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Stella O'Malley: Golden opportunity from the sordid details of a horrible night

It doesn't matter what side of the argument you find yourself, some good should be made of this awful case, writes Stella O'Malley



Nine weeks of evidence: Paddy Jackson speaks outside of court after he was found not guilty of rape this week. Photo: Niall Carson/PA Wire



Stella O'Malley

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The sordid details about that horrible night out in Belfast were appalling but the one small saving grace from the trial is that we can actually learn a lot from this case. It doesn't matter really which side you are on the debate, whether you are #Ibelieveher or if you are #notguilty, we can all benefit from meaningful conversation about how this story played out. Indeed parents this weekend have a golden opportunity to teach some significant life lessons and values to their kids.

Rape cases often highlight the generation gap as the older generation tend to vehemently argue, a la George Hook, that people shouldn't put themselves in dangerous places; while the younger generation tend to argue, just as ferociously, that people should have the right to go wherever they wish without being afraid of being raped. It is human nature to cling to your own deeply held beliefs and so some people endlessly repeat that the girl brought the trouble on herself by going up to the bedroom and others argue that, with attitudes like this, victims of rape just can't expect fair treatment within the justice system. But perhaps we could all do with giving some further thought to the overtly sexualised world that produces such a nasty situation?

The tawdriness of the events of the night puts a spotlight on our vacuous and shallow hook-up culture.

How was it that these four men thought that such a squalid affair was a great night out? The girl had gone home crying; how did they think it was appropriate to boast among friends that they were 'top shaggers' and to send sleazy messages about 'spit-roasting' and 'sluts'?

They all appeared to be out of their minds on drink - Stuart Olding, for example, consumed a total of eight cans, four pints, five vodkas, two gins and three shots. How could these sportsmen think such poisonous levels of alcohol consumption were all part of the hilarious good-natured fun?

Parents all over the country are busy reassuring themselves that their sons and daughters would never find themselves in such awful situations but perhaps they shouldn't be so sure as in my work as a psychotherapist, I frequently meet teenagers and young adults who are disturbed by their sexual experiences.

The boys tend to be victims of the easy access to hardcore porn. Porn today is a long way from the flirty, comical porn of the 1970s and 1980s but porn these days tends to emphasise pain, degradation and misogyny. Just like everything else online, it is created in a way that is dangerously addictive.

The problem with porn addiction is that, just like any other dependency, you need increasing amounts to sustain your habit. And so the modus operandi of this multi-billion euro industry is to lure people into ever deeper and ever weirder porn. The shame and self-loathing evident among young boys who have fallen into the rabbit hole of porn addiction is heartbreaking to observe.

The boys who come to see me sometimes wonder aloud whether they have accidentally overstepped some sexual boundaries on nights out. Sadly, they

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mindlessly treat girls like prostitutes. Now is the time for mothers and fathers to have some serious and authentic conversations with their kids about why, whether they are in private or public, they need to always show respect and common decency to others.

Girls are also severely impacted by our excessively sexualised world. Many girls come to me troubled by their sexual encounters as they agonise over what exactly happened when they were so out of it that they don't remember anything about the night - all they know is that they ended up in a bed, naked and passed out.

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Other girls worry about whether they are sexual enough for their boyfriends. These young women understandably want to be attractive and alluring but, in the pornified world we live in, they believe that to do this they must look like a celebrity and act like a hooker.

Sadly, even with all the pre-emptive warnings about inappropriate content on the radio, in the last few weeks many impressionable young girls and boys will have been introduced to the notion of spit-roasting and other equally sordid details that now informs their view of sex. It is the parents' role to temper this by teaching their children about the nature of the porn industry and how it demeans what should be a loving and playful activity. These are difficult conversations of course but they can be lifelong gifts for your children.

Informed consent is probably the most important lesson that parents can teach their children this weekend. This isn't age specific as whether it is playground politics or degrading sexual encounters, everyone needs to learn about the concept of informed consent. Teaching your children both how to stand their ground and, equally, how to ensure they don't walk over others is giving them the tools they need to have positive relationships. The acronym FRIES covers it well; consent should be Freely given, Reversible, Informed, Enthusiastic and Specific.

Freely given means that the decision to engage in activity should be made without pressure or manipulation. If you are too drunk or stoned then you aren't competent to freely give your consent. Reversible means that a person can enthusiastically enter into sexual activity and then, as perhaps happened in Belfast, the person can change their mind. This is why it is important that parents teach their kids how to access their 'strong voice' when they need to - how they need to tap into the strength in their bellies and say 'no' or 'stop that' loudly and clearly.

Informed means that everyone involved needs to be lucid enough to know what's going on. For the record, informed also means that if a person lies about wearing a condom then they have, in fact, committed the crime of rape. Indeed only a couple of weeks ago in Dublin's Central Criminal Court, a man was jailed for three and a half years for this exact crime.

Enthusiastic is, in my view, an interesting concept as this implies that if everyone isn't all that into the sex then it's not consent. While enthusiasm is indeed necessary for a successful sexual encounter, does the need for enthusiasm open up a can of worms that every sexual encounter needs to be good sex? Can a person be tired but willing? Can they be nervous, uncertain or anxious and still be consenting? If parents are to introduce meaningful values to their children they need to be authentic and it's perfectly OK to reveal that

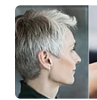


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you feel confused and unsure of your position; hardly any worthwhile discussions are simple or clear-cut.

Specific is the last aspect of FRIES consent; this means that going into a bedroom doesn't necessarily mean that the person has given consent. Likewise having sexual relations with one person doesn't imply consent to have sex with their drunken, lecherous friends.

Thankfully parents don't have to have the answers as none of us do. Indeed, for most complex issues, the rule of thumb is that if you think you have the answer then you probably need to reflect some more.

But if we can learn to confront challenging issues with integrity and if we can teach our children to be strong, kind and decent human beings, then we have at least equipped our children to be a force for good in this complicated world.

Stella O'Malley is a psychotherapist and public speaker. Much of Stella's counselling and teaching work is with parents and young people. She is the best selling author of Cotton Wool Kids and Bully-Proof Kids.

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