

## PARENTING YOUR TEENAGER ABOUT SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS - FOOD FOR THOUGHT



Thought for the day:

If your child has never yelled at you for being "MEAN!" you haven't been doing your job!

**"Children who are raised by parents who are moderately strict and voice clear expectations about delaying sexual activity are the kids least likely to engage in harmful behaviours... if you've got religious values backing you up, you're in even better shape."** (Dr. Miriam Grossman MD *You're Teaching My Child What?* Regenery, 2009)

### *The adolescent brain: a work in progress ...*

Adolescents are not mini adults. They do not think and reason like adults. Why? The pre-frontal cortex of the adolescent brain is the last to mature, sometime in the mid-twenties. It is the part that is responsible for judgement, reason, planning, self evaluation, impulse control, understanding of cause and effect, weighing up consequences of one's actions. This means that just providing information does not guarantee an adolescent will act rationally in the moment. They need guidance.

### *Boys and Girls are different ...*

**The Male Brain - wired for sexual pursuit.** Testosterone levels in males at puberty surge to 25 times higher, creating near obsessive interest in sex and body parts. **The Female Brain - wired for trust and attachment.** Any intimate behaviour including kissing and prolonged hugs produces oxytocins in the female brain, fuelling attachment, activating the brain's reward centre, slowing down judgment and caution, decreasing fear and promoting trust. The female brain is also wired to respond to male pheromones present in perspiration - affecting ovulation and trust perception.

### *Why does it matter?*

Prolonged kissing and cuddling is enough to impair judgement and decision making for girls, just as alcohol and drug use can. Physical contact can set powerful urges in motion for boys. Neither may have the maturity to assess the consequences and exercise control over these impulses.

### *What can parents do?*

Make them **AWARE** of how their brains develop and work, that this is natural and that therefore being cautious at their stage is smart. Tell them that setting appropriate physical boundaries is an important safeguard against physical and emotional hurt for both sexes. Let them know that males and females tend to think and feel differently about intimate behaviour.

**Talk about it with your daughter - eg:**

*'Girls and boys think differently about touch, even kissing. Your brain will tell you to trust him and that he loves you. His brain is more focused on physical pleasure. It's smart to be cautious at this stage of your life.'*

*'Intimate touch, even kissing, sends girls the message that you love them and will be there for them forever. At your age you can't promise that so don't send the message. Learning self control is an important part of becoming a man.'*

**Talk about it with your son - eg:**

**SUPPORT** their developing capacity for wise judgement by providing a structure of firm boundaries, expectations and guidelines for behaviour, even into late adolescence. This structure helps them when they 'wobble' over what's the best thing to do. **SHARE** your values and why you believe them. This helps the adolescent think things through. **POINT OUT** the safest behaviours and why. This helps them weigh things up when feeling unsure or under pressure.

eg: *'It's better for you not to get into sex at this stage of your life. Too many things can go wrong and there is no going back. Sex is a special part of a committed adult relationship. We expect you to wait until you are adult and can make safer decisions.'*

### *I'd like to but, isn't this too moralistic and unreasonable in this day and age ...?*

**NO!** Medicine, psychology, biology, histology and many other 'ologies' are on your side in this. Delaying sexual behaviour is associated with far-ranging benefits: decreased rates of infection with sexually transmitted diseases, higher academic achievement, decreased rates of single parenthood, increased marital stability, decreased maternal and child poverty, decreased abortion and decreased depression.

(Robert Rector, Kirk Johnson Ph.D, Lauren Noyes & Shannon Martin, 'The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity & Multiple Sexual Partners Among Women: A Book of Charts' available online at: [www.heritage.org/Research/Family/upload/44695\\_2.pdf](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/upload/44695_2.pdf))

**Postponing being sexually active is a 'best health' message!**

## *Influence of social trends on teen sexual behaviour*

Current social trends endorse sexual exploration of any kind for any age as long as both partners agree and are 'protected'. The rising incidence of teenagers having both oral and anal intercourse with multiple partners is linked to these changing social trends which are widely depicted and normalised in pornography, music videos, song lyrics, magazines and many internet advice sites.

Since the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, condoms have been widely promoted as the best means of protection. For adults in high risk situations, condoms may reduce (not eliminate) the risk if always used correctly. This 'harm minimisation strategy', originally targeting at-risk adults, has been assumed to be an appropriate model for adolescents as well.

### *So, how effective are condoms? Understanding PERFECT use, TYPICAL use and ADOLESCENT use*

Condoms provide varying degrees of protection even if used consistently and correctly. Adult studies show condoms will prevent pregnancy 98% of the time with PERFECT use but results focusing on TYPICAL use show only 85% of pregnancies are typically prevented. Adolescents, given their immaturity, alcohol use and other vulnerabilities, can expect even higher typical use failure rates.

Failure rates are based on pregnancies occurring despite a condom being used. Even if pregnancy does not occur when a condom fails, an infection can be passed on. So the failure rate of condoms in terms of sexually transmitted disease is actually higher again.

Anal intercourse carries a higher risk again of condom failure than vaginal intercourse. With or without a condom, *anal intercourse is high risk behaviour* due to the anatomy and physiology of the anus compared to the vagina, leading to higher transmission rates of infections and physical damage. Rising rates of oral sex with multiple partners have been linked to rising rates of *oral cancers* in young adults.

Condoms do not protect against herpes, genital warts or syphilis which can *live on the surrounding skin*. Over the last few decades, the number of STIs circulating widely in the sexually active community has increased from a handful to more than 24. These include incurable viruses such as herpes and genital warts, chlamydia which causes infertility and often goes undetected and HIV/AIDS. Some STIs are associated with painful and debilitating physical effects. Diagnosis of an STI is also linked to significant depression, social isolation and relationship breakdown in some people.

## *Sexual exploration for teens - the pitfalls*

Teenage girls are more susceptible to infection due to the immature development of the adolescent cervix compared to the cervix of an adult female which is thicker and more resistant to viruses. It is estimated that 1 in 20 Australians aged 15 to 29 have an STI, and rates are increasing. Around one in 4 sexually active teens aged 15 -19 become unintentionally pregnant. Half of these will have an abortion. A significant proportion will have repeat abortions. Teenagers are reporting more coercion into unwanted sex and regret about early sex.

## *The conclusion?*

**Endorsing sexual exploration as 'a good thing' is dangerous and misleading for adolescents given the health risks and their inbuilt vulnerabilities. A more honest and protective message for young people is:**

**'Wait - you are capable and you are worth it.'**

You can't guarantee your child will act according to your expectations in this *or any other area* (like smoking, drinking, gambling, studying hard, etc). But your child **MUST** hear and know your expectations in order to weigh up the options and his/her actions more fully. Your opinions, grounded in love, count more than you think!

### **Build relationship with your teen**

- Talk to your teen about the things that are important to you both - open up the communication channels
- Set very clear guidelines and firm boundaries
- Listen more than you talk
- Keep calm and lower your voice
- Use humour and not sarcasm
- Choose your battles - is it really worth arguing about?
- Do not remind them of past mistakes
- Regularly give positive feedback
- Express anger if you need to, but without insult
- Choose the right time and environment to talk about things
- Speak in positive and realistic terms
- Say 'sorry' when you are in the wrong

(Acknowledgments - parts of this drawn from: Dr. Miriam Grossman MD, *You're Teaching My Child What?* Regenery Publishing, 2009; Smith A, Agius P, Mitchell A, Barrett C, Pitts M. 2009. *Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2008*, Monograph Series No. 70, Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.)

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