



BOYS TO MENACE

Privilege. Porn. Parent-free parties. An alcohol-fuelled climate in which being nice to girls is considered uncool. A wave of sexual assault allegations involving students from some of our top private schools underlines the need to foster a healthier brand of manhood.

BY *David Leser* AND *Natassia Chrysanthos*

Private school boy, 17: This might sound horrible but I think it's true...and I'm guilty of it – differentiating between a slut and a chick that you actually like.

Good Weekend: What to you is a slut?

Boy: Somebody that just gets around a lot, actively puts on social media large parts of their body, a lot of cleavage. Somebody who will deliberately try and get with anybody they can. I think it's basically just a dude (laughs)...not like a dude but, like, a chick that acts like a dude and just gets with as many as they can.

GW: So the name for it if you're a chick is a slut?

Boy: Yeah.

GW: And the name for it if you're a guy is a dude?

Boy: (laughs) You get called "man whore", but yeah.

GW: But you're more of a legend if you're a guy?

Boy: (laughs) Last year it was definitely, like, you go to parties and see how many you can get with in one night. Mind you...one time we were at a party and I swear this chick got with half of us and we were crazy at her. Like, "What is this bitch doing?" I suppose we wouldn't do that (if a dude did the same)...so I would be guilty of holding up a chick to a different standard.

GW: So when you get with a chick for a night, are you getting a blow job or just kissing?

Boy: You kiss and then you might get a hand job or a blow job...and then you just like move on.

GW: You could do that with four, five, six women a night?

Boy: Yeah, of course, I've got with, like, four women in one night.

GW: So tell us about these parties.

Former private school girl, 18: There's a culture of feeding girls drinks throughout the night to loosen them up a bit...It's all about conquest and "How many girls did you get with?" Whereas with girls...I feel like, yes, you will get with a guy and sometimes you might get with two, but it's not encouraged. It's also not something you would brag about.

GW: Do you think a girl might be doing that because she thinks that's what she needs to do?

Girl: Yeah, definitely. If you've got a guy and you're like, "He's so nice, I want to get with

him and do stuff with him" and then (clicks her fingers) "Okay, done, (he's) moving on" ...Then another guy tries and you think, "Maybe this will be different and he might stay and talk to me and be interested in actually having a conversation with me, and just sticking with me, instead of leaving and trying to go further with another girl later."

GW: Why do you think some girls post sexualised photos of themselves on Instagram, and do you think this creates confusion in boys' minds?

Girl: Because they're taught by society that physical appearance gives them self-worth. It doesn't justify the boys' behaviour.

Private boys' school principal: Kids learn far more from their parents than they do from their private schools.

Father: I can rant and rave at the dinner table and talk about respect and consent...but the minute they get out the front door, or even look at their phone, they're surrounded by imagery and expectations that just mean, for me, as a father, it's like pissing in the wind.

Male psychologist: The whole thing is a conquest; being a teenage boy is about conquering everything. It's about conquering your own fears and doubts by conquering others. It doesn't work; I end up seeing them in their early 20s and they're a mess.

Private girls' school principal: Boys don't know where to draw the line with abuse. They don't know the difference between touching you sexually and forcing themselves on you. Boys think asking for consent kills the mood.

Porn scholar: Porn sex is not about making love...In porn the man makes hate to the woman, as each sex act is designed to deliver the maximum amount of degradation. Whether the man is choking her with a penis or pounding away at her anus until it is red raw, the goal of porn sex is to illustrate how much power he has over her.

Mother: My daughter is from a (Sydney) eastern suburbs school. She tells me that at least half of her friends have been raped. She matter-of-factly describes all men as pigs. This is a much bigger story than the Canberra one.



“THERE’S A CULTURE AT [SOME] BOYS’ SCHOOLS THAT YOU HAVE TO BE SEXUALLY ACTIVE OR FREQUENTLY HOOK UP WITH GIRLS TO BE COOL, OR NOT TO BE BULLIED.”

WELCOME TO the jungle. In this particular jungle – often a none-too-shabby home in a glorious blue-ribbon suburb of Sydney or Melbourne – young women are raped while comatose at parties; they wake up naked, sometimes with penises in their mouths, or with their underpants soaked in blood, after having been groped, penetrated, then discarded like a used condom. Sometimes they go limp, they resist, they freeze. In these hunting grounds – much like the unsparing world of the animal kingdom – there are packs and pecking orders and a fierce determination by some males to achieve social dominance and control.

This is the world Australia was introduced to by Chanel Contos on February 19, after the former student of Kambala, a private girls’ school in Sydney’s east, launched an online petition calling for better – and earlier – sexual consent education, following a life-shaping discussion with friends about their shared history of sexual assault. The petition unleashed a tidal wave of anonymous testimonies from hundreds, eventually thousands, of former and current private school girls nationwide, some as young as 13, attesting to their mistreatment at the hands of boys from some of the most elite schools in Australia.

His friends cheered him on...as he coaxed my head towards his crotch by pushing my head. I remember two of his other friends “joined in”. My hands were held behind my back...they moved me towards the back of the park. I was found by the police with my underwear by my ankles and completely unconscious. Student from Monte Sant’ Angelo Mercy College, North Sydney, graduate of 2014.

He had gone to (private Sydney boys’ school) Shore. I knew his friends, they all pumped him up as he took my hand and led me from the party. All I remember is waking up in the morning with blood on my sheets and my whole body sore. Student from Pymble Ladies College on Sydney’s north shore, 2016.

(The boy from Scots College in Sydney’s Bellevue Hill) held me by my throat...while he hit me over and over, whilst raping me and repeatedly calling me a “f...ing slut”, a “bitch”. I shouted “No!” Every time I got loud, he choked me harder to the point where I felt I could not breathe. Student from Ascham girls’ school, Edgecliff, in Sydney’s east, 2018.

Contos’s online petition, launched three days after former Liberal Party staffer Brittany Higgins had gone public with allegations of being raped in a federal parliamentary office, helped ignite a firestorm around the levels of brutal carnality in Australian institutions, none more shocking than in federal parliament and our school communities. Within days, principals were holding urgent assemblies and sending letters to families, pledging to double down on consent education and grappling with why the situation had become so dire.

Tim Bowden, headmaster of Trinity Grammar School in Sydney’s Summer Hill, took aim at parents who allowed their underage children to hold unsupervised – and often drunken – parties. “I can think of fewer more dangerous, unhelpful and foolish things that a parent could do than to provide a party of the sort described,” he wrote to parents. “These parties cause heartbreaking and life-breaking damage.”

Nicholas Sampson, headmaster of Cranbrook in Sydney’s Bellevue Hill, said his charges faced “rapidly changing contours of adolescence”. He spelt them out in a letter to parents: “Easily available alcohol, illicit drugs, lack of supervision at parties and other social events, the premature sexualisation and objectification of girls and boys, precocious consumerism and perhaps, most pernicious and undermining of all, readily accessible pornography, which displaces love and distorts impressionable views of relationships, respect for others and self-worth.”

On February 24, Dr Julie Townsend, head of the all-girls St Catherine’s School in Sydney’s Waverley, met with more than 120 girls from years 11 and 12 to try to understand better the

“rape culture” many said pervaded the private school circles they ran in. Before the meeting, Townsend had taken the view that alcohol and lax parenting were major contributing factors to this rapacious environment. “These were issues,” she tells *Good Weekend*, “but not the core ones. The bigger issue was quite simply the ‘boys culture’. I can tell you what [the girls] say, [because] I summarised it and sent it back to the parents.

“They say, [The boys] continuously go at you. They scare you into thinking you have to have sex.’ This is what’s happening at the parties. [They say] ‘We have to try not to be seen as super frigid,’ but if they’re too loose, they get heavily criticised. [They say] ‘The boys in the groups are menacing because of their egos, so you get the pack mentality. They have the feeling they own the space.’

“So this goes to the whole thing of entitlement, power, feeling a superiority. Boys make a list of which girls they’ve hooked up with, which makes girls feel belittled. Boys feel entitled to women’s bodies. There’s a culture at [some] boys’ schools that you have to be sexually active or frequently hook up with girls to be cool, or not to be bullied. If a boy is considered frigid, he may be subject to bullying as well as being pressurised to be sexually active, which results in impulsive behaviour taken out on girls. The pressure is enormous.”

Townsend also learnt that boys who were respectful towards girls were often labelled “gays” or “simps”, the latter word popular amongst rappers, men’s rights activists and TikTokers.

Good Weekend: What does the word “simp” mean to you?

Private school boy: In the truest form, “Don’t be nice to a woman. Don’t do something that’s, like, romantic or anything.” And I would admit I’ve said that a lot of times: “Don’t be a simp, mate.”

GW: Why would you tell another guy not to be romantic?

Boy: Hmm. That one’s tricky.

GW: Is it considered unmanly?

Boy: Chicks will tell you straight up they don’t like simps.

GW: So what you’re saying is a lot of your chick friends wouldn’t like guys to be too nice?

Boy: Yeah. Don’t be too nice...I would say that girls do like the guys that are massive dickheads.

GW: Have you ever been really nice or romantic to a girl?

Boy: Yeah... ‘cause she was out of hospital so I bought her chocolate and flowers and copped shit for it.

GW: Did that have an effect on you?

Boy: Oh yeah...I wouldn’t do it again.

Private-school girl: No, that is a misconception (raises her voice). There is a difference between being a pushover with no personality and someone who just genuinely respects women and wants to talk to them. Girls do like nice guys...(because) nice guys respect (us), talk to (us).

GW: Do you know the term “simp”?

Girl: Yeah...(raises voice again) it’s when you respect women. It makes me really angry. When a guy goes to an all-boys school and gets a girlfriend...he can’t really bring her into the group because it’s all boys. It’s not like a co-ed, mixed friendship group where you can just all hang out together. It’s a culture of “If you’re with

the boys, you're with the boys. You don't bring your girlfriend. You don't text your girlfriend. You don't leave to go see your girlfriend."

Of course, you don't need to attend an all-boys school to find young men steeped in misogyny. You can attend a school like Melbourne's co-educational Wesley College and hear accounts – as the nation did on March 16 – of boys making “disgusting” comments about women on a bus following the March 4 Justice rally in the city centre. You can then discover this is merely the point of the spear: that there are more than a dozen instances of girls claiming to have been degraded in recent years by their male peers at Wesley.

“I can't walk through school without passing people that have raped, sexually assaulted and/or sexually harassed me or one of my friends,” one current student told *The Age*.

You don't need to attend a private school to find rape and abuse of teenage girls, either. Earlier this year, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that a 16-year-old girl from a public school in the Greater Sydney area had been violated by her schoolmate at a party, and that the school had been repeatedly warned by the girl's father about this boy's – and other boys' – sexually menacing behaviour.

In the United Kingdom, a movement started by 22-year-old university student Soma Sara gained momentum in tandem with Chanel Contos' petition, revealing more than 15,000 testimonies of sexual assault experienced by teenagers, mainly from London's most prestigious schools, but also comprehensive and coed schools across England.

Notwithstanding these caveats, it is private boys' schools that have captured the nation's attention, because of how frequently young women have cited these schools as hothouses for sexual predation; and for what this might tell us about male and class privilege in Australia. These plush educational institutions – replete with gracious buildings and superb football fields, swimming pools, cricket pitches; music, art and performance spaces; collaborative learning zones and state-of-the-art science laboratories – have long existed on the other side of neglect. At best, they have taught boys how to become “global thought leaders” (The King's School in western Sydney's Parramatta), to “succeed in a world that is constantly being reinvented” (Scots College, Sydney), to facilitate “human growth and liberation” (St Kevin's, Melbourne), and to “crystallise their sense of self” (Melbourne Grammar). They have prided themselves on their ability to turn out well-rounded boys with an interest in society's greater good, many of whom have participated in school philanthropic programs designed to help those less fortunate than themselves.

They have also helped define a boy's masculinity – at athletic meets and heads of the river regattas, on rifle ranges and rugby fields. But also – in the case of King's – through wearing the oldest military uniform in Australia; or, at Scots, through the swirl of bagpipes evoking the courage and sacrifice of war.

At worst, though, such schools can be hyper-masculine environments in which female staff are subjected to crude, sexist remarks by students; where girls are routinely insulted behind their backs; and where unacceptable behaviour sometimes gets rewarded. One Sydney student tells *Good Weekend* that last year, “About four weeks before the prefects got announced, a bunch of guys made a really sexist rap about a lot of [our sister school's] girls.

They started name-dropping them and calling them sluts... and then some of the guys [after being suspended] still became prefects.”

All-boys' high schools make up less than 5 per cent of the nearly 500 independent schools in NSW, but their students, past and present, feature prominently in the Contos testimonies. Not just in Sydney, and not for the first time, have stories like these grabbed the headlines. In 2019, some students from Melbourne's St Kevin's College were filmed on a tram chanting:

I wish that all the ladies were holes in the road,

And if I was a dump truck I'd fill them with my load.

Three years earlier, elsewhere in Melbourne, year 11 students at Brighton Grammar published a “young slut draft” Instagram account to vote for the “slut of the year”. One post read: “Key traits – she's 13 but tits of a 14-year-old, loves anal but doesn't mind copping it up the pussy!!” Two senior students were expelled over the incident.

Over the past eight years, Cranbrook in Sydney's Bellevue Hill has been rocked by a number of high-profile sexual assault cases, including the latest in 2020 when a 15-year-old student was charged with two separate sexual assaults of underage girls in Bondi. Asked whether this belied some darker truths about Cranbrook's culture, principal Nicholas Sampson tells *Good Weekend*: “I'd be horrified to think so [and] I really don't think so.” He continues: “Obviously we're very concerned by specific examples of terrible behaviour, [but] I know the cases to which you refer pretty intimately and I think each one tells us a slightly different story. All of them are connected by unpleasantness, and that is a cause for real concern. But I don't think there's something



From top: Chanel Contos, whose online call for stories of assault revealed the issue's vast scale; former political staffer Brittany Higgins, who has become a national face of the #MeToo movement; Cranbrook head prefect Asher Learmonth, who ripped into hook-up culture.



endemic here that is peculiar to us. I think this is largely a shared problem. And I think we have seen some examples of reprehensible and wicked conduct that we need to understand in order to try and improve the prospects for our society.”

The merits of single-sex versus co-educational education have long been hotly debated, and while there are firm proponents of both, the former is indisputably in decline. Many of Melbourne's top boys' schools went coed through the 1970s and '80s, including Wesley, Carey, Geelong Grammar and Caulfield Grammar. Sydney's have taken longer to follow suit: St Andrew's Cathedral School became fully co-ed under principal Phillip Heath in 2008, with Barker College following under his leadership in 2022, while the 127-year-old Armidale School opened its doors to girls in 2015, after then-headmaster Murray Guest returned from a visit to the UK, during which he'd formed the view that the move away from single-sex schools was an almost unstoppable wave. The board of 102-year-old Cranbrook, meanwhile, recently considered a staff-led proposal – with the backing of Atlassian tech billionaire and school donor Scott Farquhar – to admit girls in 2022.

Deanne Carson is founder of Body Safety Australia, which provides sex education in schools. She notes two matters that are rarely mentioned in discussions about private boys' schools and sex: the first is that boys are also the victims of sexual abuse and violence, predominantly at the hands of other boys and men; the second is that consent education can “open a can of worms” for schools. “If boys commit sexual violence or a sexual crime outside of school, is that the school's responsibility to address?” she asks. “It's a question a lot of schools ask themselves. It's the same if boys are asking for nudes, sending unsolicited dick pics, harassing students online while they are not at school.”

Carson suspects many boys' schools have been reluctant to wade into robust consent education because of this grey demarcation line. Parental pushback is another factor. “With independent schools there's a deep understanding that the client is the parent [and] it's the loudest parent that tends to have the most influence.” In other words, parents from high-fee schools often have educators in their sights. As a father of three privately educated daughters tells *Good Weekend*: “You can't tell a parent his son has cheated in a spelling test, let alone raped a girl. One principal tells me that educators dread opening their inbox because of the bile they receive from parents who think their children are beyond reproach.”

This goes to a third point of Carson's. “If we understand that boys who enact sexual violence often have a high sense of entitlement and have been taught early on to be persistent in all areas of life to become successful, how then do the schools dismantle the very systems that set the boys up in that space? It takes a lot of courage for those schools to ask students to start reflecting on the systems that allow sexual violence to occur.”

Asher Learmonth, head prefect of Cranbrook, demonstrated that kind of courage earlier this year when he let rip with a powerful assembly speech shortly after his school was named a repeat offender. “It's because everyone in this room goes to an all-boys school,” he said. “In year 8 or 9 you'll probably start meeting girls at gatherings and parties. But these girls aren't

the people you're looking to have lunch with on a Sunday, are they? They're not the ones you would want to hang out with after school... They're people you see once a week. From the hours of 7-11 on a Saturday night. In a completely artificial environment ...

"You'd most likely go to the 'gatho' with the mindset that you're there to hook up with as many girls as you can... just so you could tell your mates. You wouldn't care what the girl's interests were or what she was passionate about... they're a means to an end... another dash on your hook-up tally, the topic of a vulgar conversation on a Monday morning with the boys."

Private school boy: I couldn't imagine a chick sitting next to me in class. Like, I literally couldn't imagine it. We had a young politicians' seminar last year and there were two women sitting next to me. I'm not saying that's bad, I'm just saying it's just so strange.

OVER THE past more than half-century, all-boys schools have proved the training ground for eight of Australia's 11 male prime ministers, culminating in Scott Morrison's ministry, where – until recent changes brought about by sexual assault scandals – 16 of 22 members of cabinet were men, at least eight of them products of single-sex schools.

In 2019, SBS reported that of 52 permanent Supreme Court judges in NSW, eight had attended Saint Ignatius' College Riverview on Sydney's north shore, the same school attended by former prime minister Tony Abbott and former leader of the National Party, Barnaby Joyce. The same school where, in 2015, allegations of sexual abuse by Jesuit staff against students began to surface.

Single-sex schools are arguably where the "boys' clubs" begin – both nursery and super-spreader for an often ingrained sense of entitlement that rewards its alumni with a fast track directly into sandstone universities, then to an assumed place within the sporting, corporate, legal and political halls of power.

"You immediately feel excluded," one prominent businesswoman tells *Good Weekend*, requesting anonymity because of her work in the corporate world. "It's not just because of your gender, although it is, it's that you observe the relationship these men have with each other. They have been party to a club of exclusivity and power from a very early age.

"And you suddenly pick up on the fact that

they socialise together, still, and that it's the same group of guys who were together at school or university... and then they marry in a particular way and have holiday homes down at Portsea or Palm Beach. They've marked out their territory very early, with an absence of any lived experience of operating beyond the power base that is entrenched in particular boys' schools about their rights as young men going out into the world.

"Whether it's a level of entitlement, a level of failure to listen and engage, or a misogyny built into their DNA, it is what we see being played out across Australia. Our leadership ranks are filled with the products of these private boys' schools."

That should not necessarily be a problem, according to Scots College principal Dr Ian Lambert, who told an assembly last month there was nothing wrong with the power that knowledge, wealth, gender and skin colour provides a man if he uses it well. "I know there are some [people] who are feeling that there's a spotlight being put on certain people in the community because they're powerful," he said. "And the message that comes through is: power is bad. For example, if you're a white Anglo-Saxon male who went to a boys' school in a wealthy suburb with well-educated, reasonably wealthy parents, then you are powerful. And the association quite often is, 'You are dangerous.' Or 'You're not valuable.'

"That would be a horrible message for you to pick up," Lambert told his students. "... You are going to be powerful... Power can be used for good, to empower others, or it can be used for negative purposes where it's just about self and getting as much as you can and taking advantage of other people... I genuinely want you to reflect on that."

Among OECD nations Australia has one of the highest concentrations of faith-based schools in the world, with more than 90 per cent of independent schools religious or religiously affiliated, according to the ABC's Fact Check. Both Scots College in Sydney and Scotch College in Melbourne, for example, are deeply informed by Presbyterian values and heritage. In the case of Sydney's King's and Trinity Grammar, the majority of governing council members are appointed by the Anglican Synod of Sydney, one of the most hardline forces in the Anglican world.

In 2018, the Sydney Anglican Diocese caused a furore after making a submission to federal parliament asking that Anglican schools be made exempt from discrimination legislation. Archbishop Glenn Davies sent a letter to all school heads asking them to sign it. One principal who refused to do so tells *Good Weekend* the letter was widely interpreted as a way of ensuring schools had the right to dismiss gay teachers (which Davies denied) and that it also severely restricted a principal's ability to appoint staff.

"That is very serious," he says on the condition of anonymity. "[Appointing staff] is one of the most important things you do. You want people who will set an atmosphere, a tone. And you want them to be talented... to be diverse [because] it's the only chance some of our kids have of meeting such diversity."

Dr Joy Townsend, founder of Learning Consent, a sexual consent training platform "for young people of all genders and sexualities", says the problem with a lot of consent education in schools is that it takes a "risk-based approach" to sexuality. "What that looks



"IF CONSENT IS TAUGHT [AT SCHOOLS],

THE FOCUS IS ON THE LEGAL DEFINITION."

like is an emphasis on preventing sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy," she says, "and if consent *is* taught, the focus is on the legal definition. The underlying principles that really need to be taught [are around] bodily autonomy, negotiating mutual pleasure – a lot of those more complex but fundamental principles of consent. And they aren't taught to kids because they're deemed to be too risky... and so that's where we see young people going online, looking to their peers, the internet and pornography to fill the gaps."

Then there's the individual teacher who may – or may not – be at ease with his or her own sexuality, or have any idea about what makes for good sex. One former private-school boy recalls his sex education teacher – a cricket obsessive with Shane Warne posters draping his office walls – offering his year 8 students the following advice on oral sex: "If you can find a girl who will swallow, you're a very lucky man."

"I remember thinking 'WTF', and the boy next to me started writing that down as a note, and I said to him, 'Don't write that down, because it won't be in the test.'"

DR ZAC Seidler, clinical psychologist and men's mental health expert, looks at schools partly through an epigenetic lens, which is to say he believes external and environmental factors influence how a boy's genes – and, therefore, his behaviour – will be expressed.

"Boys are coming into year 7 [at age 12] and the school will either turn on – or turn off – a certain gene expression that they've got," he explains. "They've all gone through primary school where they've seen and heard things, they may have been at a coed school, they may have had a good mother, they may have had a distant father.

"The culture that then exists within the school, that may not even be perpetuated by the teachers or the principals, but is a self-clustering culture that happens among the boys themselves, is going to switch something on that very well may have stayed dormant and never turned on at another school, at another time."

Good Weekend: "We have a quote from a former Cranbrook boy who says: 'While I never assaulted anyone, I felt the environment changed me negatively to someone I was not.'"

"There we go," says Seidler. "It is in the air. It is the pressure to belong to a cohort that



From top: both Tomorrow Man's Tom Harkin and Arne Rubinstein believe men need to develop new ways to build "emotional muscle" and relate to women.



gives you points, gives you a sense of success and entitlement, only when you live up to the code of conduct. We're putting the blame on porn, social media and technology in the 21st century, suggesting this is a new-age phenomenon. No, they have [simply] shone a light on something that has been there forever.

"What needs to happen is for there to be boys within the school...it cannot come really from teachers [or principals]...prefects, school captains, boys on the inside who are in positions of power to infiltrate and to shift behaviour...coming out and speaking from the top and showing what another model of masculinity looks like."

This model might steadfastly refuse to trash-talk girls, it might begin to repudiate centuries of misogyny that has cast masculinity in direct – and often violent – opposition to the feminine. "Because if the guy who's really cool [does] this kind of stuff, then he's created a new modus operandi," Seidler says.

Dr Arne Rubinstein, chief executive of the Byron Bay-based Rites of Passage Institute and author of the bestselling 2013 book *The Making of Men*, believes boys need a defined

path to transition successfully into men. "If we look at some men in their 30s, 40s and 50s, they're still running around as children in grown men's bodies, thinking that if a woman walks into their office they can be sexually inappropriate because their needs or desires are the only thing that matter," he says.

Rubinstein's work focuses in part, therefore, on helping boys deal with their emotions and raging hormones, at the same time teaching them what healthy relationships with women look like. "Discussions of life, love and relationships should be as important as maths, English and science."

This also forms part of the work Tom Harkin and his co-facilitators do at Tomorrow Man, a Melbourne outfit established to challenge narrow masculine stereotypes. Harkin says the idea began percolating when he was still at school. "I was at Frankston High and I was unable to live up to the stereotype because I was a small kid, no muscle, no good looks," he says. "I couldn't be the bulking unit that smashed it on the footy field and got all the chicks and punched on with anybody that said something

to me... That's what I looked up to. It's what I pretended to be in the shower – me shadow-boxing the bad guy and kissing the hot girl."

Alongside this desire for dominance were all the markers for "success" defined by sex. "I knew if I was still trying to get laid when I was 17, I'd be a f...ing loser. So I wanted to get the kiss with the tongue. I wanted to finger a girl. I wanted to get a blow job. I wanted to have sex. I wanted to do these things and I wanted to do them so I could get my man card. I wanted to be respected among my mates and when those things happened, I felt immense pride.

"I went to a public school and every weekend there would be a party and everybody would be getting wasted, you know, binge-drinking. But these were opportunities and I saw them as opportunities; I think we all did. I thought I was an ugly little f... And here I was at a party, and I was gonna feel confident for a moment, and other girls and their insecurities would be lowered as well, and maybe they would do something a bit risky with me, and I would get some."

Those were the days, Harkin says, when, if he wanted "to have a wank to porn", he'd sit at his father's computer and wait for pictures to load in segments, or he'd retrieve Penthouse magazines from his newsagent's waste bin. Now, boys as young as 11 have private access to high-speed gonzo porn where the algorithms are programmed to edge them into fetishes before they've had the chance to "be skin on skin" with a girl.

"These boys are seeing and wanting to do things that us as teenagers couldn't even dream of because we weren't getting exposed to this," Harkin says. "Anal sex, face-f...ing, you know, stuff that they're watching and then trying to emulate with their teenage partners."

And so what Harkin and his colleagues do is bring boys and men together – tens of thousands of them over the years – in schools, colleges, sporting clubs, regional town halls, correctional facilities, workplaces, wherever they gather, to chart a new roadmap for manhood. "We help guys get to their emotional lives in front of each other and to realise that although they thought they were the man's man and they were writing the rules, the truth was the complete opposite. They were being good boys following rules they'd inherited and were too scared to break, and they were pretending they didn't have emotional lives underneath.

"So we get men to reflect on these stereotypes and deconstruct them in the room, and defy them in each other's presence, so that they build muscles to realise, 'If I go against the rules, I'm not necessarily shunned.'"

Harkin is convinced men want to have these conversations, but lack the language to do so: "'Are you all right? Or, 'I need to say something to you that's uncomfortable.' Or 'Can this work? Do you want to do this with me?' Or 'I know that you said you're all right, I just don't feel like you are...'

"Our biggest emphasis," Harkin says, "is on building the awareness and the emotional muscle to rewrite the rules of men for tomorrow." Given what's happening in Australia today, this can't come soon enough. ■

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TACKLING THE "MOST INTIMATE" CRIME

THE STORY of teenage sexual assault is complex to write about. It raises myriad questions about our children's safety, relationship-forming, parental guidance, the quality of education, the influence of pornography and, of course, power and historical misogyny.

This story's authors inevitably bring their own perspectives to it: one is a 65-year-old man who completed his Sydney private boys' school education in 1973; the other, a 25-year-old woman who finished hers at a private girls' school less than a decade ago. One remembers all too well the ways in which girls were routinely objectified at school; for the other, the memories of the culture Chanel Contos's testimonies speak to are still fresh.



Natassia Chrysanthos: One paradox for me is that thousands of young women will tell you many of their friends have a story like this; all these mothers have told me their daughters have been victims of it. That's what spurred Chanel's petition in the first place. But parents won't tell you that their

sons have done this; no guy will say, "One of my best mates has done this." Statistically, it doesn't add up, that nobody seems to think the perpetrators are their sons, brothers, friends.



David Leser: Do you think that's because of legal jeopardy?

Chrysanthos: Yes, partly. NSW Police sex crimes boss Stacey Maloney said the community is quite happy to have more victims than sexual offenders. There's a stigma attached to sexual offending, and potential harsh penalties, which makes admitting guilt very difficult. But it also means that victims or survivors never get an admission or apology for what has happened, which can sometimes be all they want. This is why some are advocating for restorative justice processes for sexual assault. That might take a while, but in the meantime, simply apologising is something men can do themselves.

Leser: I think the best way men can create the change is to sit in our discomfort. To actually think about what we've done: whether we went too far,

how we might be part of the problem, and not to hide behind some general platitude that "I would never do something like that, I'm one of the good guys." We also need to acknowledge how many good teachers and educators there are, and how many beautiful young men there are, and how shameful it must feel for them to read about this and to really know that they've never done things like this; they've never witnessed this kind of stuff. **Chrysanthos:** The line between individual and collective responsibility here is really tricky to navigate. You can't alleviate personal responsibility for taking advantage of a drunk girl and exploiting her. But the external forces that normalise that behaviour are also at play. That's the delicacy of this conversation: sexual assault is the most intimate of crimes; the personal culpability is great. Yet what other issue has so many social and cultural inputs as well?

PODCAST



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