

TEACHER'S GUIDE

PEGGY ORENSTEIN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *GIRLS & SEX*

BOYS
& SEX

YOUNG MEN ON HOOKUPS, LOVE,
PORN, CONSENT, AND NAVIGATING
THE NEW MASCULINITY



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About the Book

Peggy Orenstein's *Girls & Sex* broke ground and launched conversations about young women's right to pleasure and agency in sexual encounters. It also had an unexpected effect on its author: Orenstein realized that talking about girls is only half the conversation. Boys are subject to the same cultural forces as girls—steeped in the same distorted media images and binary stereotypes of female sexiness and toxic masculinity—which equally affect how they navigate sexual and emotional relationships. Orenstein realized, she writes, “If I truly wanted to help promote safe, more enjoyable, more egalitarian, more *humane* sexual relationships among young people, I needed to go back into their world and have the other half of the conversation.”

Boys & Sex: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent, and Navigating the New Masculinity is the other half of the conversation *Girls & Sex* had begun.

About the Author

Peggy Orenstein is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Don't Call Me Princess*, *Girls & Sex*, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, *Waiting for Daisy*, *Flux*, and *Schoolgirls*. A contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine* and *Afar*, she has also been published in *New York*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and other publications. Her TED Talk has received over four million views. She lives in Northern California with her husband and daughter.

About this Guide

This guide is divided into two parts, chapter-by-chapter discussion questions and then a set of questions labeled as writing prompts. While intended for short writing exercises, these questions can be adapted easily for further discussion, as they urge students to think about ideas and issues presented across the whole of *Boys & Sex*.

The exception to the chapter questions is the final chapter, Chapter 9: Deep Breath: Talking to Boys, which is a chapter offering practical advice for how to talk with young men about sex.

Additional Resources

Faculty who are also teaching *Girls & Sex* can find a [teaching guide](#) for that title. It is free to download, print, or share to course management software. In addition, faculty can also find a [podcast episode](#) with Peggy on *Girls & Sex* on our podcast series, HarperAcademic Calling. We're also pleased to offer [an episode](#) for *Boys & Sex*.

Discussion Questions

CHAPTER 1: WELCOME TO DICK SCHOOL

- One of the boys this chapter focuses on is Cole, who is 18, an athlete, and who is going to a military academy. He talks about the fraught choice: do you speak out when peers are demeaning someone, or do you keep silent, in an effort to make (or keep) friends? Have you found yourself in a similar situation? How did you choose?
- William Pollack believes there is a “boy code” that trains “trains young men to see masculinity in opposition to, and adversarial toward, femininity: a tenuous, ever-shifting position that must be continuously policed” (13). Why do you think there is such a narrowness that defines successful masculinity?
- In what ways does this chapter capture how boys think about, understand, and take part in emotional labor?
- Boys reveal they often have to hide or obfuscate emotional intelligence and feelings. Often in these situations, the word “hilarious” is used as Orenstein writes, “another way, under pretext of horseplay or group bonding, that boys learn to disregard others’ feelings as well as their own” and that it “makes sexism and misogyny feel transgressive, rebellious rather than supportive of an age-old status quo” (33). What are some ways to promote healthy emotional intelligence responses from and among boys and men?

CHAPTER 2: IF IT EXISTS, THERE IS PORN OF IT

- What are some of the ways in which the chapter describes porn as affecting the sex lives of young men? How can these issues also affect young women?
- Some boys describe watching porn as a means of sex education, even though they are away of how unrealistic it can be. How do you think this influences expectations a young man has, both for himself and for potential partners?
- Rape is used as a routine plot device in popular culture, especially in a few recent hit tv shows, where the point is unclear whether to critique culture or to celebrate it. Should we hold media more accountable for how it shows sexual assault and coercion in intimate relationships?
- In Mason’s case, porn created anxiety around real-world encounters for fear he would do something wrong. And porn helped him realize that he wasn’t fully vulnerable and emotionally available. How have the young men in the book so far dealt with vulnerability?

CHAPTER 3: ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?: LIFE AND LOVE IN A HOOKUP CULTURE

- What is the shift in hookup culture? Why do you think culture has turned this way in relationships among young adults?
- What are the ways in which hookup culture aligns with the values of conventional masculinity?
- This chapter talks about the experience of Wyatt, a junior at an East Coast liberal arts college. What do you think of Tyler’s attempts at avoiding the “quagmire” of consent by checking in at every escalating stage of an encounter? And of his belief that active consent can be an exciting part of a sexual experience with a partner?
- Wyatt was also called out by one of his friends for being the kind of guy that goes through his male friends’ female friends for hookups. Wyatt realizes he may be a “feminist fuckboy,” “the kind of guy who says all the

right things, but still treats women badly” (97). At the end of the chapter, it's Wyatt who give Orenstein the answer to Nate's questions about hookup culture on college campuses. How do you think Wyatt navigated thinking through not only his behavior but also that of his environment? How is Wyatt using his experience to help Nate make his choices?

CHAPTER 4: GET USED TO IT: GAY, TRANS, AND QUEER GUYS

- Like Zane and, later in the chapter, Devon, do you ever think about the inherent stigmatism (or lack thereof) of disclosing your sexuality to someone? Or how, if you're heterosexual and heteronormative, you don't really have to? If you are not hetero- or homonormative, do you have a moral or ethical duty to disclose?
- Zane acknowledges that some people in his life accept social queerness, but not necessarily Zane's sexuality—as a young man who like, enjoys, and wants to have sex with other men. In what ways has contemporary media contributed to an acceptance of social queerness? In what ways may that partial acceptance make still make it difficult for young gay men to come out?
- We also hear from Devon in this chapter, a trans man, who spoke about learning how to “walk, stand, and sit ‘like a guy’” and how it felt to cast off the hypervisibility that seems to come innately with being female. Some of Devon's teammates appreciate when he speaks up to try and quell locker room talk. Do you think members of the trans community have more emotional labor to do than most?
- This chapter also discusses a shorthand for consent within communities of gay men, “What are you into?” It is, as Dan Savage notes, “the kind of open-ended question that invites true collaboration and mutuality, not to mention, a broader definition of ‘sex,’” where each participant is “empowered to rule anything in and rule anything out” (121). How does this question make us think differently, and perhaps more expansively, about consent?

CHAPTER 5: HEADS YOU LOSE, TAILS I WIN: BOYS OF COLOR IN A WHITE WORLD

- Did anything surprise you in this chapter on the experiences of young black men within predominantly white educational institutions? Why were, or why weren't, you surprised by what you read?
- Among the pressures young black men experience is, “feeling at once highly visible and invisible on campus, perpetually watched yet also unseen” (137). What challenges do you think arise from feeling like you're in such a paradox?
- How does gendered racism effect non-white young men?
- What are some of the ways the young men in this chapter give examples of being seen as a representative of an ethnic group and not as an individual? How could this affect someone's interpersonal development, especially when it involves intimate relationships?
- Aidan is one of the young men we meet in this chapter. In relating a young woman's frustration with him constantly checking in during escalating intimacy, he says, “With white girls, they get impatient. [...] And that raises my anxiety. Because you can't begin to understand what happens if I just ‘go ahead’” (156). What are external influences that create a culture of anxiety for young black men in their relationships with women, particularly white women?

CHAPTER 6: I KNOW I'M A GOOD GUY, BUT...

- How do we create so-called “good guys”? What influences exist in popular culture and popular assumption that make young men able to see themselves as not that bad compared to horrible bogeyman when their behavior falls short of acceptable?
- What do young men in this chapter learn about coercion? How impactful do you think it is for them to think about the variety of ways in which coercion can be experienced by a sexual partner?
- How can parents help sons (and daughters) understand consent?
- The chapter concludes with Liam saying, “Honestly, I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel about it. I don’t know if I should call the girl this morning as soon as we finish talking and apologize. That’s what I probably should do. But you and I both know I won’t” (182). How does Liam’s reaction make you feel?

CHAPTER 7: ALL GUYS WANT IT. DON'T THEY?

- “All of that to say that our culturally dictated ideas about gender, sex, and desire shape our vision of what assault looks like and who experiences it” (192): Does Dylan’s story of assault surprise you? Does how you think about assault somehow change, when the sexual assault is perpetrated by a young woman and the victim is a young man?
- How can we help young men who are victims of sexual assault feel like they have safe spaces in which to talk about and disclose their abuse?

CHAPTER 8: A BETTER MAN

- This chapter focuses on the story of Anwen and Sameer, students who met each other during college in the Pacific Northwest. What were your reactions to their story?
- Do you think Sameer was sufficiently accountable for his actions?

Writing Prompts

- How do we get young men and young women to understand and practice meaningful consent in their sexual relationships?
- What are some of the differences between how white, cis young men navigate the pressures of intimacy and sexual relationships versus how young men of color or not-straight young men do? What are things these groups can learn from each other about intimacy, consent, and sexual culture?
- Do you think young men feel different pressures about defining masculinity, compared to how young women feel about defining what it means to be a woman? What do you think those pressures are? How do they manifest themselves in society and culture? And how can we make healthier options available for young men?
- In what ways can young men be encouraged to perform their own emotional labor? How do we increase a young man’s emotional intelligence—or make him aware that being attuned to emotional intelligence isn’t a bad thing? How do we break the cycle of women being the ones who do emotional labor?

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