Just a few minutes later I get a sense of what the two women who have taken on this task are up against.

We are in the wood-paneled hall of one of London's leading boys' private schools. I gaze on the assembled Year 9 tenderly as they look up at the presentation; with their soft, milky skin and untied laces, they bring out a maternal protectiveness. They are children.

Then they burst into spontaneous applause. There is even a small whoop. What prompted that? A statistic about how the majority of teenage boys think porn is “really inspiring”. Their approval is immediately shushed by their female class teacher with a hissed “Don’t do that!”

It’s a fleeting moment, because for most of the time these boys sit attentively and ask knowledgeable and confident questions about rape, sexting and hardcore porn. But the complicated eddies of protectiveness (me); censure (their teacher); and the electrifying disinhibition of porn (them, all of them) swirl around the rest of the morning.

On the walls there hang portraits of the school’s venerable headmasters from the pre-Dapper Laughs era. The portrait above my head is a reverend. But their silent reproach is useless in 2014. What these boys need — or are told to need — is an innovative project run by two very tough Americans. It’s not sex ed; it’s too late for that. It’s sex re-education.

“So, gentlemen,” says the first, Deana Puccio, who has spent most of her professional life prosecuting sex crimes as a district attorney in New York, “this is why in my opinion misogyny is on the rise.”

She flashes up a slide on the screen, the title “Generation Porn”. Pretty much everything we cover will come back to variations on the effects of easily accessible and ever more extreme porn.

Puccio’s colleague is Allison Havey, a former television news correspondent. When we meet after their talk, Havey tells me that she believes porn is the single biggest factor in the problems between the sexes today: “It’s filtering down to different elements of our culture. Adverts, videos, games, films.”

Together Puccio and Havey are the RAP (Raising Awareness and Prevention) Project. They speak in gravelly voices, wear strict business suits and high heels, say the word “penis” often, and describe real-life sex crimes that have happened to teenagers in this area with brutal accuracy. In short, they are not these boys’ mums, although they are both mothers of teenagers who inspired their work.

Still, the boys push back at them. Sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly, they challenge and question what they are being told. “What about Ched Evans?” says one boy. “He thought he had consent.” His friends follow up repeatedly on the footballer’s rape conviction. “What if you are both drunk — is that consent?” asks another, softly spoken, boy.

And what they are most concerned about, with so many questions that the teacher eventually intervenes to move on, is this: how much of their internet trail of porn-watching or porn-inspired sexting will be found out by potential admissions tutors or employers? Which doesn’t seem to me like getting to the heart of the issue.

It’s only afterwards that I realise there was absolutely no sniggering or squirming, of the kind that I experienced when my teachers even skirted around the birds and the bees. “And why do you think that is?” asks Havey. I tell her I don’t know. “It’s because of the amount of sexual images they’re consuming. In our day it had shock value. Now they’re desensitised. Therein lies the dilemma.”

Puccio had spent her working life prosecuting increasingly unpleasant sex attackers in Brooklyn. Burnt out, she was relieved to come to London when her husband's job moved. Then two years ago, when the eldest of her three daughters was 15, Puccio found her blithely setting off to meet a man she barely knew anything about.

“I thought: ‘Oh, my goodness. How naive is my own child?’ I had thought that because I had been in the sex-crimes division my girls were just going to get it. At the moment she got out the car, I got really nervous and started remembering all my cases. I thought: ‘This is going to be one of my kids because I haven't done my job properly.’”

Looking around for courses for their children, all they saw were rather limp sex-education offerings. “Penis, vagina: that's not going to help anyone,” says Puccio. Or self-defence — “That's too late.” She and her friend Havey engineered their own course. It would be hard-hitting, based on both real crimes and real-life consequences of crime (such as depression in the aftermath of Facebook sexual harassment, or “fraping”) and based on teenager's lives as they lead them now.

It was also targeted at girls. In the year that the RAP Project has been running they have been asked by headteachers to present it more than 200 times. Their client list is a roll call of some of the most prestigious schools in the country, from St Paul's School for Girls to St Mary's School Ascot. They are also popular among state schools, especially faith schools, from Catholic to Jewish.

“You know what?” says Havey. “It doesn't matter how much money you have, these kids are floundering. They all have the same concerns: they're trying to survive in a very unforgiving world.” Puccio adds: “It's the culture of sexualisation as well as perfectionism. You have to have an A-star and, with all the guys looking at porn, wax your bum, have a thigh-gap, big boobs.”

Parents used to worry about their teenagers having sex. Now they have started to worry that they are not. The power of porn has come to an ironic conclusion: it has made boys more satisfied in isolation than in the real world. What was once a gateway to sex is now a locked door.

“Friends of ours that have teenage girls of 17 or so say to me: something has changed in the past five years,” says Havey. “Teenagers just aren't having sex in the same way. They don't go out on dates as they used to. It is easier to masturbate to online pornography.”

The more girls they spoke to, the more stories they heard of girls being groped in their school corridors or revenge-sexed: “What the girls said to us was: ‘Please speak to the boys. Be hard-hitting.’ They were begging.”

The requests from boys' schools were also coming thick and fast. As the mother of a teenage boy, Havey had the best start on how to adapt their material. She knew from experience that a typical male teen hobby today is playing the latest *Grand Theft Auto* computer game, where the goal is for the protagonist to have sex with a prostitute, then attack and kill her to get his money back. “I've seen friends of my son play it, aged 14 or so. It's ‘Let's run over the chick.’ It's desensitising.”

In their talk to girls the focus is on helping them protect each other. On more than ten occasions girls have approached them afterwards to report a sex crime. For the talk to the boys it's entirely different: it's getting past the "desensitisation" that's the challenge.

They do that with a focus on the law and on the traceability of online misdemeanours. It's this that the boys are most interested in and affected by, they have learnt. And so it proves on the day I attend at City of London School, a prestigious independent school in the City.

It opens with Havey telling them that their presence has been requested by their female counterparts. "We are going to talk about hard-hitting things. We're here to build a bridge between you and girls. Your female friends wanted us to talk to you because they are concerned about you."

There is a section on helping boys to avoid becoming the victims of sexual attack. Then there's an uncomfortable gear change: boys can be both victims and aggressors. So on to porn: they are asked the average age at which boys first access it. They guess 14. It is apparently 11. "If you see on your computer screen a girl raped anally and crying or a girl having sex with 'dumb slag' written on her top, imagine an 11-year old viewing that," says Havey.

One boy raises his hand: "What defines hardcore porn?" "Pain, domination, the desensitising of erotica," says Puccio. "Your visceral reaction that this is wrong, this is uncomfortable. The problem is, the more you guys see it, the more that reaction goes away. It seems normal and it's not."

Like most of the class, I did not know that the legal age for sexting your friends is 18: if you distribute images of teenagers before then you are committing an offence of distributing an indecent image of a child.

"It is shocking to many young people that they can legally have sex at the age of 16 but can't have naked pictures of a girl of 17 on their phone," says Puccio. "Guess what? No. Some of you have those pictures of teenage girls on your phones. That's illegal. Don't pass them on. You're just as liable."

The boys look chastened, but the moment the RAP Project hits home comes next. "One of the things that concerns me as a prosecutor is that there are things that good, decent young men do as a bit of a laugh, but which may damage their reputation for life," Puccio tells them.

"We once spoke to parents, and a woman who was a mother and on the admissions board of a London university told us what young people need to realise when they apply is that we now have IT experts who can go through their IT history. Despite being head boy, if you have a history of sending explicit images, that would ruin your chances of getting that job.

"Shocking but true. You are at a top school. Would you want your chances at 16 or 17 of becoming a lawyer or a doctor to be ruined?"

This anecdotal story proves explosive. The boys just can't stop asking questions about it. How will they track? What will they track? Are phones protected? They're all good questions: American universities have been open about searching Facebook accounts of candidates, but so far no British university has admitted it.

Still, just the possibility terrifies them. “Boys are obsessed with this,” says Havey after the talk. “It’s almost that idea of ‘How much can I get away with?’ ”

That, and Ched Evans, whose rape conviction has been brought up spontaneously in every talk to boys that Puccio and Havey have done. “Ched Evans crystallises the debate for them. Maybe they feel they’re the bad guys and girls don’t get the blame.”

The hour is up. The children file out obediently. These are boys any parent would be proud of and they are also now scarred for life. Any time they imagine doing something furtive online, it will trigger the thought that adults of influence — maybe even some formidable American women — are seeing into their souls via their search history. Mission accomplished.

[theraproject.co.uk](http://theraproject.co.uk)



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