

CAMPUS SEXUAL ASSAULT: Parents can be important

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Sexual violence on college campuses is pervasive. Thirteen percent of students experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation during their undergraduate or graduate studies.¹ This percentage is higher yet for undergraduate women: More than one-quarter report that they have had such experiences while at college.¹ The highest risk periods are the first two semesters spent on campus, with more than half of sexual assaults occurring during August, September, October, and November.²

Following an assault, many students do not seek on-campus services that are available to them.¹ Friends are important sources of information and support and many who are assaulted eventually tell a parent. The reactions of friends and family can ease the pain but sometimes they become problems, too.

No matter how well-informed or well-intentioned, parents of college students are caught off guard when their own child discloses an assault. The initial conversation about the assault typically focuses on information and emotions run high. The family's history of dealing with crises and traumas shape what happens next. When it comes to sexual assault, parents often want to protect their daughter's privacy and don't turn to others for information and support; it can be an isolating experience and strain a marriage. The parents also can experience a sense of betrayal: Closely involved in their child's college selection process, they must reconcile with the fact that the school they chose was not a safe environment for their daughter. Moreover, their own beliefs and expectations about men and women – and their daughter in particular – affects how they themselves cope. In turn, their reactions can be formative in their daughter's perceptions of and relationship with her family.

In her forthcoming book, Susan B. Sorenson, Ph.D., Director of the Ortner Center on Violence & Abuse, presents a roadmap for parents on dealing with the reality of what comes after a campus sexual assault so they are best equipped to support their child.³

After Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide for Parents details the realities of assault and the choice to disclose through powerful quotes from survivors and their families. The book aims to guide parents in how best to support their child from the initial conversation when a disclosure is made to long afterward. In this situation, it is integral for the parents to serve as a parent

first (not a lawyer, therapist, and so on); it is crucial that parents honor that role, because no one else can be that – there is no direct substitute for mom or dad.

“Let her be in charge. Do not take over...It is really important that you help her regain her sense of autonomy and agency.”

– Susan B. Sorenson, Ph.D.

After Campus Sexual Assault also is a call to action for colleges and universities. Families existed long before and will exist long after the college degree is granted; it's important that colleges and universities acknowledge the role of parents and families and bring them in in a meaningful way. Efforts to provide more information to parents about resources could begin with straightforward conversations at new student orientation and include proactively involving parents in the aftermath of an assault while upholding student confidentiality. Greater knowledge, awareness, and inclusivity can help both parents and schools be of better support survivors of campus sexual assault.



Photo credit: Katherine Cambareri

While speaking with Dr. Sorenson about their experiences, daughters and their parents twisted pipe cleaners as a tension outlet. This image is of one that was left behind. More are featured in the book.

1. Cantor D. et al. *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct*. Westat and the American Association of Universities, 2020.
2. Sinozich S & Langton L. *Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization among College-age Females, 1995–2013*. Bureau of Justice of Statistics, 2014.
3. Sorenson SB. *After Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide for Parents*. Roman-Littlefield, expected release in June 2021.