

# Teens Need Parenting About Sexuality

## *Raising Teens*

**Anna Lee Court**

### **Teens' voices**

“A lot of parents say you shouldn't have sex, but they won't have the talk with you. They're scared to have the sex talk; you should just know, and that's it. My mom said to me, “if you ever get pregnant, you're out of the house.”

FROM *WHAT WE CAN'T TELL YOU: TEENAGERS TALK TO THE ADULTS IN THEIR LIVES*  
BY KATHLEEN CUSHMAN, NEXT GENERATION PRESS, 2005

“A few years ago, my dad just handed me a box of rubbers. He didn't say a thing.”

SKOWHEGAN HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR

In this column, we consider why the on-going conversation about sexuality with our teens is so difficult but such a critical part of parenting. We describe possible goals for this conversation including treating boys and girls equally. We discuss when to start these conversations. We end the column with some disturbing statistics that show how important it is that we step up to the plate on this issue!

In the next column, we will discuss what our teens mean by “sex”, and how to prepare ourselves for, and express our values in, talking with our teens. We provide a short list of some of the things they need to know, and recommend resources to support parents.

### **The most important conversation we don't have**

Our teens are growing up in a culture that uses sex to sell everything. They are exposed to media messages that project consequence-free sex as routine. Unless we talk to our children about sexuality, they will learn about it first from the media or from someone else, and we may not like the messages these sources convey.

There are many reasons why we don't we have this conversation. We overestimate what our children know about sex. A survey of 12,000 teens and their parents showed that the kids actually know very little while the parents thought they knew a lot.

We think talking about sex will make our teens more curious. We hold onto the belief that if we tell them about sex, it's as if we give them permission. In fact, studies show that when we openly communicate with our teens about sexuality, they are better able to resist peer pressure, delay sex until they are older, carefully and responsibly consider

their choices about sexual behavior, and develop the moral and ethical values that lead them to wise decisions.

Another reason we don't have this conversation is that we don't know when to start talking about sex or what to talk about. We worry that we will give them "too much, too soon." We worry about giving mixed messages if we preach abstinence while telling them about birth control and protection against sexually transmitted diseases.

Possibly, we prefer not to think of our teens as sexual beings. Often, it's awkward and discomforting to talk about sex. Our parents didn't talk to us about it, and "we turned out alright." Finally, we think we can just "let the schools do it."

Our children will not thank us if we avoid this critically important communication. They need clear and loving guidance to develop healthy, appropriate attitudes toward their own sexuality. Their bodies are changing dramatically and they need to learn to manage their developing sexual feelings. Without our help, our teens may feel caught in the "Do It Now!/Just Say No!" crossfire. They need us to teach them a more realistic framework for decision making. Otherwise, they are more likely to experiment with risk-taking sexual behaviors far beyond their developmental capabilities.

Our teens also need us to guide them to have healthy and respectful romantic relationships. "Hooking up" (sexual relationships without love and commitment) is increasingly becoming the norm for many young people.

### **Consider these goals**

It's up to each caring adult to establish the goals for conversations with our teens about sexuality. These need to be consistent with our personal, parental and religious values.

It's not just about damage control. Of course, we want our teens to avoid pregnancy and disease, and we don't want them to be exploited. But our broader goal is to support their development toward healthy sexual adulthood in every way -- physically, emotionally, socially and ethically.

Abstinence is the safest choice but difficult to achieve in the relatively long period between sexual maturity and adulthood/marriage. Our kids need more than slogans. If instruction in abstinence is to succeed, we need to explain it in a way that recognizes that our teens have sexual feelings. We need to support their own decision-making process (it is their decision, after all) by discussing with them how they will know they are ready for sex. Or not ready. We need to support their capacity for self-knowledge and self-restraint.

We often give very different messages to boys and girls regarding sexual activity. Although girls are frequently cautioned to wait to become sexually active, boys are not. Girls are made to feel that they have the chief responsibility for resisting pressure for sex and preventing pregnancy. We can do better than this! The "boys will be boys" excuse for irresponsible behavior or behavior that exploits just doesn't cut it any more.

## **When to start**

Our children are learning about sex all the time from the media, our culture, and other children, and they are curious. At a young age, they are aware that sex is a special topic of some importance. We should be answering their questions as they come up. Sex educators tell us that children will keep asking questions through fourth or maybe fifth grade, but by sixth grade they will discount us as resources if we haven't started talking to them about sexuality.

We need to talk with our teens about sexuality before they are faced with dilemmas. Unfortunately, this is happening to them at an earlier age. By middle school, young teens are likely to have heard of kids their own age engaging in oral sex, and by eighth grade they are likely to know someone who has "gone all the way."

Instead of being worried about telling them "too much, too soon," we should worry about "too little, too late." These conversations should be open and on-going. If we start at an early age, and have repeated, age-appropriate discussions with our children, we will get comfortable with this area of parenting. We need to create opportunities for our children to talk to us on these subjects, and we need to listen to their perspectives. For very reluctant teens, we may need to discuss sexuality so that they can hear the conversation and not confront them directly. They will be listening.

## **Some sobering statistics**

Usually we don't provide scary statistics in these columns, but this subject is too important to hold back. Talking to our teens about sex can keep them from becoming one of these statistics:

50% of Americans will have had a sexually transmitted disease by the time they reach 24! Many of these young people will not even know they have an STD and will go untreated.

While Maine has the fifth lowest rate of teen pregnancy in the country, there are some areas of our state with very high rates. Somerset County has the second highest rate of teen pregnancy among Maine counties and some towns in Somerset County have rates that are more than twice the state average.

## **Become an advocate**

May is Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month and is observed in states and communities throughout the country. Even if we don't have children or our children are grown, we can help our young people by becoming advocates for all youth with respect to healthy decisions about sex. Call the Family Planning Association of Maine (207-662-7524) and ask how you can help.