

# *We Can Stop* **Sexual Assault, Harassment, and Abuse Before They Happen**



We all have a right to safety in our daily lives – to have our boundaries respected and make choices about what happens to our bodies – at home, school, the workplace, and in public places. That sense of wellbeing and safety can be taken away by knowing that sexual assault, harassment, and abuse are common and not always taken seriously.

**The good news is that we can stop sexual abuse before it happens by addressing the bigger picture in which it occurs.**



## **The Bigger Picture**

Too often, our society sends the message that sexual assault, harassment, and abuse are caused by an individual person's choices and failings – that of the victim or the perpetrator.

We should never blame victims for what happened to them – sexual assault and abuse are actions that one person chooses to inflict on another. We need to hold individuals who commit abuse accountable, but we can't stop there when it comes to ending sexual assault altogether. Focusing solely on individual perpetrators and instances of sexual assault, harassment, and abuse is often easier than facing the reality that this type of violence is widespread and common, and the driving forces behind it are hard to see.

Everyone's beliefs, values, and behaviors are continually shaped by the world around them – by unwritten rules on how to behave, laws, policies, and pop culture. For instance, weak policies or lack of accountability for those who have committed sexual assault can lead to an increased risk for perpetration. This means our efforts to stop sexual assault before it happens must go beyond changing individuals. We must improve expectations for how we interact with one another, strengthen policies to support survivors, and promote safety throughout communities.

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## Personal Safety vs. the Bigger Picture

Sometimes when people hear about preventing sexual assault, harassment, and abuse, they think about ways they can keep themselves safe. Prevention means much more than protecting ourselves, not to mention many factors that impact our safety are beyond our individual control.

Stopping these types of violence before they happen requires us to work together to support healthy, safe, and respectful behaviors and environments.

# Prevention

MEANS MUCH MORE THAN

## PROTECTING OURSELVES

### What You Can Do

- Improve skills around asking for consent and respecting the answer, challenge jokes that demean others, and maintain and model healthy relationships.
- Encourage children to respect others' boundaries and bodies, challenge unfair gender stereotypes, and treat others with respect.
- Improve policies and practices within faith communities, community organizations, workplaces, and schools to ensure everyone is treated fairly. Screen staff and volunteers and train them frequently on healthy behavior and boundaries.
- Create and pass legislation that supports survivors and improves equitable resources.

**We can take these steps and more to work towards a safer and more equal world for future generations.**



No Smoking

## Stomping Out Second-Hand Smoke

Stopping sexual assault before it happens can feel challenging – but it is possible. The social stigma about second-hand smoke is a great example of how educating the public and changing unwritten rules and expectations helped address a public health issue.

Not long ago, smoking cigarettes was a widely accepted activity that took place almost everywhere – restaurants, hospitals, even airplanes. Yet people nearby who breathed in the smoke were put at risk for serious health consequences. Over many years, public health professionals and youth leaders exposed the negative effects of second-hand smoke.

Thanks to a greater understanding of these health risks, society's views about where people could smoke changed, and it became less common to see people smoking in public spaces and in the media. And just like with second-hand smoke, it's possible for us to make the necessary changes to eventually have a society where sexual assault, harassment, and abuse are not common.