



Talking To Our Teens About Sex

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Sex permeates the culture of our children through music, ads, television, shows, films and the Internet. What not so long ago was considered vulgar and pornographic is now viewed as normal and acceptable. Movie stars and popular singers who are our children's role models dress in sexually explicit and provocative ways. The lyrics of their songs, movie and television themes, and magazine ads are sexually overt and provocative in order to sell the products. Images of women with exposed cleavages sell toothpaste, nearly naked men and women in suggestive sexual poses sell perfume. Sex is bombarded at our teens sending them the message that to be sexual is to be cool and acceptable. We have come a long way from the days when I was a child where the most popular TV show, "Leave It To Beaver" showed his parents, Ozzie and Harriet sleeping in flannel buttoned up pajamas in separate twin beds. The overemphasis on sexuality robs our youth later on in their lives of the experience of the sacredness and sensitivity of sexuality with love and deep intimacy with another.

In counseling teens and preteens, I notice that they feel pressured to have sex when they are not ready for it. Kids are having sex at younger and younger ages. They're not just expected to have sex before marriage; they're expected to have it if they go steady with someone for even just a few weeks. By the time they are 15, the norm is that they should have lost

their virginity. Some young people often start years earlier. One girl told me that the first time she was pressured to have intercourse she was thirteen. When she was twelve or thirteen, the sexual pressure started amongst her peers. I told her that I thought she was still very young to be involved sexually. But she said it wasn't too old because she has a friend who started having intercourse at twelve. Even more alarming, some of her friends had sex before ever having their periods, at ten or eleven years of age. Girls in middle school-sixth, seventh, and eighth graders-reported that the boys of their peer group were pressuring them to have oral sex. When they refused, the guys would make fun of them and call them prudes. But if they submitted, they'd be called sluts. These girls were in a terrible double bind because they were sluts if they did and prudes if they didn't. They were not mature enough to know how to handle the situation as they were highly susceptible of what others thought of them. They knew what was expected by their peers but did not know how to be true to their heart and soul when it came to sex. For them, sex becomes an activity designed for popular acceptance and self esteem rather than the expression of something deeper and fulfilling that is possible between a man and woman. They were simply too young to have the wisdom necessary to navigate the depths of true love and sensual connection combined with another.

Loss of Innocence:

When our children have sex out of pressure and expectation, they are experiencing a loss of their innocence. The depth of being with a partner where love is experienced through sensual intimacy is not comprehended at so young an age. Even though most preteens and teens are having more and more sex these days than ever before it does not mean that they are truly enjoying it other than for titillation and self gratification or, for power, fitting in and status.

However, I found some young people who are wise, although these are in the minority. One such 14 year old girl told me, "It's like you're young. It's your body. If you want it to be shared with someone else, it's a big thing. I'm not afraid of being hurt physically, not by the sex act, but it's my body. If I have sex, it's not my body anymore. Our bodies are so sacred they should be shared with someone we really love and want to be with." This girl knew the value of who she was. That is what we want to impart in our children; that they feel their bodies are sacred, that they themselves have the sensibility to determine who they'll share their bodies with and when it feels right for them to do so. Also, that they can say no and not feel pressured about it if it feels wrong to them in any given moment. When I questioned her about where she came up with her ideas about sexuality she said, "My mother." Obviously, this girl had a strong bond with her mother who was a great role model for her.

How We Can Talk To Our Children:

We can't just say to our sons and daughters, "You can't have sex."

Moralistic repression doesn't work. Most of them are not going to listen because it sounds hypocritical to them and contrary to everything they see and hear around them. We have to lovingly explain to them what the repercussions can be for them emotionally and psychically and that it is a decision that they themselves have to make. So teaching them how to listen to their inner selves and follow their innermost feelings about it is key. If they feel pressured or, have any doubt or, ambivalence, that is a sign from within not to do it. Showing them how to be true to themselves both in sexual and other matters is the best life lesson a parent can offer.

Many kids tell me that they can not talk to their parents about sex. Being punitive with our children and giving them a laundry list of DO's and DON'Ts alienates them. When we use our power as parents rather than our sensitivity and wisdom and truly hear them our children just shut down and don't trust us. Moralistic lectures, economic sanctions, and punitive actions on our part are actions resulting from our fear or powerlessness and it usually results in either rebellious, or, neurotically suppressed children. What works much better is developing an open style of communicating through which we can impart our wisdom and help them find their own.

Keeping the channels of communication open creates trust with our kids. They the know they have someone they talk to about anything. In this manner we can create a deeper and more rewarding relationship with them. We must keep the lines of communication open with our children. This doesn't mean that we occasionally tell them across the dinner table that we'll always be there for them. Children have to experience that it is safe to talk to us truly, not just be told the door's open.

Communication With Our Children Image

Here is an imagery exercise that helps us examine our difficulty in communicating with our children. In the image, we see our children as people in their own right grappling with a problem. It helps us detach from our expectations of them. This frees us up to speak honestly. One of the best ways is to listen to them as if they were a young lonely stranger that needs help. When we listen to them as *strangers*, it is easier for us to step into their shoes and empathize with them. We can hear them better because we are not all twisted inside with recriminations. We can discuss our values and share our experience. This image helps us view our child more openly.

Communicating With Our Children Image

1. See you are talking to your child about sex.
2. What do you see?
3. How is the talk going?
4. How do you feel about it? (Notice your feelings and body sensations.)
5. Now see your child as if he or she were a wonderful but lonely stranger—just a teen coping with problems.
6. Does that free you in talking to him or her?
7. What would you honestly say to this teen from your own experience?
8. Remember, it is his or her body, mind, and soul.
9. See you are free to be honest in discussing sexuality with this lonely stranger.

In the image, we see our children as people in their own right grappling with a problem. It helps us detach from our expectations of them and so, it frees us up to speak honestly. One of the best ways is to listen to them as if they were a young stranger that simply needs some real answers and help. When we listen to them as *strangers*, it is easier for us to detach and thus, step into their shoes and empathize with them. We can hear them better because we are not all twisted inside with recriminations towards them or, ourselves. We can discuss our values and share our experience. This image helps us interact with our child more openly. ■



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