





Is Your Daughter Safe at Work?

Every year, thousands of teenage girls are sexually harassed, even assaulted, at work. What smart moms need to know—and what they must teach their daughters


BY E.J. GRAFF

At first, 16-year-old Maureen Smith* loved her new job at UltraStar Cinemas' Poway 10 theater. It was fun to see movies for free, and she liked goofing around with the other kids who worked there, including her best friend, Lindsay. Maureen's parents had been pleased when she'd told them she wanted an after-school job so she could earn her own spending money. At the time, Maureen was a high school junior who not only earned academic awards, but played lacrosse and ran cross-country. Yet her mother, Katherine, felt her daughter could handle the new responsibility: "She was very disciplined," Katherine recalls.

A few weeks after Maureen started working at the San Diego-area theater, Dan Wooten, 32, was brought in to become general manager—and everything changed. "Dan had an air about him that was really intimidating," Maureen says now. His language was foul—"I heard words out of him that I'd never heard from anyone in my entire life"—and his favorite topic was sex. He would describe his own sex life in

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK LUND

*Name changed to protect privacy



disturbingly graphic detail. He would point out customers and ask the girls who worked at the theater whether they'd want to have sex with those men. And he showed off the pornographic magazines that he had stashed in the box office.

Dan wasn't the only problem. The assistant manager, Adam Gustafson, physically harassed Maureen and the other girls. He'd grab them abruptly, bending their arms into painful positions, then put them in armlocks—restraint holds he was learning at the police academy and practicing, he said. Or he'd come up from behind, tilt their stools back suddenly so they'd be terrified they'd hit the floor, then catch them against his hips.

But for Maureen, the worst part was that Dan kept scheduling her to work at night—in the box office, often alone with him. There, he'd make sexually provocative remarks, telling her that he liked the way her hips moved when she walked, for example. He'd also touch her, rubbing her flat stomach admiringly or taking her wrist and commenting on how “little” it was. When she cut her hair, he got extremely upset, and said that women were sexier with long hair and that cutting it was a “sin.”

Although Maureen found it embarrassing and degrading to have Dan treat her this way, she tried to ignore it, hoping that would make him stop. She also felt confused. From time to time, other managers came through the theater, and she and Lindsay would try to tell them what was happening. But the managers merely shrugged. Maureen became afraid of not being taken seriously. “I just thought that was how the real world was,” she says.

THE DANGEROUS BOSS

Many parents worry about the threat of sexual predators on the Internet and try to monitor their kids' online activity. That threat is real, and yet teens are far more likely to encounter a predator on the job. While no one can say exactly how widespread the problem is, a 2005 study from the University of Southern Maine reported that 46 percent of teenage girls who'd worked had been sexually harassed; three percent had been victims of sexual assault or attempted assault or rape. And lawyers for the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) say they've been seeing more and more of these harassment cases over the past several years—all over the country. Because of the spike, the commission recently launched its first educational initiative aimed at teens and their employers (for information, see Youth at Work; youth.eeoc.gov).

Although the Maine study was small, the numbers are not surprising: Other research has shown that the younger the worker and the lower she is in the hierarchy, the



Predators at work often target the “good girls”—the ones most likely to remain silent

more likely she is to be harassed. And the numbers are in line with a 1994 survey, still considered definitive, of adult women working in federal agencies. That study found that 44 percent of women in the agencies had faced some form of unwanted sexual attention on the job.

Most often, teens work at low-wage restaurant, retail, or service jobs, where they're likely to be supervised by transient managers who are themselves low-skilled, inadequately trained, and poorly paid. Their bosses too often ignore sexually tinged behavior, dismissing it as harmless flirtation and not recognizing that predators are unlikely to back off. Indeed, psychologists say that the men are often seeing how much they can get away with, pushing further each time.

Managers are also ignoring the law. In most states, if sexual harassment includes unwanted touching, it could be a criminal offense. And under federal law, it's a civil offense for which the employer can be sued. Most states and some municipalities have *continued on page 224*

How to Prepare and Protect Your Child

A first job makes a teen feel very grown-up. But she still needs your guidance. Here's what to say and do

Before she starts

- **TELL HER TO CHECK** the atmosphere of the place whenever she applies for a job; she should note how employees are treated.
- **EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCE** between flirting (enjoyed by both parties) and harassment (unwelcome sexual comments or physical contact).
- **EMPHASIZE THAT SHE SHOULD** tell you if someone makes her uncomfortable, so you can talk about the best way to respond.
- **MAKE SURE SHE KNOWS** she can refuse an order that is not related to her job duties; for example, her supervisor can't compel her to travel with him unless it's explicitly part of the job.

Once she's working

- **ASK HER IF YOU CAN** drop by; let her supervisors see you.
- **LISTEN CLOSELY** when your teen complains. Suppose she says something like, "Oh, work is a drag." If you simply answer, "Well, yeah, work's always a drag," your teen may shut down, explains psychologist Christine Nicholson, Ph.D. Instead, keep talking. Find out why work's a drag. If your daughter complains about a particular person or "creep," ask her what's creepy

about the man. What about him makes her uncomfortable?

- **BE SUSPICIOUS** if a manager seems to favor your child, asking her to come in early or stay late "because she's the best worker." Another danger sign: He pays attention to her in a way that has nothing to do with the job, such as teaching her to drive.

If your child is harassed on the job

- **IMMEDIATELY TALK** with her manager. If that person doesn't take the situation seriously, call the next higher-up. Keep going up the chain. Write down all names, phone numbers, dates, and times of your calls. Refer to these if you need to call back. Or send letters (by certified mail).
- **STAY ON THE CASE**, even if your teen is uneasy. "You need to make clear to her that it's not about her behavior, it's about the guy's," explains Bonnie Sanchez, a clinical counselor who runs the Albuquerque Sex Offender Treatment Program in New Mexico.
- **LET HER QUIT** if she's uncomfortable; insist that she leave if she's really upset or you feel the situation is risky. If your daughter does stay on the job,

make sure she understands that this is not the time to be "nice." Don't let her think that she's overreacting, even if the harasser tries to say it was "all in fun." Remind her that she's probably not the only victim. "If he's doing it to you, he's doing it to somebody else," said a plaintiff in the Burger King case (see page 224).

- **HAVE HER DOCUMENT** the harasser's behavior. She should keep a notebook and write down everything that is said or done, when and where it took place, and if there were others present.
- **TELL HER TO TAKE A PICTURE** if she can (perhaps with a cell phone) of any physical "evidence"—say, a welt where a towel was snapped against her.
- **SUGGEST SHE TALK TO OTHER EMPLOYEES** and find out what their experiences have been. You may also want to talk to their parents.
- **IF YOU DO DECIDE TO SUE**, find an attorney who has expertise in sexual harassment or employment-discrimination law. Don't delay—in every state, there are deadlines for filing, some as short as 180 days from the date of the last incident.



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additional laws on the books that safeguard employees.

If bosses won't protect underage workers, then parents must. That means alerting your child to the risks when she starts hunting for her first job (see "How to Prepare and Protect Your Child," page 165) and staying watchful once she begins.

This goes for sons as well as daughters. Although girls are more vulnerable, boys can be victims, too, as evidenced last September when Representative Mark Foley of Florida was caught sending suggestive e-mails and sexually explicit instant messages to male congressional pages.

AFRAID TO TALK BACK

In the Foley case, it was a young page who blew the whistle. But it's rare for teens to come forward. A part-time job is usually their first foray into the adult world, and they're eager to appear grown-up, responsible, able to handle whatever happens.

What's more, predators often target the polite, obedient, well-behaved "good girls," explains Christine Nicholson, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Albuquerque, NM, who specializes in adolescent girls and sexual trauma. "These are the ones who say, 'Please, can I do anything for you?'" Men know they can manipulate these girls—and that, like Maureen, they're likely to respond with silence.

Not that the system makes it easy for young victims to speak up. Federal sexual harassment law allows all employees to file a complaint, but it doesn't make any special allowances for teenagers. A lawsuit is likely to be stronger if a victim has complained—if not to the harasser, then to her supervisor or to Human Resources or another designated person. But most

teenagers won't do that. "They're used to doing what Mom and Dad say, what their teachers say, what their coaches say," explains Jennifer Drobac, an Indiana University law professor and former employment attorney. "Yet the legal system expects these girls to confront their

school, she not only got paid for her hours, she earned credits toward graduation. Every day after morning classes, Natoshia and her friend Bethany* headed to work.

Almost immediately, their shift manager, Nathan Kraus, started to annoy them. Some of it was verbal—

The girls felt desperate: Wherever they turned, *they* were being blamed—not the manager who was tormenting them

first workplace authority figure and say, "That's completely inappropriate conduct on your part."

Deborah Healy, who worked as a cashier at a Burlington Coat Factory in Springfield, IL, found it very hard to stand up for herself. A manager had repeatedly asked her personal questions that made her uncomfortable. And one time, when she was alone with him in a locked room as he counted out her cash drawer, he insisted that she sit on his lap. "I just did it," says Deb, who was 17 at the time. "I sat on his leg—really lightly—for a second and then ran to the other side of the room. I thought that was my only option."

Yet a month later, when a higher-up manager told her that the man was being fired for sexual harassment and asked Deb whether she had anything to tell them, she was reluctant to talk about the incident. "I didn't want to be the one to ruin the man's life," she explains. That may sound strange, but Deb was young, naive, and so ashamed of the encounter that, like many unprepared girls, "I sort of felt responsible for what had happened," she says.

A girl may also worry about losing her job. Natoshia Hanneken worked at a Burger King in Peerless Park, MO, as part of a school-based work-study program. A senior in high

school, she not only got paid for her hours, she earned credits toward graduation. Every day after morning classes, Natoshia and her friend Bethany* headed to work.

Almost immediately, their shift manager, Nathan Kraus, started to annoy them. Some of it was verbal—for example, asking the girls to head out to the Dumpster with him for sex. Or if one of them was kneeling down to wipe the floor, he'd say things like, "As long as you're down there, you can do me a favor."

But Nathan also got physical, swiping their breasts and bottoms with his hand as he walked by, pinning Bethany against a wall and groping her breasts, bumping and grinding against Natoshia's bottom as she bent over to get barbecue sauce for a customer. Still, she and Bethany felt they had to try to get along with him. "Our graduation depended on this job," says Natoshia. "We couldn't quit. We couldn't get fired."

GETTING SOMEONE TO LISTEN

And yet, Natoshia wasn't afraid to confront her boss. Over and over, she told him to cut it out. "You need to stop saying this stuff to me because I find it really disgusting," she said. Within a week, she and Bethany reported him to a higher-up manager. The girls didn't know it at the time, but other young workers had also complained about Nathan's behavior. Yet, incredibly, the manager "didn't seem to believe us," says Natoshia. After that, she and Bethany found an internal complaint hotline. The man who answered the phone, says →

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Natoshia, “told us that maybe we were taunting [Nathan] with our body language and by the way we were wearing our uniforms.”

The girls felt desperate. Although one shift manager was sympathetic, no one did anything about the situation. Wherever they turned, they were being blamed—not the creep who was tormenting them.

Natoshia began to fall apart. Once she’d been proud of her long blond hair. But as soon as Nathan admired it, she cut it as short as she could and

Although the company had to agree to EEOC oversight for two years, there was no admission of wrongdoing. Nathan Kraus had been allowed to resign earlier, and one of the assistant managers, while initially reprimanded, was later promoted to manager. (Then, as part of the settlement, he was required to go for sexual harassment–awareness training.)

The legal process itself was brutal. During the mediation talks, Nathan would stare the girls down; when the groups went into separate rooms (as part of the talks), he would pace the hall just outside the girls’ room, smirking at them.

But it took a serious injury before Maureen and Lindsay finally broke down and told their parents what they’d been going through. Lindsay needed emergency medical treatment because Adam, the assistant manager, dislocated her shoulder when he pulled her into one of his arm holds—in horseplay, he later claimed. The parents reported the men to the local police, but when no charges were filed, Maureen, Lindsay, and two other girls brought a civil lawsuit against Ultra-Star Cinemas’ management.

Following an eight-week trial, in April 2005, a jury found unanimously in the girls’ favor and awarded \$850,000 for emotional distress and another \$1.5 million each in punitive damages—a total of \$6.85 million. That July, the judge threw out the damage award as excessive and ordered a new trial on the monetary issue only. The case is currently on appeal in the California courts. But the finding of harassment is not under question.

Today, Maureen is about to graduate from college. Thinking about what she and Lindsay went through can still bring her to tears. But the girls decided to tell their story, they say, to prevent the same thing from happening to other girls.

As a result of her ordeal, Maureen has decided to become a lawyer specializing in sexual harassment cases. “The best way to stop it,” she says, “is to make companies realize that they need to take action against it. And the best way to do that is through the legal process.”

She knows that the work won’t be easy, but she remembers clearly what kept her going during the stressful litigation and its aftermath. “Every time I wanted to stop,” she says, “I thought about the fact that Dan might go back—and that there might be other Dans out there doing the same thing right now.” ■

Most teens are afraid to speak up. “They’re used to doing what Mom and Dad say, what their teachers say,” explains one expert

dyed it a gloomy brown. She got a nose ring, a belly ring, a tongue ring. Looking back, Natoshia sees that she was silently “screaming out for help, too afraid to ask out loud.”

Finally, Bethany told her older sister, who got the girls an appointment with a lawyer. The appointment was scheduled for the morning, and Natoshia, ever the dutiful girl, did not want to miss school without a parent’s note. So she finally told her mom what had been going on. “It felt really, really good that someone listened to us and believed us,” says Natoshia.

The lawyer took the case, and the EEOC, after investigating and concluding that the law had been violated, filed a lawsuit, with seven girls as plaintiffs. In December 2004, Midamerica Hotels Corporation and Northwest Development Company, which operated that Burger King (along with 37 others), settled for \$400,000 in damages.

But the girls didn’t feel vindicated.

Today, Natoshia is still struggling and has dropped her plans to go to nursing school. Since high school, she has held a series of jobs, and by her own admission, she currently has no boyfriend and only a few girlfriends. “Once something like this happens, it changes your whole perspective on everything,” she says.

THE BEST WAY TO STOP IT

Maureen Smith’s problems at the movie theater got worse before they got better. After Maureen began dating Travis, an 18-year-old student whom she’d met through her church group and who had also worked at the theater, Dan Wooten became even more lewd. Then one night, Maureen came home late and thought that she spotted Dan’s car on her street. As the garage door closed, her cell phone rang. It was Dan. He asked where she’d been, what she’d been doing, and why she was getting home so late. He’d become a stalker.