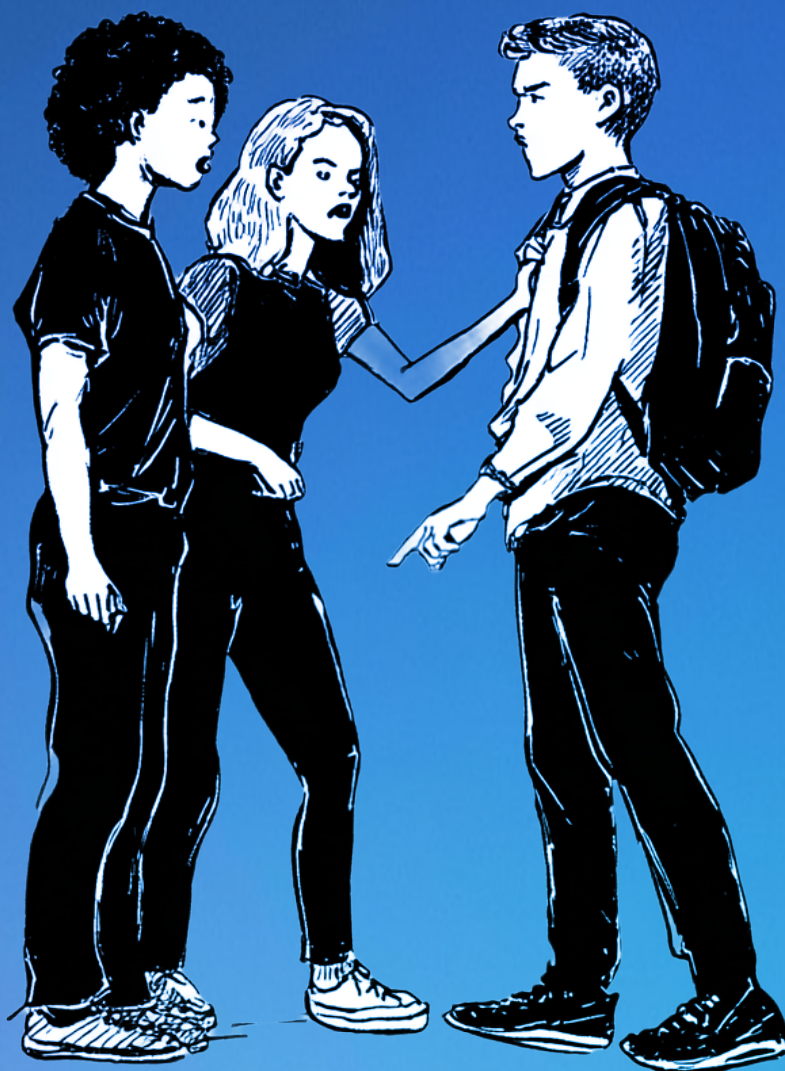


Toolkit



What to Say When You See Sexism

A Practical Toolkit for Teachers,
Parents, Adult Allies, and Students

By Jo-Ann Finkelstein, Ph.D.

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Why Scripts Matter

Most people want to speak up when they witness sexism, but in the moment they freeze. They worry they'll overreact, embarrass someone, start an argument, or make things worse.

The good news is that interrupting sexism doesn't require a perfect speech. In fact, the most effective responses are often brief, calm, and matter-of-fact. The goal isn't to shame the person who made the comment. Shame makes people defensive. The goal is to interrupt the stereotype, reinforce your values, and help young people think more critically about the messages they've absorbed. It's a way to communicate: "This isn't how we treat people here."

Think of these responses as "micro-interventions." One conversation probably won't change someone's worldview—but hundreds of small conversations over time help shape it.

The CARE Method: A Four-Step Response

You won't use every step every time, but this framework can help you respond confidently in the moment.

1. Calm yourself first.

Children learn more from calm correction than emotional confrontation.

2. Address the stereotype or behavior.

Focus on the comment—not the child’s character.

“That sounds like a stereotype.”

“Let’s not make assumptions about people based on gender.”

3. Reinforce your values.

State the norm you want to build.

“Around here we treat people as individuals.”

“Everyone deserves respect.”

4. Encourage a better way forward.

Offer a better way to think or respond.

“Can you tell me what that specific person did instead of making a statement about all girls?”

“Let’s focus on the behavior rather than the person’s gender.”

Teachers and School Staff

Situation: “Girls are so dramatic.”

Instead of ignoring it, try saying:

“Let’s be careful about making statements about half the population. What specifically happened that frustrated you?”

Why this works

The comment gets interrupted without humiliating the student. Instead of debating whether girls are dramatic, you’re teaching students to distinguish between a stereotype and a specific experience—a skill that promotes more accurate and fair thinking.

Situation: “We need another guy. Girls aren’t good at this.”

Try saying:

“That’s a stereotype, not a fact. Let’s let people’s skills speak for themselves.”

or

“We don’t assume what people can do based on gender.”

Why this works

Children often absorb stereotypes long before they consciously believe them. Calmly challenging those assumptions prevents them from becoming accepted “truths” within the classroom.

Situation: A boy repeatedly interrupts girls.

Try saying:

“Hold on. She wasn’t finished.”

If it becomes a pattern:

“I’ve noticed you’re jumping in before some of the girls finish speaking. I don’t think that’s your intention, but I’d like you to practice waiting until they’re done.”

Or, to the whole class:

“Research has found that girls get interrupted a lot by both boys and other girls. I want you to try noticing when you might be doing that and practice letting people finish before responding.”

Why this works

Research consistently finds that girls are interrupted more often than boys. Many children aren’t aware they’re doing it. Naming the pattern without accusing the student helps build self-awareness instead of defensiveness.

Situation: A sexist joke.

Try saying:

“I know you were trying to be funny. The joke depends on putting girls down, and that’s not the kind of humor we want here.”

Why this works

Humor can normalize prejudice because it disguises harmful ideas as “just joking.” Responding calmly separates intent from impact and reinforces classroom expectations without escalating the situation.

Situation: Boys are rating girls' appearances or otherwise objectifying them ("She's so hot." "I'd hit that.")

Try saying:

"Let's talk about people in a way that recognizes they're whole human beings, not just bodies."

Or

"We don't rate people like products."

Why this works

Objectifying girls and women has been normalized in our culture and reinforces the idea that a girl's primary value lies in how she looks. Interrupting those comments helps establish a different norm—recognizing girls are people with thoughts, talents, abilities, and feelings, rather than being reduced to their bodies.

Parents and Adult Allies

Situation: "That's for girls."

Try saying:

"Colors, hobbies, toys, and interests don't belong to one gender. People get to like what they like."

Why this works

Children begin policing gender norms surprisingly early. Expanding what's considered acceptable gives both boys and girls more freedom to develop authentically.

Situation: “Girls can’t drive.”

Try saying:

“That’s a stereotype. People drive well—or poorly—as individuals, not because they’re male or female.”

Why this works

Parents don’t have to deliver a lecture every time. Brief corrections, repeated consistently, help children question cultural messages before they become deeply ingrained beliefs.

Situation: A boy comments on a girl’s body or rates her appearance.

Try saying:

“It’s natural to notice when someone is attractive. But let’s not reduce girls to how they look. They’re whole people with ideas, talents, and personalities—not bodies to evaluate.

Or simply,

“What do you know about her besides what she looks like?”

If you want to encourage reflection:

“If she were standing right here, would that comment help her feel respected?”

Or,

“Imagine walking into every room knowing people were evaluating your body before listening to what you had to say. That would probably make you feel very self-conscious. I’d rather we notice people’s ideas, kindness, humor, or talents.”

Why this works

It separates attraction from objectification. Rather than suggesting it's wrong to notice someone's appearance, it teaches that appearance shouldn't be the primary lens through which we see or talk about girls. The goal is to broaden the conversation from what girls look like to who they are.

Situation: "It was just a joke."

Try saying:

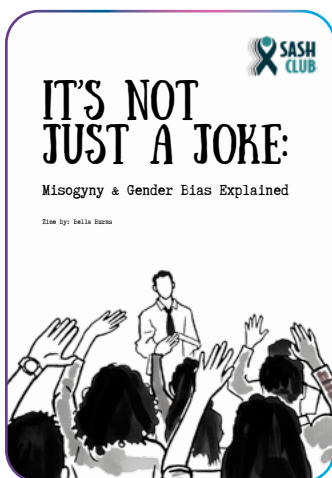
"I know you were probably trying to be funny. But jokes also send messages. Let's think about what this one is saying about girls."

Or

"Can you explain what's supposed to be funny about it?"

Why this works

Acknowledging intent lowers defensiveness while still holding children accountable for the impact of their words. Asking someone to explain a sexist joke often reveals the stereotype behind it without turning the interaction into an argument.



Challenging sexism with zines

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Students

You don't have to lecture or start a fight. Sometimes a simple comment is enough to shift the conversation.

Situation: "Girls are so emotional."

Try saying:

"That's a pretty big generalization."

Or,

"I know plenty of girls who don't fit that stereotype."

Why this works

Social norms are shaped by peers. Even one person questioning a stereotype can make others less likely to accept it.

Situation: Someone makes a sexist joke.

Try saying:

"I don't get it. What's funny about it?"

Or simply,

"Not cool, man"

Why this works

Asking someone to explain the joke often reveals the underlying stereotype without you having to argue. It invites reflection instead of confrontation.

Situation: You notice a girl being interrupted, talked over, or dismissed.

Try saying:

“Hang on—I think she was still talking.”

Or,

“I think [INSERT NAME] has been trying to make a point.”

Why this works

Small acts of allyship communicate that everyone’s voice deserves equal space. These moments also encourage quieter students to continue participating.

Situation: When someone objectifies a girl (“I’d hit that.”)

Try saying:

“Bro, she’s a person.”

Then change the subject.

Why this works

Redirecting attention away from appearance reinforces the idea that girls are more than how they look—a powerful message in a culture that often teaches otherwise.

Final Thoughts

You don't have to respond perfectly every time.

Kids aren't born sexist. They absorb messages from family, peers, media, social media, advertising, and the broader culture. That means adults have countless opportunities to interrupt those messages and replace them with healthier ones.

Often the goal is simply to interrupt the moment, plant a seed, and show everyone else in the room that sexism isn't normal, inevitable, or invisible.

Every time you calmly challenge a stereotype, make space for a girl's voice, question a sexist joke, or remind a child that people should be judged as individuals—not by gender—you are helping create a culture where respect becomes the norm.

These moments may seem small, but children are always watching. They notice not only what we teach, but what we tolerate.

“Slut-shaming matters because when people are dismissed as sluts, hoes, bops, and thots, they are denied care and compassion as human beings and in a variety of situations, including when they are sexually harassed, sexually assaulted, or victimized by image-based sexual abuse (“revenge porn” and “deepfakes”).”

—Leora Tanenbaum, author of *Sexy Selfie Nation*

Essential resources

- [*How to Address Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault with Children*](#), Jo-Ann Finkelstein.
- [*Sexism & Sensibility: Raising Empowered and Resilient Girls in the Modern World*](#), Jo-Ann Finkelstein, Penguin Random House, 2024.
- [*Creating Safe and Respectful Schools: Addressing Misogyny and Gender Bias*](#), Joel Levin.
- [*Misogyny and Male Supremacy: It's Not Just a Joke*](#). A youth-focused presentation by Lydia Bates, Southern Poverty Law Center and the research team at the Polarization and Extremism Research & Innovation Lab at American University for SSAIS.
- [*Addressing the Rise and Impact of Misogyny among Students in Grades 6-12*](#). A for-credit free webinar created by SSAIS for Share My Lesson.
- [*Misogyny Free Schools*](#). Website pages with articles, action plan, campaign assets, videos, broadcast media, misogyny stories, and opportunities to engage.

Articles

- [*#MisogynyFreeSchools: A New Movement for Respect and Safety*](#). An overview of resources to address gender bias in schools, SSAIS for Share My Lesson.
- [*Misogyny is Rising in U.S. Classrooms: Where is the National Response?*](#) SSAIS in Ms. Magazine.
- [*The Power of Peer Education to Combat Sexual Harassment*](#). SSAIS for Share My Lesson.

Dive Deeper

- [*Sexual Harassment Defined and Its Impact on Students, youth-focused presentation*](#), SSAIS.
- [*Supportive Measures for Students Experiencing Sexual Harassment and Harm*](#), SSAIS.
- [*SSAIS toolkits*](#) and [*SASH Club presentations*](#)
- [*Articles*](#) by Jo-Ann Finkelstein including:
 - [*This is your Brain on Sexism*](#)
 - [*Bias in Language has profound effects on young minds*](#)
 - [*Girl Interrupted \(Boy Interrupting\)*](#)
 - [*If you don't know it's sexist, does it even matter?*](#)

Websites

- [*Stop Sexual Assault in Schools*](#)
- [*SASH Club*](#), Students Against Sexual Harassment



Jo-Ann Finkelstein, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist, speaker, and the author of *Sexism and Sensibility: Raising Empowered, Resilient Girls in the Modern World* (Penguin Random House). For more than 25 years, she has worked with adolescents and their families in both clinical and community settings, addressing high-risk behaviors, developing prevention programs for at-risk youth, supporting survivors of domestic violence, and creating educational resources to help prevent sexual violence in schools. She served as a program evaluation consultant for health and sexuality education curricula in the Cambridge and Chicago Public School systems. Dr. Finkelstein's expertise and writing have been featured in outlets including NPR, NBC, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Atlantic, The Guardian, Oprah Daily, CNN, Ms., Psychology Today, and others. Dr. Finkelstein serves on the advisory board of Stop Sexual Assault in Schools.

Stop Sexual Assault in Schools

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