

Sticks and Stones May Break Our Bones, and Verbal Abuse WILL Hurt Us

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Author Note

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Abstract

When playground bullies enter college, residence hall facilities can become their new “sandbox,” and gender-based discriminatory language is one way bullying can manifest itself. By the time sexual and/or physical abuse materializes, campus personnel often ask themselves what they could have done to prevent such actions. The author shares personal experience addressing this issue on both building-wide and individual student levels. In order to create real and meaningful change, collaborative partnerships are formed which break down barriers between student affairs and academic affairs. Addressing verbal abuse with intentional collaborative sanctioning, the author argues, serves as a positive form of both reactive and proactive assault education.

Keywords: verbal abuse, Title IX, discriminatory language, assault education, residence hall

Where to After the Playground?

For decades, children have been taught the “sticks and stones” rhyme to cope with playground bullies. Eventually, however, the cliché became subject to mockery when those who utilized it learned (the hard way, in many cases) that it held little power or truth. Publications such as *The Bully at Work* by Gary and Ruth Namie (2009) illustrate the progression of bullying from the playground arena to other environments. This progression can be readily seen at institutions of higher education and specifically in residential halls, where verbal abuse in the form of gender-based discriminatory language can be committed with disturbing convenience, since student residents live in very close proximity to one another.

Residence Halls as Playgrounds

I am a hall director of a co-ed facility that accommodates more than 400 students at a public university in the Midwest. Due to the nature of my job, I expect to encounter policy violations; however, in the fall of 2013, the semester began in a particularly troubling way. Over the course of only two days, five of my six female staff members informed me about separate instances of addressing policy violations with male students (different men in each situation), only to be met with aggressive and gender-based discriminatory language such as “bitch” and “cunt.” Clearly, this was upsetting and unsettling to my staff. As the building-hearing officer, I heard each case and addressed each of the young men individually. During this process, tension grew within the hall as supporters of both the alleged perpetrators and the victims voiced their opinions. It was clear that this issue needed to be addressed on a much larger scale.

The End of Recess

To begin lowering the level of gender-based verbal abuse in the residence hall, the University set up required meetings for the all-male floors. The university coordinator of diversity affairs opened each session by establishing ground rules for participation. As she expected, several of her exercises were met with rude retaliation. Her final activity, however, seemed to have an impact on the residents. Each participant was asked to picture a female from his life whom he greatly respected. Several young men volunteered to share whom they were thinking about and what these women meant to them. The facilitator then asked each participant to visualize this important woman being verbally disrespected. The reaction from participants was strong and practically universal. The group

discussed how every female was someone's daughter, sister, or mother. As the students left, it was hard to guess the impacts of the meetings. However, just a few days later, a hall employee overheard an exchange between two male students suggesting that the program was successful. When one young man referred to a female resident in gender-based discriminatory language, the other student quickly interrupted him, telling him his language was offensive.

A New Game Plan

I am proud to describe myself as a feminist, or “someone who believes in the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” (“Feminism,” n.d.). Yet, I was concerned that many of my male students viewed me and my values in a negative light. I decided it was time to stop force-feeding them my personal philosophies and start offering them resources. Thus, I arranged for a knowledgeable and engaging—and male—speaker to address the young men from my hall. I advertised the presentation as a “Men Only” event and offered food and beverages, in hopes that men would attend despite it not being mandatory. Of about 200 male residents, 60 attended. During the presentation, the speaker shared his personal story and explained the theory of bystander intervention, an emerging and effective strategy for reducing gender-based violence on college campuses, centering on the premise that changing student attitudes, increasing their knowledge, and teaching them safe intervention skills will lead to decreased violence (Student Success, 2013). By addressing these young men directly, and from a male perspective, hall culture began to shift. After this event, I observed a significant decline in concerns about respectful behavior brought forth by female staff.

Playing by the Rules

Although our programming in the fall of 2013 improved residence hall culture, gender-based verbal abuse remains an important campus. In investigating and responding to student complaints, the focus is now on addressing students on an individual level. Some strategies include assigning sanctions that deal directly with gender-based discriminatory language (e.g., requiring offenders to summarize and reflect on an article discussing sexist labels against women, etc.) and mandating that student violators meet with male faculty members to discuss their offense and how to move forward positively. It is my hope that this type of collaborative sanctioning will create meaningful and long-lasting results.

Reformation Through Collaboration

As I have learned about abuse-progression theory—which holds that abuse escalates from emotional to verbal to physical to sexual—I have begun to consider how university-wide collaborative efforts could create systemic change. Verbal abuse might very well serve as a “gateway” to serious Title IX and Clery violations. Considering the popularity of interdisciplinary education in higher education, is there any reason why it should not extend to student conduct? The university conduct process is intended to be educational: Students should not abstain from repeated offenses due to fear of further sanctioning, but rather because they understand the negative implications of their behavior on the community. To achieve this end, creative and collaborative sanctioning could and should be considered. Student violators of verbal abuse require intentional sanction assignments connecting them with educated activists and/or community organizations committed to social change. Perpetrators of sexual assault do not become violators overnight; their behavior progresses from other forms of abuse. As educators, it is our responsibility to identify these red flags, educate our students on the gravity of their decisions, hold students accountable for their actions, and provide a verbal-abuse-free environment for each and every one of our students.

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Author Biography



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