**On respect, responsibility, and Mrs. Hall’s open letter to teenaged girls**

Last week I saw dozens of people linking to a post written as an open letter to teen girls from the mom of several boys. Almost as quickly as that post went viral, the backlash hit. It seems like the post struck a nerve – some feeling like it expressed their very own thoughts, and others feeling like the message was problematic.

I am in the latter camp, and my first reaction was to write a snarky post . . . my own open letter back . . . maybe some satire to skewer what I felt to be a condescending and sanctimonious tone towards other people’s children. But I thought better of it, because the more I thought about this mom and her need to write something like this, the more empathy I felt for her.

When I really look at this post and the message behind it, I actually feel sad. I feel sad for this mom and sad for her boys. I think the attitude in this post reflects a lot of fear . . . fear of her boys growing older, fear of their sexuality, fear of their autonomy, fear of their potential. While we may land in different places, I get that fear. I think a lot of parents do. I desperately want my kids to have a healthy sex life as adults. But when I think of the possibility of one of my kids having a sloppy makeout session behind the portables or looking at porn or posting sexy photos, I kind of want to curl up into a fetal position. But hiding my head in the sand about the fact that my children are sexual beings does not benefit me, nor does it benefit my kids. Neither does pretending like it’s everyone OUTSIDE my home who poses a risk to my child’s sexualization, because I have enough humility to know that it could very well be my own daughter posting sexy photos someday, and it could very well be my own son googling a lot worse.

Mrs. Hall and I probably have a lot in common. We probably have anxiety about the potential problems and heartache that could result from early sexual behavior. We probably want our kids to grow up into respectful adults. We probably want them to be respected, too. We want to be involved parents and we want to be cautious of their online life. We want our kids to become moral, upright citizens of the world. We don’t want to raise boys who are disrespectful or who leer at girls.

But Mrs. Hall and I have very different approaches for how to get there. She seems to think she can best help her sons with their sexuality by externalizing the problem. I was struck by the us vs. them nature of this post, as if her own children were devoid of any of their own impulses if it weren’t for the influence of others. She puts the responsibility of their thought life on their female friends. She blames the girls for any potential objectification. For example:

*“Did you know that once a male sees you in a state of undress, he can't ever un-see it? You don't want the Hall boys to only think of you in this sexual way, do you?”*

Whether or not boys are capable of only thinking of a girl in a sexual way after seeing her in a bathing suit or pj’s is a problem to address WITH THE BOYS. Yes, parents of girls should be having discussions about how they present themselves online. I think that needs to happen within that relationship, and it needs to happen with kindness instead of shame. But parents of boys should be having discussions with their boys about their *own* behavior, and how they will conduct themselves in a world that screams to girls that they need to be sexy.

There is a lot of pressure on girls to be sexual. Our culture tells us in overt and covert ways that sex sells, that being sexy equals power, that the shape of our bodies communicates our worth. It’s not the least bit surprising that girls feel tempted to express themselves this way, and this is a necessary conversation to have with our girls. However, I don’t think the context of this conversation should be about boys and their powerlessness to objectify. It should be about self-empowerment, wisdom, and personal boundaries. Because no girl is responsible if a boy can ONLY look at her in a sexual way. And the dangerous message that Mrs. Hall is sending her own sons is that they are powerless to the objectification of women if certain modesty conditions are not met.

Further, our conversations with girls should be approached with respect and understanding. I shudder to think about having a mother approach me with the tone Mrs. Hall took when I was a teenager screaming for attention with my clothing choices. I feel sad for the real-life peers of Mrs. Hall’s children who realize that they’ve been blocked and then read her barbed “no second chances” letter to them online. This is not grace.

The irony here is that Mrs. Hall herself is objectifying these girls. She is rejecting them if they have stepped outside of her code of behavior which involves only one trait: modesty. She’s not asking about their other qualities. She’s not looking at context. And she is teaching her sons that they have two options when confronted with a sexually attractive girl: objectify or reject. I’m afraid this practice is only reinforcing the idea that boys could not possibly view someone who looks sexy without objectifying them. She isn’t teaching her sons to respect women. She is teaching them that only certain woman are deserving of respect.

I love [how Nate Pyle puts this in a post to his son:](http://natepyle.com/seeing-a-woman/#sthash.4J0SnnU9.bZRMp4nW.dpuf)

A lot of people will try and tell you that a woman should watch how she dresses so she doesn’t tempt you to look at her wrongly. Here is what I will tell you. It is a woman’s responsibility to dress herself in the morning. It is your responsibility to look at her like a human being regardless of what she is wearing. You will feel the temptation to blame her for your wandering eyes because of what she is wearing – or not wearing. But don’t. Don’t play the victim. You are not a helpless victim when it comes to your eyes.

Our world is bombarded with sexual imagery. Unless we have our boys walking around in blindfolds, they are going to see it. It’s on billboards and commercials. It’s on magazines at the checkout aisle and at the gas station. And yes, it’s on Instagram and [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/rageagainsttheminivan). It’s not wrong to want to reduce this. But our goal shouldn’t be to solely set up conditions in which our sons who never have to deal with this. Our goal should be to have sons who are equipped to deal with women they find sexy. Because THEY WILL. (Or they may find men sexy. That’s a possibility, too.)

I think it is vital that we teach our boys that there is a difference between finding someone sexually attractive vs. reducing another person to a sexual object. We would do well to teach our boys that one does not have to lead to the other. (We would also do well to reassure our children that sexual attraction is TOTALLY NORMAL).

Speaking of sexual attraction being totally normal, something else really bothered me in Mrs. Hall’s post. She said:

*We hope to raise men with a strong moral compass, and men of integrity don’t linger over pictures of scantily clad high-school girls.*

I’m going to ignore the age specifics here, since she’s referring to her boys who are in high school. But I want to point out that many men of integrity DO linger over pictures of scantily-clad women. The fact that Mrs. Hall thinks these things are mutually exclusive is not going to prepare her sons well, either. In my counseling practice I’ve seen MANY men of integrity who struggle with looking at pornography. Of course, some men do this and don’t have moral convictions about it, but I’m referring to men who hold religious beliefs that place this behavior outside their own moral code. I’ve seen pastors of mega-churches, Christian authors, elders, church leaders struggling with pornography . . . I’ve seen great husbands and exemplary dads who struggle with their impulses as it relates to sexual imagery. Plenty of good men struggle to adhere to their own convictions about sexual imagery or lust. And I’ve also seen that most of these men, when raised in Christian homes, had families that shared a pattern of behavior:

* They were taught to be ashamed of their sexual feelings
* Their parents emphasized female bodies as “forbidden fruit”
* They were taught all-or-nothing thinking in relation to sexuality (i.e. Good men aren’t even tempted by this stuff)
* Their families lived in denial about adolescent sexual behavior
* Their families never normalized sexual feelings
* Their families held the reigns too tight, failing to equip them for life in the real world

These kinds of parental behaviors often lead to the very thing the parents are trying to avoid, because when we pair shame with normal sexual attraction, over and over, we are telling our boys (and girls) that there is something wrong with them. Shame is the fuel for addiction – why saddle our children with that potential? We’ve got to normalize sexual feelings and within that, teach self-control and respect. Our kids need to learn to do this in the context of the real world. Because one of these days they won’t have mom around to block the Instagram accounts of every potentially sexy friend.

We can’t control how others dress. We can try to help our own daughters, and the girls whose trust we have earned, to make good choices. But when it comes to our sons we need to focus on teaching our boys to manage their own thoughts and to extend respect to every woman, regardless of how she is dressed. That’s their job and no one else’s. Trying to protect them from situations they will encounter in real life simply leaves them with under-developed self control and a mentality that blames women for their impulses.