

# THE EXCUSE INTERPRETER

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Discover the hidden meanings  
of common expressions that can  
excuse disrespectful behaviour  
towards girls.



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN  
**LET'S STOP IT**  
**AT THE START**

# INTRODUCTION

## THE ISSUE: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Most Australians agree violence against women is wrong.

We know that:

- › On average, one woman is killed every week at the hands of a current or former partner<sup>1</sup>.
- › One in three women has been a victim of physical or sexual violence, since the age of 15, from someone known to them<sup>2</sup>.
- › One in six women has experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner<sup>3</sup>.
- › One in four Australian women has experienced emotional abuse from a current or former partner<sup>4</sup>.
- › One in four young people is prepared to excuse violence from a partner<sup>5</sup>.

*Note: Figures have been rounded.*

## THIS CYCLE OF VIOLENCE STARTS WITH DISRESPECT

Not all disrespect towards women results in violence. But all violence against women starts with disrespectful behaviour.

Disrespect starts with the beliefs and attitudes we develop from a young age.

Our children form their beliefs from the world around them – what they hear, see and talk about. And from the stories, people and experiences that are an integral part of their childhood.

We just want what's best for them. Though sometimes, without meaning to, we ignore disrespectful behaviour, prefer not to get involved or make excuses to protect our children.

Making fun of girls because of their appearance, or using gender as an insult (for example, 'don't throw like a girl'); these are forms of disrespect that may seem harmless at first in young people.

Without realising it, we can sometimes say and do things that make young people think disrespectful and aggressive behaviours are acceptable.

We might be surprised to recognise some of the most common ways we excuse disrespectful and aggressive behaviour. These include:

- › playing down disrespectful behaviour
- › accepting aggression as just part of being a boy
- › blaming girls who are treated with disrespect.

We teach boys this behaviour towards girls is 'just what boys do'. We teach girls to accept it, and tell them 'it's ok, he probably did it because he likes you'.

Gradually, boys and girls start to believe that disrespect is just a normal part of growing up.

## TOGETHER WE CAN HELP STOP THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

As parents, family members, teachers, coaches, employers and role models, we can have a positive influence on young people and set the standard for what is and what's not acceptable, right from the start.

We can be more aware of the excuses we make, and how they can have a lasting impact.

We can start having conversations about respect with boys and girls.

We can 'stop it at the start' and help prevent violence against women.

## HOW TO USE THIS INTERPRETER

What adults say when males are disrespectful or aggressive toward females shapes young people's views about what is and isn't acceptable – or what might be okay in certain circumstances.

But our language can carry hidden meanings. The things we say in front of young people can be interpreted in ways we don't intend. Without meaning to, we can say things or use words that excuse disrespectful behaviour towards women.

You can use the Interpreter to become more aware of your reactions in these situations. It will help you avoid seemingly harmless phrases that might send mixed messages to young people about respect.

### References:

<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Criminology, (2015). *Homicide in Australia: 2010–11 to 2011–12: National Homicide Monitoring Program annual report*

<sup>2,3,4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2016). *Personal Safety Survey*

<sup>5</sup> VicHealth, (2013). *Young Australian's Attitudes towards Violence Against Women report (the summary Youth Report)*.

# PLAYING DOWN DISRESPECT TOWARD GIRLS

This is when we brush off or try to lessen the seriousness of disrespectful or aggressive actions.

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OR SAID ...	WHAT A YOUNG PERSON MIGHT THINK
▶ “He picks on you because he likes you”	▶ <b>GIRL</b> I shouldn't get upset when he insults me.
▶ “Lighten up, he didn't mean it like that”	▶ <b>BOY</b> It's okay to do it if you like them.
▶ “It's only a bit of fun”	▶ <b>GIRL</b> I'm making a fuss about nothing.
▶ “It's just a joke”	▶ <b>BOY</b> She overreacted.
	▶ <b>GIRL</b> I shouldn't take it so seriously.
	▶ <b>BOY</b> I can get away with this.
	▶ <b>GIRL</b> I shouldn't get upset about this.
	▶ <b>BOY</b> It's okay to make sexist jokes.

# ACCEPTING AGGRESSION AS JUST PART OF BEING A BOY

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OR SAID ...	WHAT A YOUNG PERSON MIGHT THINK
▶ “It's tough being a boy”	▶ <b>GIRL</b> It's okay for boys to disrespect me.
▶ “He's just going through a phase”	▶ <b>BOY</b> It's not my fault if she makes me angry.
▶ “Boys will be boys”	▶ <b>GIRL</b> If I just accept it, he'll grow out of it and it'll stop.
▶ “He didn't know he was doing anything wrong”	▶ <b>BOY</b> I have the right to act this way.
	▶ <b>GIRL</b> It's just what boys do – I should get used to it.
	▶ <b>BOY</b> We're just like that, it's fine.
	▶ <b>GIRL</b> It wasn't his fault.
	▶ <b>BOY</b> I'm not responsible for this.

# BLAMING GIRLS

Sometimes we shift the blame when a boy is disrespectful or aggressive towards a girl. This may imply that she must have done something to provoke the behaviour, or manipulated the situation.

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OR SAID ...	WHAT A YOUNG PERSON MIGHT THINK
▶ “It takes two to tango”	▶ <b>GIRL</b> I probably did something to start it.
▶ “She probably provoked him”	▶ <b>BOY</b> She started it, so my actions are okay.
	▶ <b>GIRL</b> I caused this.
	▶ <b>BOY</b> She asked for it.

# AVOIDING GENDER STEREOTYPES

Gender stereotypes are labels that reinforce outdated ideas of how men and women should behave. Popular phrases imply boys should take control and suppress their emotions, and girls should be passive and accommodating.

While it may not be our intention, these comments often have a negative effect on the confidence and self-esteem of young people. If we continue to use words and phrases like these, the outdated ideas about male and female roles will go on.



## MALES

### HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OR SAID ...

"Man up"

"Stop acting like a girl"

"Who wears the pants?"

"Boys don't cry"

"She has you under the thumb"

"You're so whipped"

### WHAT A BOY MIGHT THINK

Men need to be tough.

I'm too soft.

I should be in control of the relationship.

I shouldn't express my emotions.

She's in control of me.

I shouldn't value what my girlfriend wants to do.



## FEMALES

### HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OR SAID ...

"She's such a bossy boots"

"She's a feisty one"

"Why are you being so uptight?"

"She can be a real know-it-all"

"She's a bit of a tomboy"

"She's a little princess"

### WHAT A GIRL MIGHT THINK

I shouldn't be assertive.

I shouldn't give my opinion / I shouldn't stand up for myself.

I shouldn't have boundaries.

I shouldn't say things that make me sound clever.

I shouldn't be myself / I shouldn't play the sports that I like /  
I should look more feminine / I shouldn't dress the way that  
I like / I am judged on my appearance.

I shouldn't be myself / I should look less feminine /  
I shouldn't dress the way that I like / I am judged on my appearance.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO NEXT

Reflecting on our own attitudes, which might excuse disrespect, and being aware of the things we say to young people is the first step towards making a change.

By talking to young people about respect, we can have a positive influence on their attitudes and behaviours as they grow into adults.

### Other useful tools:

#### THE CONVERSATION GUIDE

Advice and tips for discussing sensitive issues and having open discussions with your children.

#### THE RESPECT CHECKLIST

A practical checklist to help parents identify some important aspects of respect and gender equality to talk about with your children.



Learn more at [respect.gov.au](https://respect.gov.au)

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Australian Government

A joint Australian, state and territory government initiative.