

Our Kids and the Workplace

By Kathleen Peratis

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Thousands of children will go to work with their mothers or fathers on Ms. Magazine's "Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day" in April. Most of the kids will spend the day in a white-collar enclave, the sort of place they may hope or expect to inhabit in four or eight or 10 years. But much sooner, many of them will be going to work in places that are considerably less well-mannered — fast-food restaurants and large chain retail stores — and they will be ill prepared for what lies ahead.

The daughter of a friend of mine works in one such place, a fast-food restaurant. A few weeks ago, my friend asked me if the laws against sexual harassment apply to 16 year olds. She came to learn that the 19-year-old assistant manager (and scheduler) was hitting on her daughter. Her daughter was holding him off, but she knew her time was running out.

This girl's experience is not uncommon. In early December, the Washington Post reported that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had filed a lawsuit on behalf of a 17-year-old high school student and part-time waitress against a St. Louis fast-food restaurant, Steak 'n Shake Operations. A cook had grabbed, threatened and exposed himself to her, she alleged, and when she complained, the manager suggested it would be better if she quit. This was the commission's 25th sexual harassment lawsuit on behalf of teens in 2004, up from eight in 2002.

A few days later, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission announced a \$400,000 settlement with a Burger King franchise on behalf of seven young women, six of them high school students, whose complaints to assistant managers of similar conduct went unheeded.

One anecdote and a few dozen lawsuits do not make a trend — but, as with all forms of sexual abuse, the experience is often rampant long before official reports show up on the public radar screen. Reliable data on sexual abuse of kids at work are sorely lacking, but it seems that young workers are seriously at risk in the places of employment most likely to hire them.

About 3 million kids work in part-time jobs during the school year and a million more during the summer. All told, according to a 2002 study by sociologist Susan Fineran, 80%-90% of teens are employed part time at some point during their high school years. In her groundbreaking study of more than 700 part-time employed high school students in Maine, Fineran reports that one-third of them experienced sexual harassment at work.

Little wonder: The sexualization of these kids has become part of the landscape.

In September, Playboy.com announced that it was seeking America's sexiest McDonald's employees "to serve a little shake with their fries" and to pose for the upcoming "Women of McDonald's" online pictorial. On his late night television show, David Letterman observed of the prospective contestants: "They are just like McDonald's — cheap and not hot enough."

Funny line, but I wonder if he knows how young they are. As many as 70% of McDonald's employees are under the age of 20; most have never been employed before. And because of McDonald's extraordinarily high annual turnover rate, the employees are often supervised by people not much older than they are, people who have little managerial experience or, more likely, none at all — which accounts for why complaints are ignored, and the victims and their parents have little recourse but to seek legal intervention.

Kids are not ignorant of the phenomenon of sexual harassment, but they get their information from television and movies, where it is likely to be trivialized, or from a women's studies class, where the emphasis is on ideology, not on the nuts and bolts of workers' rights. For a young, and especially a first-time worker, if the workplace is raunchy, she thinks that must be the way things are in the real world. If a supervisor talks to her or touches her inappropriately, she wonders if she is being a big baby for finding it objectionable and worries whether reporting it will just get her in trouble. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has launched a program to address this ignorance called Youth@Work, one of the few programs aimed at teen workers from a rights perspective. But at best it will reach a fraction of the audience that needs the information.

That audience includes boys, 10% percent of whom, according to Fineran's study, also experience sexual harassment at work. The differences between the groups — for example, the harassers of girls were mainly males, but the harassers of boys were both males and females — points to the need for further studies. More significant, perhaps, is that girls felt much more upset and threatened by the harassment than the boys did, though the long-term impact on either group is unknown.

Sexual harassment of young workers is not news to Marie Wilson, former chair of the Ms. Foundation, who launched "Take Our Daughters To Work" in 1992. She intervened in a "situation" in the Iowa state legislature in the mid-1970s involving young female pages who were being sexually harassed by middle-aged male legislators. She engineered a sit down among the pages and the legislators, and what emerged seemed to be an understanding and a solution. Permanent? Probably not.

We try to arm our kids to face so many hazards, from smoking to college anxiety, from peer pressure to bad politics, but we can't arm them against a hazard we don't know about. Add this one to your list.

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