

# Kids Need to Hear More From Parents About Sexual Issues

by Mary Gossart

A recent survey of parents and youth reports that many families wait far too long to talk about some of the tough issues: sex, HIV and AIDS, violence and substance use.

Conversations, if they do happen at all, are often too little, too late.

The survey was conducted as part of a national campaign by the Kaiser Foundation in an effort to encourage parents to talk with their children earlier and more often about difficult topics.

What did 10- to 12-year-olds say they want more information about?

- How to know when you're ready to have sex (50 percent of parents say they have not discussed this topic).
- How to handle peer pressure to have sex (46 percent of parents have not discussed).
- How alcohol and drugs might affect decisions to have sex (45 percent of parents have not discussed).

According to the survey, most parents say they have talked with their children at some level about substance abuse, violence, HIV and AIDS, and pregnancy. Yet many parents of 10- to 12-year-olds are sidestepping the more challenging discussions about sex, despite the fact that these are the very conversations young people want—and need—to have with their folks.

Young people benefit when their parents talk early and often with them about tough issues. Talk, not lecture. Discuss, not preach. An honest, open dialogue, a true invitation to examine an issue together. A sharing of factual information, as well as personal beliefs and values. A willingness to listen and hear, as well as talk. These are conversations that hold value and benefit for youth.

Fifty-seven percent of surveyed parents of 10- to 15-year-olds indicated they have talked openly with their children about sexual issues, including relationships and becoming sexually active. The survey found that the children of those parents were more likely than those whose parents had not talked to them to first turn to a parent:

- If they were dealing with pressure to have sex (72 percent of those who talked to their parents vs. 57 percent of those who did not).
- If they were thinking about having sex (67 percent of those who talked with their parents vs. 51 percent of those who did not).
- If they were worried about being pregnant or having gotten someone pregnant (66 percent of those who talked with their parents vs. 48 percent of those who did not).

Take home message: Young people need to be hearing more from their parents about sexual issues. Starting early helps create an environment in which children learn that sexuality is a significant and wonderful part of who they are.

As parents affirm their willingness to discuss sexual issues in an open, positive way, they can build a foundation of trust and comfort around the topic. Young people are much more inclined

throughout their growing-up years to turn to their parents with questions or concerns about sexuality if they know the atmosphere will be one of trust and comfort, as opposed to shame or judgment.

It can be difficult and intimidating for young people to disclose personal ideas, values or opinions that conflict with their parents' views. Rather than put themselves on the line, it's almost easier to just not say anything at all. So the conversation becomes a monologue (read: inquisition and/or parent lecture), and no one feels good about the outcome.

A few respectful agreements might help to create a safer environment for free and open discussion. These agreements are jointly decided and may include the following:

- Whatever is shared remains confidential.
- We can speak honestly without fear of consequences.
- We have the right to speak without interruption.
- We can choose to not participate in any part of the discussion.

Trust, comfort and safety are vital pieces in talking with youth about sexuality.

The truth is, parents are the first and primary sexuality educators of their children, whether they do it well or not. They have been sharing messages through their words, as well as through their silence. Their responses (or lack of responses) teach children a great deal about sexuality—not only in terms of information, but also in terms of values and attitudes.

The family experiences that parents shape from the moment their child is born help determine the extent to which that child develops positive, healthy feelings around sexuality.

The truth also is that in this society, children are bombarded with sexual messages day in and day out—through the media, from their peers. Wouldn't you like to get your two cents in, Mom and Dad?

While it's important to begin these conversations early—perhaps earlier than parents might ever imagine—it's never too late to start. Begin now. If you need help, check out Planned Parenthood Health Services of Southwestern Oregon in Eugene, which provides direct support for parents with handouts, pamphlets, free-loan videos, workshops and other resources. Contact the education and training department at 541-344-1611, Ext. 13, 14, 15 or 17.

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