

## Sexual Decision-Making: The Student View

Recently, the Coalition assembled some members of its panel of teen consultants to discuss how parents can be helpful as their teenagers make decisions on issues involving sex. The panel was moderated by Julie Terraciano, MFCC, a parent and chair of the Coalition's Issues and Choices committee. Here's what the students had to say:

How can parents help as their kids deal with sexuality?

- My parents had been discussing sex with me for years, but one day they just asked me straight out if I'd had sex before. When I said "yes," they said, "Be safe." They knew they'd told me about the dangers, and they trusted that I would stay safe and not do anything to harm myself.

- It's not helpful for parents just to tell their kids not to do it, because kids will do it anyway if they want to — it's a lot like drinking in that way.

- Parents should just tell their kids how to stay out of bad situations and let them know they are there if the kids want to talk.

- My parents have always been realistic, and I've always been able to talk to my mom. I had my first serious relationship in my junior year, with the potential for sex, and she always made sure I had condoms. Just the fact that she was willing to talk and wasn't scared off was really helpful.

- Parents like to be clued in on what's going on. My mom sometimes asks if there's anything I want to tell her, and if I say "no," she doesn't push. Even then, it's nice to know that she cares and she's there. I know they just want me to be safe.

- I don't think parents really want to know what you're doing. Once my dad said, "I know we can't control you, so be



*I didn't want it to be something that I did for the first time just to get that over with.*

smart." I guess that's OK.

- I think it's OK for parents to let the school take that over at this stage. Parents can kind of be a back-up.

- But if parents have a really strict moral code, they can't rely on school.

How do teens decide if they're ready to be sexual?

- Sometimes, if their friends are doing it.
- I didn't want it to be something that

I did for the first time just to get that over with — I want it to mean something. To some kids, it doesn't mean anything and they take it seriously — they'll do it with anybody. Those are the kids who get into trouble with sex.

- It's about listening to yourself — for me, if it feels awkward, it's not going to happen. And that makes me feel good — it makes me respect myself more.

- Also, actually having sex isn't the only intimate thing you can do with a girlfriend or boyfriend — there's plenty of other things.

*continued on page 2, col. 1*



**What They're Saying** page 2  
**Girls' Self Esteem** page 3  
**A Father's Review** page 3  
**Parenteen Index** page 3

## Talk Early, Talk Often: Talking to Teens About Sex

By Nancy Adler, Ph.D.  
*Professor of psychology, Departments of Psychiatry and Pediatrics, UCSF  
 Mother of two daughters*

ety does not deal well with sex and sexuality and we see the results in adverse consequences of unprotected intercourse. The United States has the highest

There are few things that create greater anxiety for parents than the prospect of talking with one's child about sex.

There are numerous stories and jokes about explaining the birds and the bees to our young children. However, there is little discussion about how we handle these issues with adolescent children. As parents, we are given very little guidance.

There are many aspects of sex and sexuality to discuss, including our own values about sex and the health risks associated with sexual behavior. This task is not made easier by the culture in which we are all living; American soci-

*We have the highest rates of STDs and of teenage pregnancies of any industrialized nation.*



"hidden epidemic" of sexually transmitted diseases pointed out that our teenagers get very mixed messages. On the one hand, they are told not to engage in sexual activity. On the other hand, they are bombarded in the

*continued on page 4, col. 1*

### The Student View (continued from page 1)

- Lots of my friends are waiting. In my school, girls can get a bad reputation if they're too sexually active.

Boys are called studs, but girls get called sluts.

- It can be hard for girls — it's like you're either a slut or a prude. There's nothing in between. But for boys, that works out either way. If your girlfriend is a slut, that means you got some, but if she's a prude, it's assumed you tried but it's not your fault that you didn't get any.

- And if a guy waits to have sex, girls like that — it's like he's cute; he's waiting for the right person.

- For guys, there might be more pressure to have sex — girls don't do it because they worry about pregnancy, but for guys, the consequences are minimal.

- I have a couple of friends who are considering having sex, and it worries me that they're so indecisive, because it makes me think they're not really ready.

- Lots of kids seem to lose their virginity in their junior year — there's just a huge sweep. You're more likely to have a serious relationship by then. Plus lots of kids can drive, and you can do things in cars. Driving changes everything. You have a lot more freedom at that point. Parents really have to let go then.

- It's different for everyone. Freshman year is too young — either they're doing it with someone older or it's a cry for help. Some kids think they're ready and ahead of the game, but there's an age when it's just too early.

What about the issue of safe sex? Have kids absorbed that message?

- Yes! At my school we practice putting condoms on zucchini and bananas — and on a big plastic penis. We call it Mr. Penis.

- In my health class we have condom relay races — seeing how fast you can

put them on a banana. We research condom prices at local stores. One thing they really emphasize is that if you feel uncomfortable going to buy



*If you feel uncomfortable buying condoms, you're not ready to have sex.*

condoms, you're not ready to have sex.

- At my school we don't have any sex ed, but I think kids at this age generally know what's going on. If you don't, you just ask your friends.

- Kids understand that safe sex is serious. They give each other condoms. If you know a friend is going to be doing something, you talk about it.

- Girls, especially, need to look out for each other. You don't want to have to rely on the guy to have a condom.

Do teens worry more about pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases?

- I don't worry about AIDS with the kids I hang out with, although I know I shouldn't say that. But I do know I have to keep myself from getting pregnant. That's more of an emotional thing.

- I have one friend who got drunk and had unprotected sex and thought he got AIDS. As it turned out, he didn't, but he really freaked. He's been abstinent since then.

- I'm really worried about AIDS, but I don't think I would be if I knew the boy had never had sex before.

- At my school, they show us a slide

show of deformed genitalia from STDs — it scares everyone out of their minds. No one has sex in freshman or sophomore year because of that. And afterward, pretty much everyone uses protection because of those slides.

What kinds of things do parents do that are not helpful?

- My parents just assumed I was going to sleep with my boyfriend, even though I wasn't. I don't think they should make those assumptions.

- My parents still won't let me have my boyfriend in my room with the door closed! I know it's just because they care, but it

still bothers me — it's like they don't trust me.

## What They're Saying

"Parents play important roles...If you are too shy or embarrassed to talk about (sex) yourself, you still need to make sure these conversations are taking place. Don't let your personal discomfort cost you your adolescent's life..."

Mike Riera, Ph.D.  
*Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers*

"Teenage sexual activity knows no racial or socioeconomic barriers or boundaries."

Victor Strasburger, M.D., from chapter "Everything You Wanted to Know About Teenage Sex" in *Getting Your Kids to Say 'No' in the '90s When You Said 'Yes' in the '60s*

"Adolescents have a special need for closeness, and if that need is not being met at home, they may seek alternative ways of fulfilling it."

Victor Strasburger

"...Those who teach and counsel adolescents say they have no question that there has been a significant rise in the prevalence of oral sex and a decline in the age of the participants...oral sex has become a com-

If you could tell your parents one thing about helping you deal with these issues, what would it be?

- Parents should explain what they're going through — what they're thinking, why they act the way they do sometimes. Then we'd be more likely to say what's going on with us.

- It bothers me that my parents worry so much. Parents should just let kids know what they expect. They should know that we'll make the choices that are right for us. Kids usually make pretty good choices.

- I know my body, and I know most of my limits. The ones I don't know, I'll learn from testing myself, not from them going at me.

- If I'm with someone, my parents should know there's a reason — a sense of caring and respect. ☼

monplace initiation into sexual activity, widely perceived by many young people as less intimate, and less risky, than intercourse."

*The New York Times*, April 5, 1997.

"By ninth grade, 38 percent of teenagers are sexually active."

Kaiser Family Foundation Survey, Spring 1996.  
*The New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1996

"Only about one-third of girls from 15 through 19 use contraception the first time they have sex. In a survey of 1,510 Americans from 12 through 18 conducted for the Kaiser Family Foundation last spring, fewer than half

of sexually experienced teenagers said they always used contraception when they had sex."

*The New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1996

"...what alarms health officials most is that teenagers and young adults are now the primary victims of STDs. (Most people, according to statistics, are contracting AIDS in their late teens.)"

"Young, Active and Infected," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 31, 1994

# Reversing the Plunge in Adolescent Girls' Self Esteem

**S**ixty percent of 9-year-old girls have already been on a diet," says Emily Hancock, Ph.D., therapist and author of *The Girl Within*, who spoke at a Parents' Coalition forum in January. Hancock noted that our culture is sexualizing girls at a younger and younger age. "The media is a tidal wave," she said. In her Harvard doctoral study of women between the ages of 30 and 75 who were asked to describe their lives, many chose to recall their ninth year as a time when the core of their identity was most strongly felt — "before culture came along with pruning shears by age 11 to 13."

Traditionally at age 9, the adventurous, independent spirit is strong and these self-possessed girls live from the inside out, Hancock said, not yet so aware of how they look and "as subjects of their own experience rather than objects." They are fearlessly curious, their interests are wide and their career goals are clear and aimed high.

Later, Hancock pointed out, girls are often subtly discouraged from pursuing these ambitions out of parents' protective tendencies. While boys are often encouraged to "flex their muscles," girls receive messages to become compliant. By age 15, girls' self-esteem generally reaches the lowest point.

Hancock gave parents some ideas on how to sustain the girlhood energy and spirit through adolescence. Many of these tips can help boys as well.

- Have positive, strong female role models around.
- Be aware of this 9-year-old stage and note their goals so you can remind them later "when they have amnesia."
- Be aware of who you look up to and have them as your allies.
- Ask your daughters (sons) who they want to be at age 25.
- Take them seriously as people — remind them that they are more than their looks, popularity and grades.
- Recognize them for the new people they are becoming as they shed their childhood. (This can be hard



*Girls are often subtly discouraged from pursuing their ambitions out of parents' protective tendencies.*

- because of their own uncertainty.)
- Develop an authentic relationship, being honest and sharing your own experience when appropriate.
- Help them speak in their own voice instead of the clique's.

• Role-model a sense of play by recapturing your own playfulness. What really will sustain girls, Hancock believes, is what they learn in their families. Hancock has also studied college-age girls; has a chapter in a new book, *An Intricate Weave: Women Write About Girls and Girlhood* (ed. Marlene Miller); and has started an online magazine, *Moxie*, for teenage girls. Its web address is <http://www.moxiemag.com> ☼

## BOOK REVIEW The Wonder of Boys

Reviewed by Roger Torkelson, Parent of two sons in college

**W**orking primarily with math-related ideas or with my hands, I find that for me, the consideration of emotionally-laden concepts is often a shift. Thus I brought a degree of skepticism to Michael Gurian's *The Wonder of Boys* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996). I was pleasantly surprised at how meaningful it was. His insights helped me to communicate better with my sons.

The author reflects on why it is difficult to raise emotionally healthy sons. His goal: raising boys with a spiritual understanding of who they are.

We need to go beyond the core family in our sons' upbringing. Mr. Gurian emphasizes that a father needs other males to help "with strong guiding hands" and with honest conversation. Uncles, coaches, teachers, fellow church-members, fathers of his son's friends and friends of his own need to be involved. This is even more important as we face the breakup of the extended family and the detrimental effects of divorce.

The chapter entitled "Teaching Boys about Sex and Love" is key. Many fathers have trouble communicating

with their sons about sex. Mr. Gurian makes a point of comparing our culture with more "primitive" cultures. These societies are "teaching the boy, and then the young man, how important his sexual power is in the great cycle of life." Through our silence and through two-dimensional, media role models, we are failing to teach our sons the relational and spiritual connections of which sexual activity is a part. There are good reasons for talking openly and bluntly with our sons rather than lecturing them on the physical act of intercourse and the "negative" consequences — pregnancy, STDs. Further, tying sex to guilt is particularly difficult for young men to resolve.

Mr. Gurian gives us insight into why boys have difficulty getting their emotional maturity on a par with their sexual drive. Our culture falls short because it fails to integrate three intertwined concepts: sex, love/intimacy and commitment. By taking these into consideration, fathers (and mothers) may have better dialogue with their sons.

Some other background ideas are necessary for healthy talks about sexuality. We may want to recognize the consequences of 1) a testosterone-driven body; 2) the emotional and developmental differences of boys and girls during all stages of development; and 3) the confusing messages impacting our young men from media, peers, parents and social institutions.

I recommending both parents' reading *The Wonder of Boys* as a first step toward healthy communication between them and their sons. ☼

## The Parenteen Index

Interested in obtaining some back issues of *Parenteen*? Here's what we've covered in previous issues:

- Parents' Coalition: Developing a Sense of Community — Fall '94
  - Drugs & Alcohol — Winter '94-'95
  - Communication — Spring '95
  - Diversity — Summer '95
  - Transitions — Fall '95
  - Self Esteem — Winter '95-'96
  - Risk-taking — Spring '96
  - Letting Go — Summer '96
  - Stress — Fall '96
  - Media — Winter '96-'97
  - Drugs & Alcohol — Spring '97
- For copies, call (415) 389-9441.

## Talk Early, Talk Often (continued from page 1)

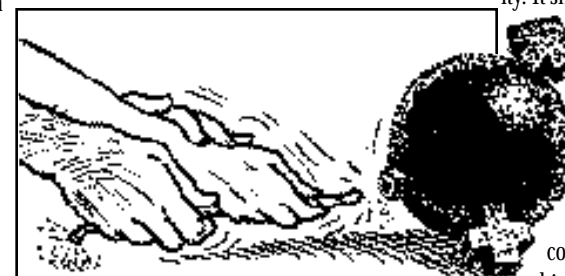
media by messages about sex. There are approximately 10 incidents of sexual behavior portrayed each hour on prime-time network television. Almost all of these portray casual sex with no adverse consequences. Children are subjected to 14,000 television messages annually about sex but fewer than 1 percent of those messages will say anything about protection (e.g., contraception, STD protection, choosing to abstain).

It is interesting to note that countries such as the Netherlands, which have very low rates of pregnancy and STDs, have approximately the same rates of sexual activity among adolescents as we do in the United States. However, in contrast to adolescents in the United States, adolescents in those countries are more likely to be engaging in responsible sexual behavior — using protection against pregnancy and STDs. Contraception is far more available and sex is more openly discussed. As a result, young people feel comfortable getting the needed information about protection and how to obtain and use it.

The pervasive presentation of sex and sexuality in the media, coupled with figures that show that more adolescents are becoming sexually active, can lead to both parents and children overestimating the percentage of adolescents who are sexually active. There is the perception that "everyone is doing it," and adolescents may feel uncomfortable or that something is wrong with them if they have not had sex.

According to recent national surveys, just over 50 percent of high school stu-

dents have engaged in sexual intercourse. This means, however, that half have not. One can focus on the glass being half full or half empty. These figures should encourage adolescents who want to postpone sexual activity that it is not abnormal to do so. At the same time, these figures should



*Discussions should occur before it's a "hot" issue with your child.*

encourage parents to be aware that their children may become sexually active during high school and that this needs to be a topic of discussion.

What should parents discuss with their child? One important topic should be the conditions under which parents would (or would not) approve of sexual activity. A recent publication put out by the National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health may be helpful to parents in developing their own evaluation and in discussing it with their child. This publication provides information on adolescent development and sexual behavior. It suggests a checklist of "readiness for mature sexual relationships" and gives criteria that should be met before anyone engages in intercourse or other intimate sexual behavior.



## Very Important Dates

Parents' Coalition meetings

The Coalition meets on the second Monday of each month, September-June, from 7:30 - 9:30 p.m. at San Francisco Day School, 350 Masonic Ave. (at Golden Gate Avenue). All parents are welcome.

Looking ahead: Sept. 8 (tentative) Forum. Jay Skelton, Ph.D., on emotional I.Q. Business meeting will follow.

## Criteria for Readiness

Discussion of such criteria helps get the conversation away from simple assertions that "you are too young," which are never very convincing. It helps to frame why adolescents who lack maturity would not be ready for sexual activity. It should also be noted that some adults (or adults in some relationships) would not meet these criteria either. The criteria involve both the characteristics of each individual in the couple and of the relationship between them. Examples of the former are that each individual is physically mature; knowledgeable about sexuality; committed to preventing STDs and pregnancy; able to deal with potential negative consequences of having intercourse; patient, understanding and empathetic; and approving of the behavior.

Examples of the latter are that the partners are committed; trust and admire one another; have talked about having intercourse beforehand; are motivated by pleasure and intimacy; have tried and enjoyed non-penetrative sexual behaviors with each other; and have a safe and comfortable setting. These criteria may provide useful talking points between parents and children as a basis for discussing each family member's feelings about sexual behavior.

As parents, we need to be talking to our children about their behavior. It is a time to convey our values and hopes — and also to convey that we are open for discussion and to provide information that will help them.

One way to initiate such a discussion is to discuss what is being shown on television. What does your son or daughter think of what is being portrayed? Do they think it is a realistic portrayal of relationships? Do they think that is how relationships happen? Why isn't the couple using protection? Is it realistic that nothing would happen as a result?

It is best if these discussions can occur before you think that this is a "hot" issue for your child. If this is an

ongoing matter of discussion in your house, starting when a child is watching prime-time television, it can be discussed without the overlay of anxiety or accusation that may occur if you wait to bring it up until you think it's an immediate issue. ☼

To obtain a copy of the publication put out by the National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health, contact the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States at 130 W. 42nd St., Suite 350, New York, NY 10036; (212) 819-9770.

For lots of additional information on talking to your teens about sex, contact the Planned Parenthood office nearest you: 441-7858 (San Francisco and Alameda Counties), 574-5823 (San Mateo County) or 454-0471 (Marin County).

## Parents' Coalition Mission

To support and inspire parents of adolescents through education and communication in order to promote the health and safety of our youth.

Representatives are selected by the parent associations of their schools. If you or your school would like to be involved or if you have comments or questions, please call Roger Torkelson at (415) 389-9411.

### Coalition Representatives

- |                               |                 |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Jill Goldman                  | Carol Nathan    |
| Carol Henwood                 | Barbara Wilson  |
| Branson                       | Lick-Wilmerding |
| Ginny Gertler                 | Sandra Edward   |
| Bridget Hiler                 | Ellen Kreitzman |
| Convent of the Sacred Heart   | Debbie Lawn     |
| Joni Burton                   | Audrey Votano   |
| Crystal Springs               | Marin Academy   |
| Carol Savio                   | Len and Holly   |
| Abby Schnair                  | Auerbach        |
| Debbie Vogel                  | University      |
| Drew Preparatory              | Terry Aramendia |
| Mindy Kershner                | Carol Winetsky  |
| French-American International | Urban           |

### Newsletter Staff

- |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|
| <b>Editors:</b>  | Ann Bogazianos   |
| Sue Adams        | Girija Brilliant |
| Marsha Torkelson | Ellen Rashbaum   |
| <b>Designer:</b> | Holly Shepard    |
| Aleks Kardas     | Camilla Smith    |

**Circulation:**  
Cynthia Ostroff

Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves. Call (415) 566-6511 for more information.