

EDITORIAL

Teach your children well

If female cadets at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy are, as some claim, experiencing sexual harassment, their charges should be investigated and needed corrections made. If widespread harassment goes unreported because upper-classmen can make a cadet's life miserable, that, too, needs correcting.

Women students at the academy, however, are not alone in these circumstances. Women in all occupations and at almost all stages of their lives are subject to sexual harassment.

A ten-year-old girl is attending a matinee with her friends; the next seat is vacant until after the movie begins. A man occupies the seat, his raincoat across his lap. Within minutes his hands begin to caress the girl's legs. At first, she is disbelieving; people don't do such things! Then she becomes embarrassed. Soon she is frightened; too frightened to move, to speak, to object.

She fears her friends will think she is bad. She has been taught to respect older people, to be polite, to think of other people's feelings. Too unsophisticated to realize she is being exploited, she spends the next hour being manhandled; her own hand, pressed by the man beside her, is soon involved.

This child goes to a movie, innocent; comes out of the theatre burdened with knowledge and guilt. She knows what happened is wrong. She knows allowing it is wrong. What she didn't know, still doesn't know, is how to prevent the initial approach, how to stop it immediately, and what to do the next time. This little girl doesn't even know *why* it happened. She feels somehow responsible. She feels guilty, ashamed, and soiled, but no better prepared to meet the next such approach than she was to meet the experience she has just been through.

Society's outraged response to child molestation, to sexual harassment, to assault, and to rape, solves nothing for either victim or perpetrator. A better way to meet the problem is to

educate children so that when they encounter a sexual approach they can deal with it appropriately.

Where society fails is not only in its inability to control perversion, but in neglecting to inform and prepare children to recognize and reject sexual advances. Boys as well as girls are subject to sexual approaches. Institutions of all kinds must deal with this problem: boarding schools, college dormitories, and correctional institutions have known the difficulty for centuries. One of the most demoralizing aspects of prisons is sexual abuse of inmates by inmates. Even in its own home, a child may be molested by a parent, step-parent, grandparent, "funny uncle" (aunt, cousin or friend) or family acquaintance. Sexual approaches to children occur anywhere and everywhere just as do sexual approaches to adults.

In theory, adults know how to deal with the situation; in fact, of course, many adults are no better prepared than most children. They have never been trained to view their bodies as personal possessions, rightfully defended. Until parents recognize the need to educate children about the **likelihood** of sexual molestation, and until parents are alert to the **likelihood** their children will be molested, the practice will continue. Children need instruction in immediate response.

We teach children not to play with matches or fire, to wash their hands before eating, to avoid alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs, and to look both ways before crossing the street; but we hesitate to teach them to say in a loud voice, "Take your hands off me!" if anyone touches them in a way the child feels is wrong.

The female cadets at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy who complain of sexual harassment are well within their personal and constitutional rights to register objections. They are, however, not unique. Other women in other circumstances have similar experiences. And even men and boys, at times, are sexually harassed.