

This "baptism by fire" will be funny in hindsight, I tell myself.

I barely stifle a smirk. I doubt that the men and women glaring at me would share my amusement. Surprisingly enough, even the nicest of people completely lose their sense of humor when perceiving a threat to their children. There is a moment of silence as I look down at the wilting piece of notebook paper my mentor had scrawled a very rough outline on. The answer isn't there, but even if it was, I wouldn't realize it because in this magical moment, I manage to forget what was asked of me.

Welcome to my first parent night ever.

It began as smoothly as everyone in the office had claimed it would. Parents and teachers filed in happily chatting with each other. The principal, a stern looking nun, warmly shook my hand with an amused look that said "aren't you a little young for this?" Everyone politely smiled as another presenter and I were introduced. I suppose our first mistake was that we started speaking. Had we simply stood there smiling, we'd all still be standing around smiling. But, speaking got involved. Questions were asked and perhaps not the best answers were given. Somewhere along the way, smiles faded, tones became sharper and more incredulous, arms got crossed. Heart rates were raised, more questions were asked and less adequate answers were given.

This process repeated itself and somehow a few parents solidified the impression that I was coming to their school to encourage their junior high kids to be promiscuous. This was, of course, so preposterous, I couldn't grasp where they got that idea. How did I suddenly become a symbol of "our culture's tolerance for moral disintegration"? What went wrong? In my bewilderment, I failed to properly address concerns. As later parent nights would reveal similar concerns, I felt it would be helpful to other rape prevention specialists who may be faced with parent nights if I listed some frequently asked questions.

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Angry Parent: We are not comfortable with you talking to our children about sex.

Not so good answer: I'm sorry you feel that way. Why not?

Better Answer: We do not give biology lessons. This program's focus is on relationships, not sex.

AP: But you're talking about rape. Sex must be mentioned.

NSGA: Briefly. I'm sure they won't even notice.

BA: Rape is defined as any internal violation of the body. Any forced sexual intercourse. Most of the discussion revolves around the legal definitions of rape and what constitutes consent or lack of it.

AP: What EXACTLY are you going to say? We are not comfortable with not knowing exactly what you are going to say to our kids.

NSGA: I won't know until I get there.

BA: We do not have scripts or power point slides. The program is meant to be student

driven, but presenter guided. We tend to view this as flexibility and not unpreparedness. Also, we will not be alone with your children. Your teachers and, if available, the principal who you know and trust will be in the room with us ready to stop us, redirect the discussion and assist us with any pedagogical ambiguity should the need arise.

AP: We are not comfortable with you encouraging our children to have sex.

NSGA: I'll do my best not to.

BA: We are not encouraging kids to have sex. We are discussing relationships, rape and sexual abuse.

AP: My child is X years old. I think he / she is too young to hear this.

NSGA: He / she probably know more than you realize.

BA: The students guide the discussion. Children tend to learn as much about the subject as they are mature enough to learn.

AP: What religion are you?

NSGA: I don't see that as relevant.

BA: We are not teaching or encouraging views that conflict with the tenets of [insert religion here]. Our program is not a lesson in morals, with the exception of the belief that rape is bad. We are not experts in your particular religion and would prefer to leave that discussion to the experts, i.e. the staff of your school.

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I eventually managed to escape my first parent night with only minor cuts and bruises commonly associated with diving through the nearest window. Happily, this experience was not indicative of parent nights to come. Though one or two may have begun with equal (if not higher) levels of animosity, every parent night after the first was easily diffused with a rather simple realization: What gets lost in some heated discussions is the fact that parents and presenters are struggling to strike a balance between preserving a child's innocence and preparing him or her for a potentially dangerous world. We are all trying to give children tools to protect themselves. Sometimes we forget that we're on the same side, Sometimes the best thing we can do is take a moment, take a few deep breaths and remind ourselves of this fact.

Raymond Wang

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Raymond is on to something with this last thought. We do need to remember that we are working on one team, with several different members, that has the responsibility of creating a safe, respectful person. It is our role in the community to provide information to students, teachers, and community members that will reduce the occurrence of rape and other forms of sexual violence. This is our focus, but we are just one possible source for this type of information. If we can work together with parents, teachers, administrators, law enforcement, and other social services, we can create a situation

where the children of our community can feel safe in assertively communicating their needs and their boundaries.

Personally, I have been doing the POWER program for almost eight years. I have had many discussions with all of the above mentioned members of this team about how to best serve the community. Rape prevention and education exists in the state of Arizona because of a lot of hard work and dedication. I am thankful to be a part of this team. I am thankful to those within our organization, Casa, and I am thankful to those outside. Without Carol Hensell, who is our contract administrator, we would be completely lost. Locally, we have the benefit of sharing Maricopa County with the good folks at Peer Solutions, Inc. and Arizona State University. It is our privilege to serve this community with both agencies at our side. It would also be remiss of me to ignore the contributions of Karen Bachar and the University of Arizona, Ourtown, SACASA, Northland, ADABI, Mount Graham Safe House, Horizon Human Services, and Wingspan.

Tom Reardon