

How my four-year-old showed me the dangers of being polite

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I keep hearing that a massive shift is under way in our attitudes toward sexual violence, harassment and gender discrimination. How with each Ray Rice, Jian Ghomeshi, Dalhousie dental school, Bill Cosby, Armed Forces, MP misconduct and #FHRITP headline, momentum builds. That what started as a few disparate waves of public outcry has become an ocean of discontent.

There have been [calls to arms](#), [pointed explainers](#), [harsh reality checks](#) and countless hashtags. There is no way of knowing if, two, five or 10 years from now, we'll look at this news cycle and mark it as pivotal moment – but last week's reaction of CityNews reporter Shauna Hunt, who told off a group of guys waiting for just the right moment to harass her, was more than a notch in the movement's bedpost. A camera caught one woman reaching her own personal tipping point; she had endured such misogynist taunts before, but couldn't handle another. If one person has reached their tipping point, you know there are more out there. My own tipping point came by way of a conversation with my four-year-old daughter. Perhaps, collectively, this is what will finally push these issues past occasional debate and into real change.

I am lucky enough to not have personally experienced most of the degradation that's been the basis for these headlines, but watching Hunt's controlled exasperation in dealing with Shawn Simoes and his merry band of harassers felt very familiar. I was raised to always be polite and speak up if something was bothering me. I internalized those lessons with a hierarchy. Politeness was the baseline; a bar needed to be met for me to speak up. I learned to be confident, but to ignore some things that bothered me, for the sake of being cordial. Everyday sexism fell neatly into this category.

I ascended in my career and was recognized for my skills – so did it really matter if I was the one who, by default, took notes in meetings? Was it really a huge deal if, when I worked as a waitress, customers would make jokes about tipping me based on how I looked that day? Wasn't it enough that others recognized how gross it was when a former boss, who I later saw at a restaurant, put his arm around my back, grabbed my breast and said, in front of a group of friends, "Now that I'm not your boss any more, I'm

free to maul you!” I knew it was wrong. They knew it was wrong. No need to make a scene.

It was kindergarten-variety violence that sparked a change. Bit by bit, the waves of outcry had turned into an undertow. I started to see the harm in certain behaviours and expectations that I had considered innocuous. The push over the edge came when I realized that my attitude – passive acceptance, masked as confidence – had trickled down to what I was teaching my daughter.

As most parents of four-year-olds know, the answer to “how was your day at school?” can sound like a crime report from the toddler-police. “So-and-so hit me.” “So-and-so pushed me.” “So-and-so wouldn’t let me talk.” These status updates start almost every conversation at dinner. Until recently, my responses aimed for the sweet spot between teaching confidence and empathy – every night, some slight variant of: “If someone hits you, you should say stop, and if they don’t, just walk away. Maybe they had a hard day and don’t know how to deal with their feelings.” The take-away: Speak up if you have to. But most importantly, be polite, deal with it privately. No need to kick up a fuss.

But one night, when I heard the words coming out of my mouth, I realized I needed to change my script if there was any hope of changing hers.

Not drastically. Not hysterically. But a shift. “Sounds like so-and-so had a hard day, but it’s never okay to hit someone. If someone hits you, say stop and if they don’t, tell the teacher.” The takeaway: Speak up. Screw polite. Kick up a damn fuss.

Since then, I’ve noticed dozens of ways I had been pushing her toward that model of passive acceptance, and how little rewrites can make a big difference in how she sees her place in the world. A year ago, if she complained that someone wasn’t letting her talk, I would have told her to be patient, wait until there was a break and then take her turn. I’ve changed that script, too – and a friend’s jaw dropped recently when my half-pint squared herself in front of her six-year-old son and forcefully told him to let her speak. (Unprompted, he apologized and asked what she wanted to say.)

The revelations kept coming. Getting a toddler dressed in time for school can be a herculean task on the best days. Routinely, it felt necessary (and harmless) to use my bigger size and strength to stuff her into her clothes while she fought me off. And then one day, it felt wrong – like I was teaching her that physical force is something she, in some cases, needs to endure. No more overpowering her with sheer strength to get her to bend to my will.

So while it’s much too early to tell if this is really a watershed moment culturally, on a micro level, I can report that it’s changed how one kid is being raised. And if there’s one, maybe there are a thousand.