

**TEENAGE
SEXUALITY:
EXAMINING THE
PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES**

*CONGRESSMAN HONDA'S
STUDENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
2003-2004*

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BACKGROUND

The Student Advisory Committee (SAC) is a group founded by Congressman Michael Honda, and since its inception in 2001, has researched and reported on important teenage issues in an effort to serve the greater Bay Area. It consists of twenty-six students from fourteen public and private schools in the fifteenth Congressional district, a student leader, two co-chairs, and two adult mentors. Its purpose is to aid the Congressman in learning more about youth issues by providing him with students' perspectives on key concerns affecting them. Congressman Honda was presented with an oral overview of this report on May 25, 2004. One of the ultimate purposes of the Student Advisory Committee is to present the Congressman with data concerning current teenage social problems so he will be able to make informed decisions about our community's youth.

In turn, the students learned more in the government process and gained the opportunity to meet and work with peers from throughout the district. The SAC experience, however, was shaped by more than just meetings. In the beginning of the year, its members bonded on a group retreat. In addition, they celebrated birthdays and holidays in the spirit of camaraderie. They actively participated in community service, handing out toys at the Sacred Heart Community Center in San Jose. These supplementary events continued to help the close-knit group work more effectively.

In the course of a full school year, the Student Advisory Committee worked to identify solutions for the problems that accompany teenage sexuality. The 2003-2004 Student Advisory Committee decided on the issue of teenage awareness and responsibility because its ramifications significantly impact every student's life, albeit to varying degrees. The committee divided itself into four different subgroups in an attempt to holistically approach the problem; the subdivisions were media, action, survey, and research. In order to learn about Bay Area teenager perspectives on sexuality, SAC surveyed fourteen different schools within the fifteenth Congressional district. Six hundred high school seniors participated in the survey. The results from questions about sexual topics were tallied and cross-referenced with questions about personal information such as age, gender, and race.

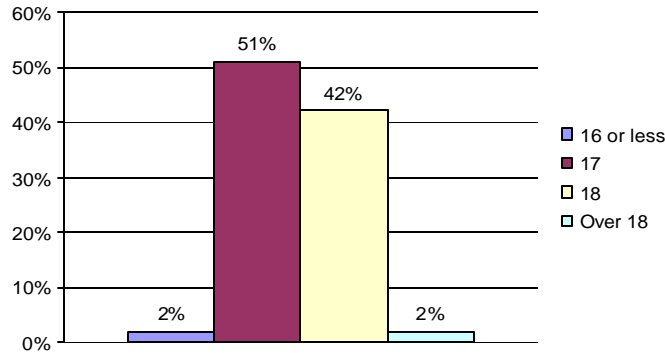
The problem statement identified by the Student Advisory Committee was:

How can we promote awareness of media influence, peer pressure, and educational and supportive resources concerning teen sexuality in order to empower youth in the 15th Congressional District in making responsible, comfortable, and informed choices in their relationships?

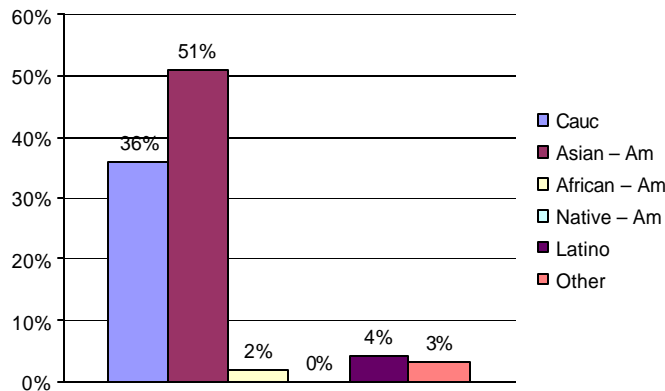
The following is a written report that describes and analyzes the Student Advisory Committee's findings.

(Please note a non-response to a question is reflected in the percent gap to total 100%.)

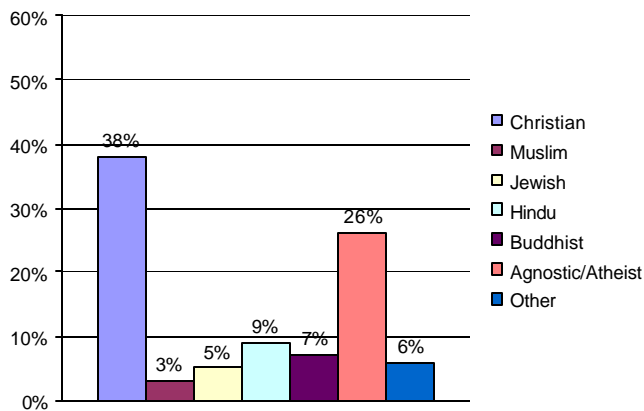
AGE



ETHNICITY

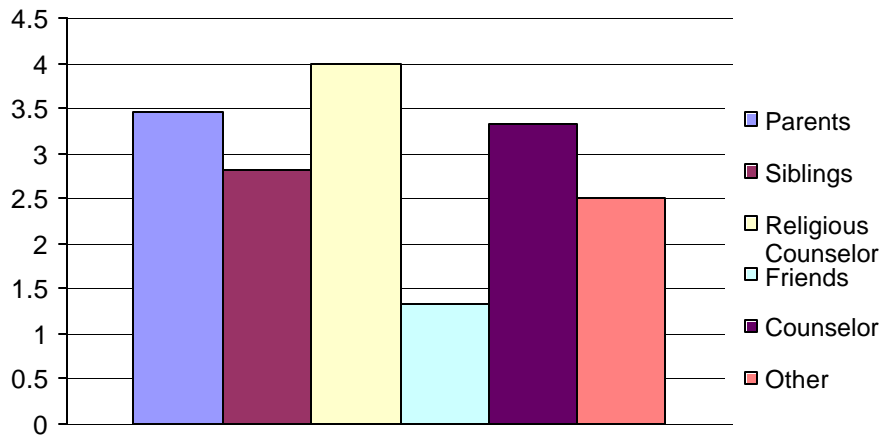


RELIGION



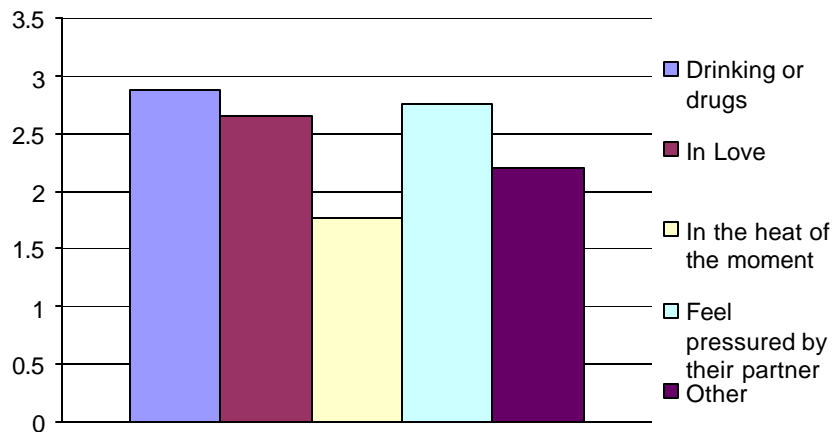
Because of the ranking system where 1 was the first choice, the graphs are reversed, where the higher colored bar is the last choice. These statistics provide personal information about the teenagers who responded to the committee's survey. Of them, approximately 50% were male and 47% were female. These graphs indicate that a wide diversity of students were surveyed, reflecting many different experiences and viewpoints.

**Who are you most comfortable talking to about sexual topics?
(Ranked 1 through 5, 1 being the first choice)**



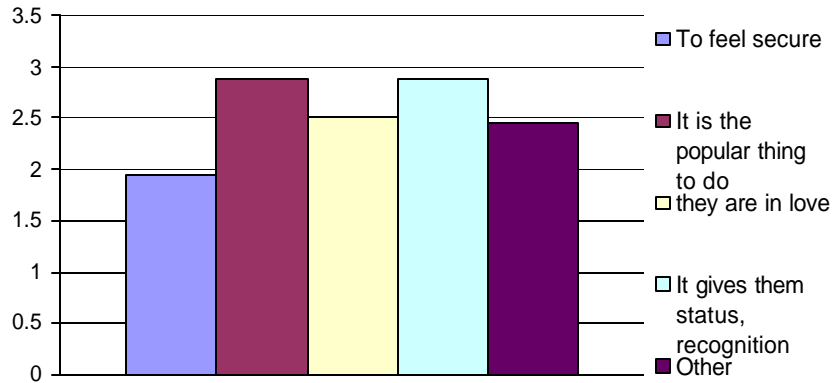
This graph indicates that most teenagers feel comfortable talking with their friends. Thus, most students would rather talk with their peers as opposed to older mentors or even family members. Another important point to observe is that school counselors were ranked higher than parents when it comes to discussing sexuality. While a school counselor is present to support a student in their academic and personal life, the parent should have a much closer relationship and be better able to discuss this matter with his or her child.

**Most students become sexually active because they are ...
(Ranked from 1 through 4, with 1 being the first choice)**



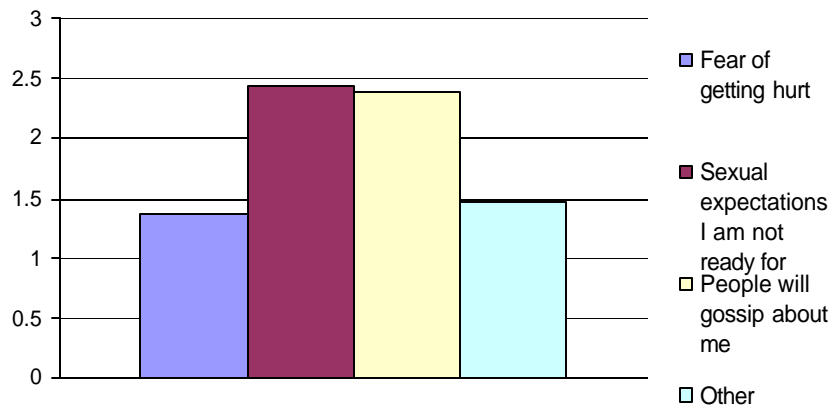
The committee found that the main reason why many teenagers become sexually active is because they are caught “in the heat of the moment.” Teenagers were spurred to enter the activities because they didn’t give adequate thought to their actions. However, drugs, alcohol and peer pressure were not as influential as one would expect. These answers exemplify the lack of educated thought involved with such decisions.

**The reason most students get involved in a relationship is...
(Ranked from 1 through 5, 1 being the first choice)**



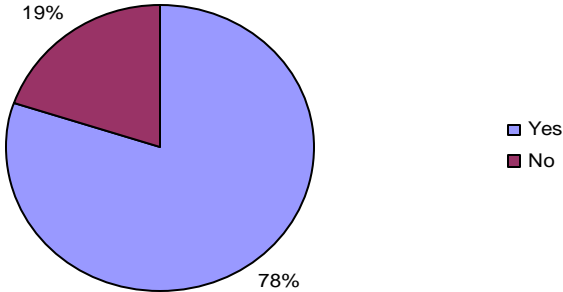
According to the graph, most students enter into a relationship in order to feel secure. The need for security indicates indirect peer pressure. The least popular responses were those influenced by direct peer pressure. Due to the messages of the media, one might think this would have ranked higher. However, the results indicate that the decision is individual and dependent upon self-worth, not image.

**The reason I wouldn't want to be in a relationship is...
(Ranked from 1 through 3, with 1 being the first choice)**



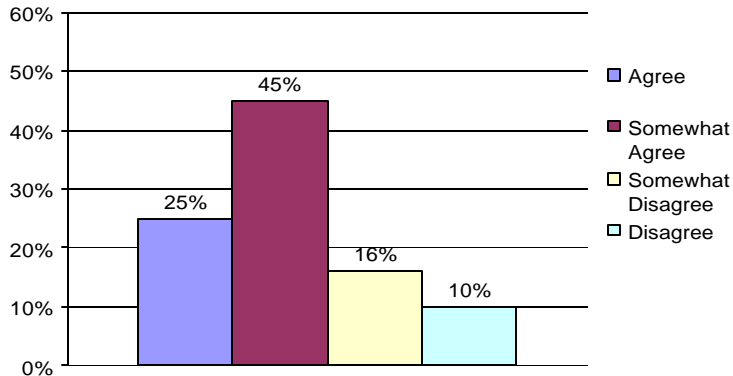
According to the survey, the most common reason that high school seniors do not have a relationship is for fear of getting hurt. When relationships do end, many teenagers cannot deal with the emotional consequences, and they let this failed relationship influence other aspects of their life. The second most common reason is that others might gossip about the two people in a relationship. When others gossip about a relationship, the relationship is no longer between two people, but between everybody who is involved, destroying trust. Interestingly, sexual expectation is the least common reason among all the others. Thus, most teenagers believe they are ready to handle the sexual component of a relationship.

Do you feel that schools have a responsibility to educate students about sex?



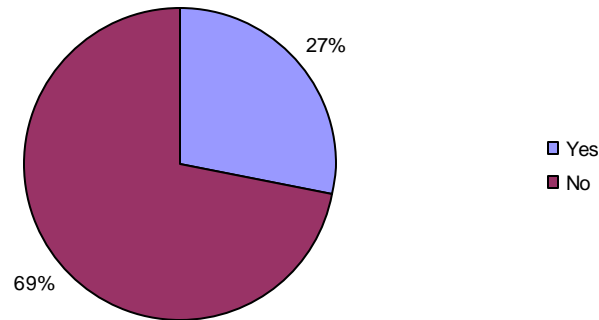
Sex education in the schools is a controversial subject and has been, ever since it's inception. The constant reversal of opinion has left students caught in the middle. Every year, the curriculum changes due to the prevailing political winds of that particular time. According to our polls, 78% of all students surveyed felt that schools have a responsibility to educate students about sex. They feel that it is an important issue that must be addressed despite the questions it raises about socially acceptable behavior. The facts speak for themselves: students feel that schools should teach sex education.

Teaching teenagers about STDs does a lot in preventing teens from having sex.



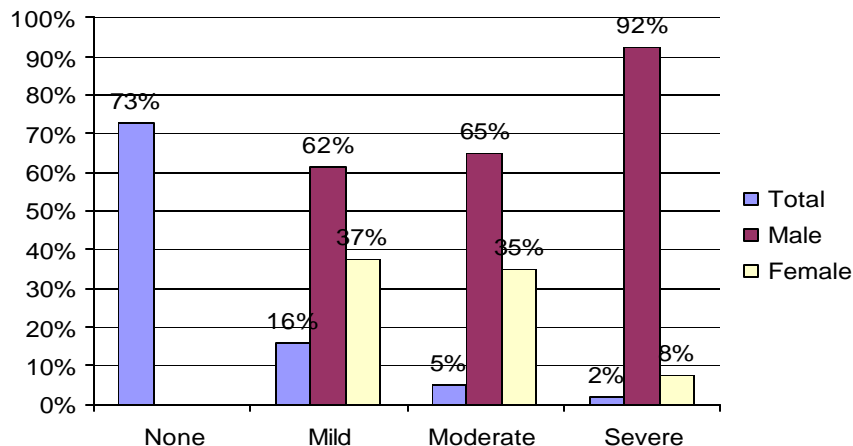
There have been questions raised over the effectiveness of sexual education in discouraging teens to have sex, and many different approaches offered. Some people have been vocal through the media that the teaching of such diseases is excessive, gratuitous, and just plain inappropriate. However, seventy percent of students surveyed agreed or some-what agreed that the teaching of STDs does help prevent teenage sexual activity. It is not surprising to note that STD education has also greatly discouraged unprotected sex. It is apparent that the "fear factor" is in play when dealing with STD education. Our results show this committee that STD education is important in educating and warning students about sex, an act that often seems to be regarded casually.

There have been times when I have regretted being involved in a sexual activity.



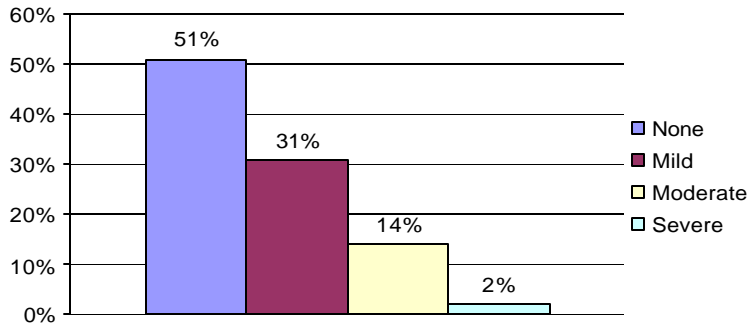
According to the graph, 27% of teens regretted being involved in a sexual activity. The positive conclusion that one can draw from this graph is that most teens feel comfortable with their sexual decisions. On the other hand, a significant minority of teens did regret their participation in sexual activities. This group of teens did not have the education or maturity to be informed about the effects of their actions and suffered negatively as a result.

How much pressure do you place on your peers to engage in sexual activity?



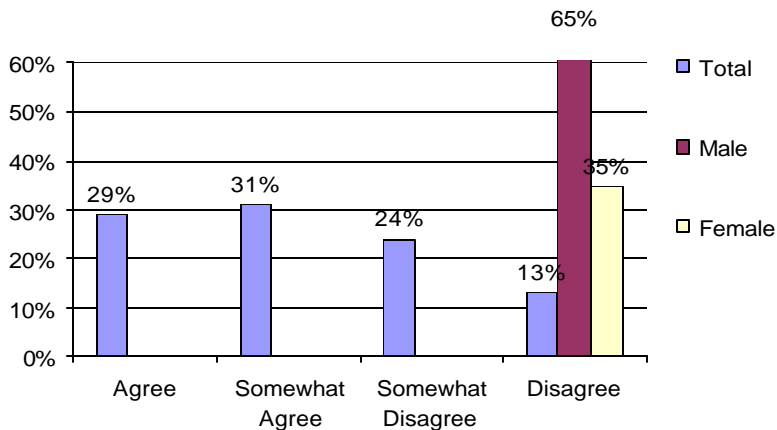
It is a common assumption to believe teens engage in sexual activity due to pressure exerted from their fellow peers. Parents are always wary of who their children associate with because of this fear that teens partake in sexual activities in an attempt to fit in. Therefore, it is surprising to find through our research that the vast majority of teens actually do not push their friends into engaging in sexual activity, as 89% place almost no pressure, and 73% place none at all. However, it is extremely important to note that by and large, those who said they place pressure on their peers to participate in sexual activity are male, primarily due to the ambiguous, often hypocritical, guidelines set forth as to what behaviors are accepted or normal for each gender.

How much pressure do you feel from your peers to engage in sexual activity?



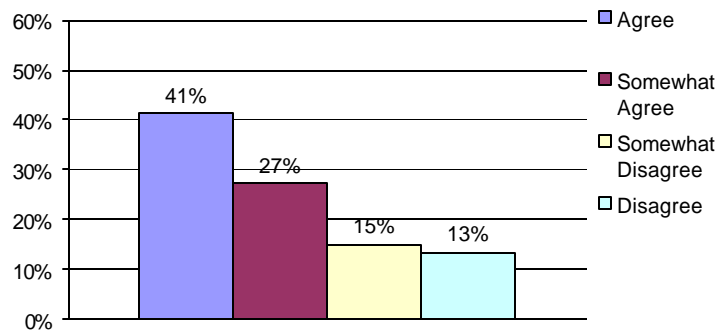
An even more alarming fact is that the decision to engage in sexual activity amongst teens is a highly individual process and not persuaded by others, as a vast majority, 82%, feel almost no pressure inflicted by their peers, while 51% feel none at all. Furthermore, this is not a one-way street, as only 15% of those who place severe pressure on their peers receive the same treatment, and only 12% of those who feel severe pressure inflict it on their peers. Thus, according to this data, the issue of peer pressure is almost a moot point in discussing teen sexuality. It is apparent that nearly all think for themselves and make the decision whether to engage in sexual activity, or not, on their own, and not by the basis of what their friends are doing.

Having sex in high school is too early.



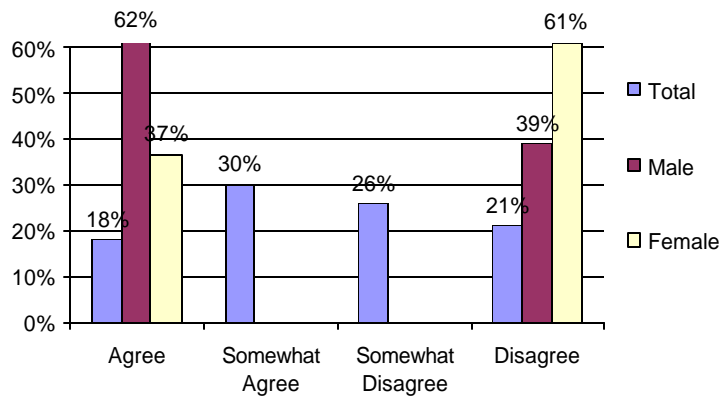
According to the graph, 60% of teenagers believe that having sex in high school is too early. This indicates a fairly equal division of opinions about the matter. These opinions reflect the mindset towards sex that most high school students share. The statistics are slightly alarming in that many believe that most high school students are fully prepared to handle the consequences of sex, a fact that this survey has indicated is untrue.

Premarital sex is OK and should be neither discouraged nor encouraged.



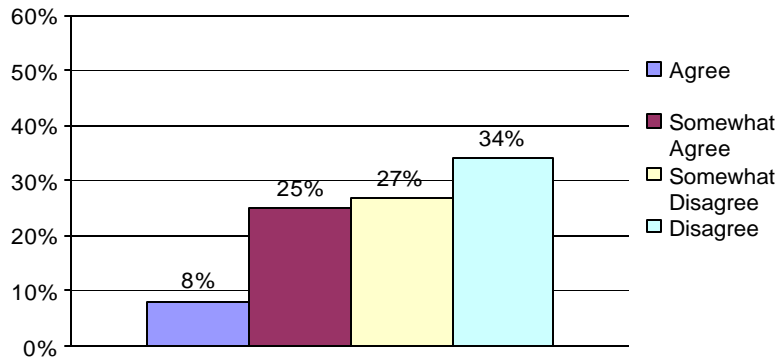
Of the teenagers that took the survey, a majority (78%) of them agreed in some degree that premarital sex was okay, while the other 22% disagreed to some degree. Those who disagreed might have done so because of the influence of their religion since many believe in a religion that forbids premarital sex. Specifically, 63% of Christians, 2% of Muslims and Jews, 7% of Hindu's, and 9% of Bhuddists disagreed that premarital sex was okay. Other factors that could have contributed to the stated opinion include parental perspectives, sex education, and social influences.

Sexual promiscuity in high school should not be shameful.



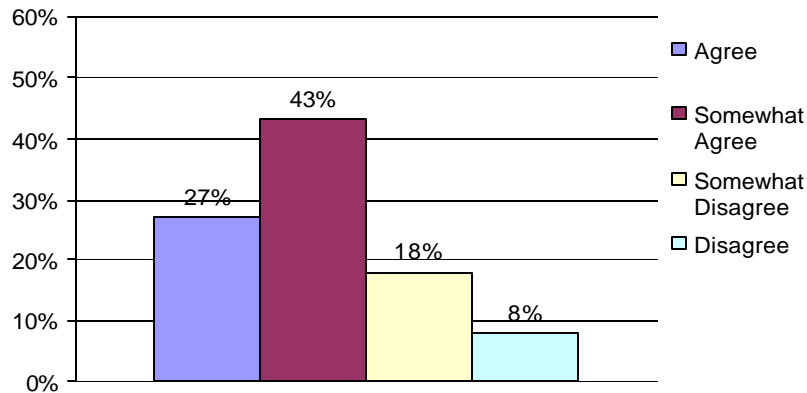
Sexual promiscuity is all too prominent in today's high schools, whether seen through dress code violations or public displays of affection. The relatively equal distribution of agreement and dissent indicates the teenage group is divided on the issue. However, 62% of males agreed completely with this statement while only 39% disagreed; conversely, only 37% of females agreed completely while 61% of females disagreed. This indicates that males are far more comfortable with sexual promiscuity than females. The perception of sexual behavior of the different genders probably increases the pressure females feel to demonstrate sexual promiscuity. Again, these statistics indicate a casual approach to sex.

Sexual activities on TV, radio and magazines accurately reflect sexual activity at my high school.



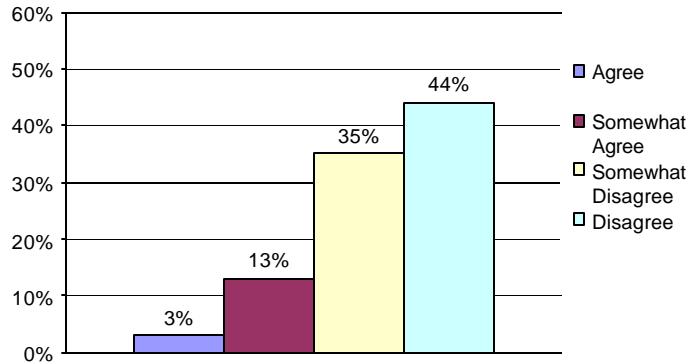
The response to this question demonstrates that depictions of sexual activities are not mirrored in reality at Bay Area high schools. Most people completely disagreed with the statement, indicating that the media is inaccurate in its portrayal of teens. However, this reflects well for the teenage population as media relationships are often sexually explicit and superficial. Hence, teenagers must give at least some thought to their sexual relations.

Girls who have sex get a bad reputation (for sexual activity) at school.



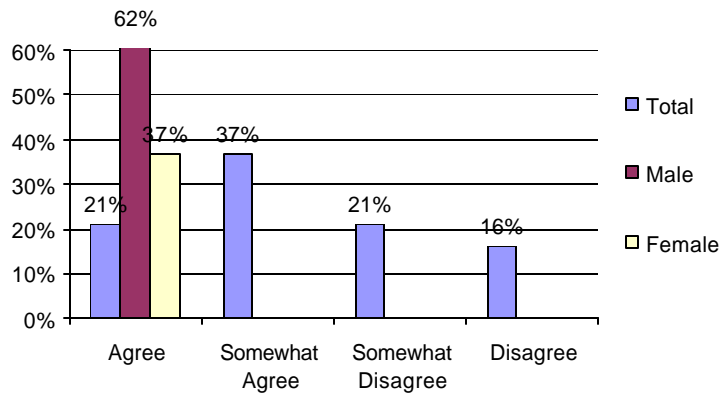
According to this graph, 70% of teens support the fact that girls who engage in sex gain a negative reputation at school. This indicates that most teens don't associate sex with high school relationships, and recognize the potential harm of such activities. Hopefully, this perception will serve to counter the messages sent by the media that often present sexually active teens with little association to reality. At the very least, it suggests that students will not be driven to have sex as a result of example.

Boys who have sex get a bad reputation (for sexual activity) at school.



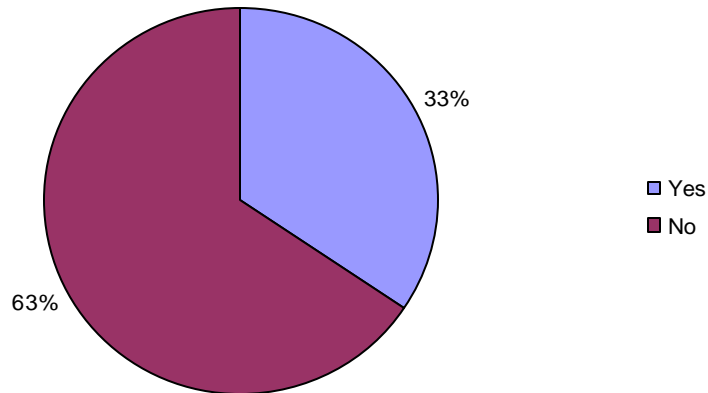
This graph counters the one shown above; males do not receive a negative reputation for having sex. This is probably a reflection of the societal values associated with the respective genders. Boys are seen as successful while girls are regarded as promiscuous in their pursuit of sex with the opposite gender. This indicates that society should be concerned about the stereotypes placed on each gender and particularly the positive association of boys engaging in sexual activities.

I would rather be in a relationship than be single.



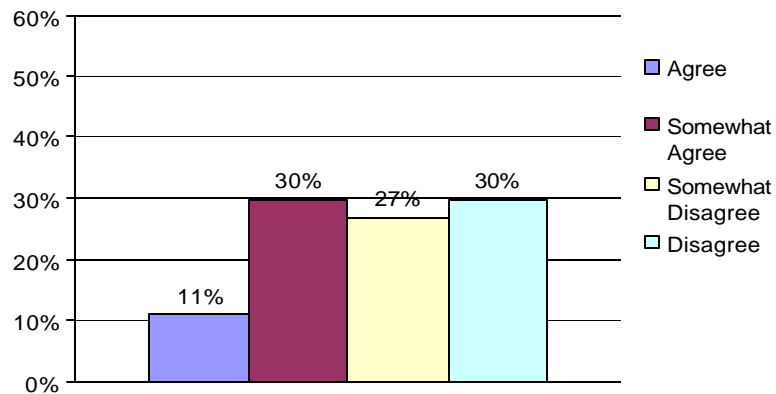
The graph shows that of the high school seniors surveyed, about 58% agreed that being in a relationship is better than being single. Specifically, of the 21% of high school seniors who agreed completely with the question, 62% of them were male and 37% were female. Usually, society would assume that females have a greater desire than males to enter into a relationship.

Are you in a relationship currently?



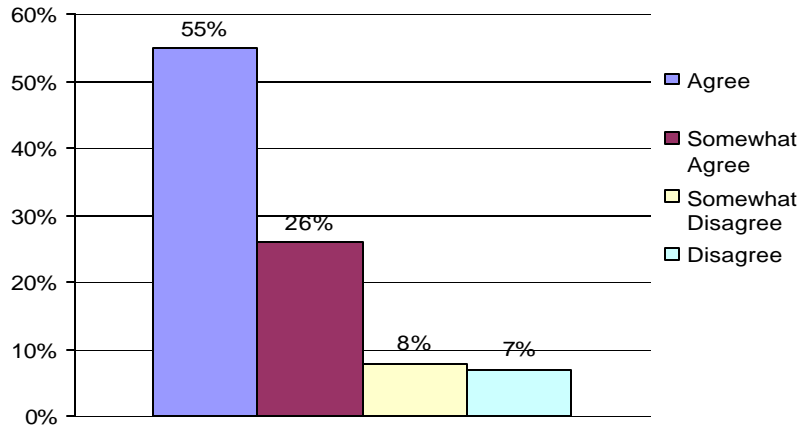
According to the survey, only 33% of seniors are currently in a relationship. This indicates that many are not sexually active although there may be some exceptions. It also exemplifies that teens are largely self-sufficient. Interestingly enough, about 50% of the participants who said that they are in a relationship are Caucasian and 44% were Asian. Clearly, one's background influences their decisions to enter into relationships.

Being in a relationship means it is OK to have sex.



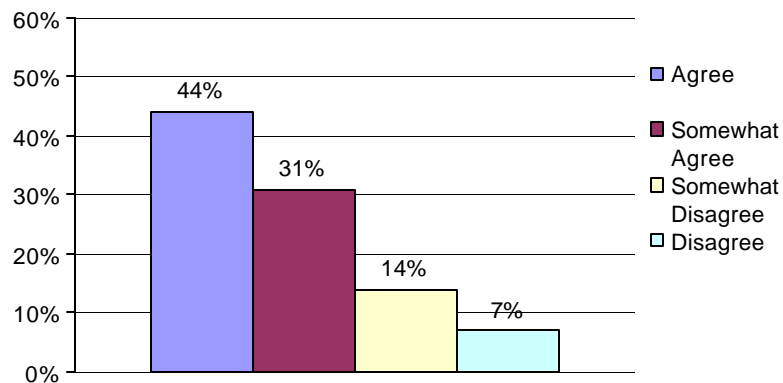
The information from this survey question clearly tells us that students do not think that being in a relationship makes it OK to have sex. They do value sex more than just another aspect of their relationship with their significant other and would probably agree that being in a relationship does mean that sex can be important in a relationship in the future. On the other hand, 30% of those polled agreed somewhat to the question. About 50% of those who agreed were Caucasian and 45% were Asian.

It is important to me to talk about sexual activities with my partner before they happen.



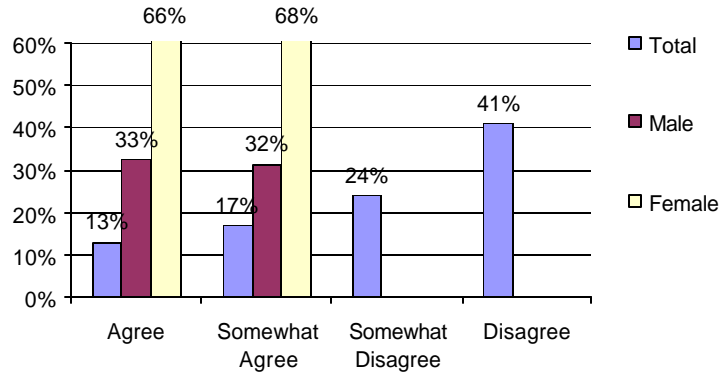
The data collected conclusively illustrates that the majority of high school students place a significant amount of importance on talking about sexual activities before they occur. 81% of students surveyed stated that it is essential for them to discuss sexual activities before actually engaging in them. One would hypothesize that adolescents feel the need to talk about sexual activities in advance in order to avoid rash decisions made in the heat of the moment. This finding opposes the popular belief that the adolescent decision making process is careless and impulsive.

It is important to me to talk about past relationships/sexual history with my partner.



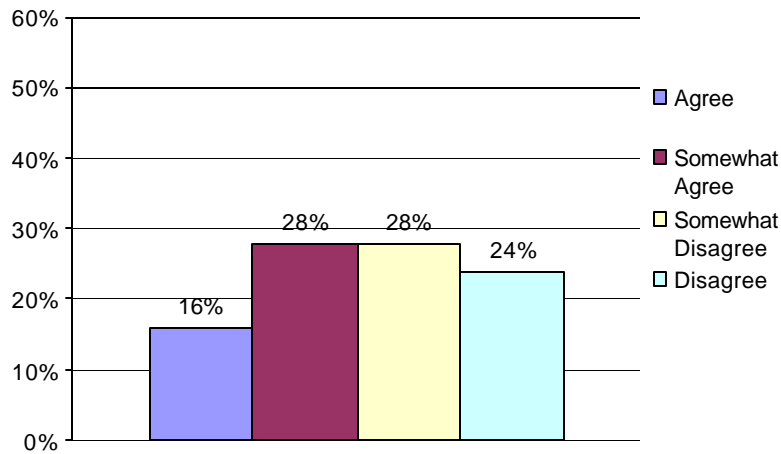
Additionally, high school students feel that it is important to be aware of their partner's past sexual activity. Fully three-fourths of students surveyed stated that it was a priority for them to talk openly with their partners about past sexual experiences. This is possibly a result of a heightened knowledge about the dangers of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

I worry about being pressured to go farther than I want to sexually.



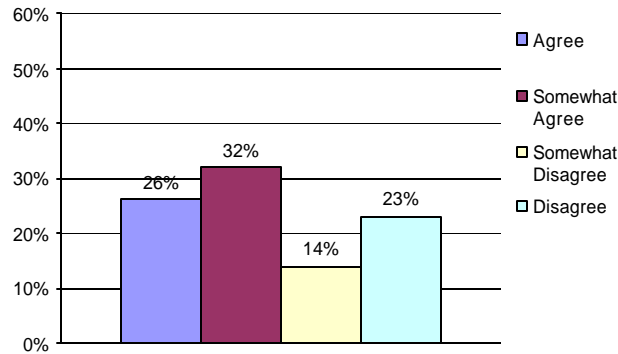
According to the results the data provides, 30% of teens do not worry about being pressured to go farther than they want. Most teens do not worry about being pressured about sexual advancement, yet a disproportionate number of females agree with this statement compared to males. This indicates that females do feel more pressure than the opposite sex to engage in sexual activities, and is probably a key factor in their decision to do so.

I would date someone who had a reputation for being sexually active.



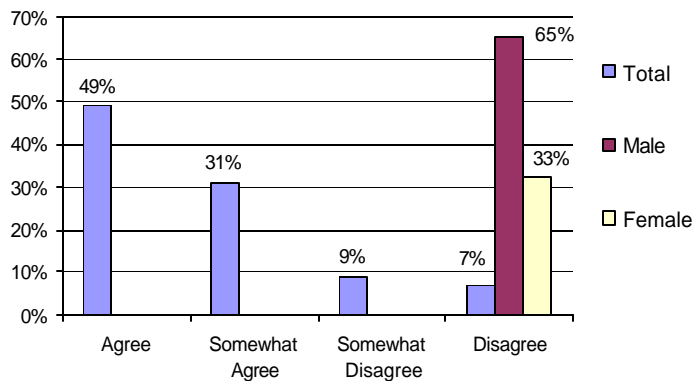
The next issue that we surveyed teens on was if they would date someone who was sexually active. 16% agreed, meaning they would, and 24% disagreed. 28% somewhat agreed and the same number somewhat disagreed, which totals 56% of teens being uncertain. Every situation is different and that is a key factor to keep in mind.

My friends are sexually active.



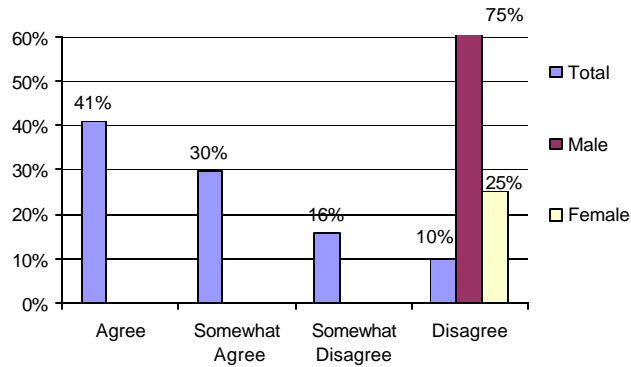
Most of those surveyed, specifically 58%, said that they agree that their friends are sexually active. While teenagers often make dubious statements, the survey indicated that most of them confide in their friends about sexual matters. Thus, there is truth in these statistics. The idea that over half of the teen population is sexually active is a cause for alarm and above all, this statistic reveals the reality that teenage sexual activity is prevalent in the Bay Area.

Engaging in sexual activity is emotionally risky.



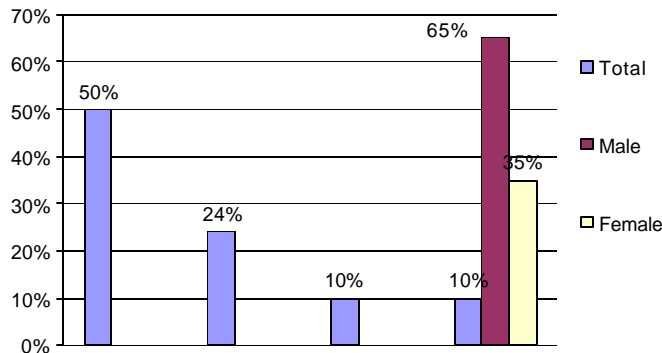
An overwhelming amount of seniors in the Bay Area actually agreed or somewhat agreed that engaging in sexual activities can be emotionally risky. 49% of the entire sample pool agreed, and 31% somewhat agreed, showing that most teenagers acknowledge that sex is more than just "fun." Other responses included 9% who somewhat disagreed and 7% who disagreed. Looking at the cross tabs, it revealed that of those who disagreed, nearly two-thirds of them were male, with 65% being male and 33% being female. Given the culture surrounding sex, most males seem to disbelieve that sex carries emotional baggage and instead view it as a scoreboard or a badge of honor. When the religious affiliation of those who disagreed was analyzed, the largest group was at 37%, who were atheist or agnostic. The next largest was at 28%, who identified themselves as Christian, followed by 11% Buddhist. The other religious groups each took a small slice.

I would feel upset if I had sex and my partner talked about it with friends.



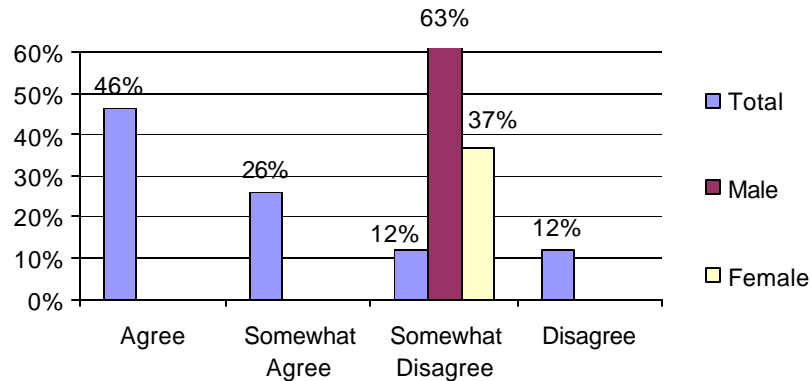
According to these results, most of those surveyed either agreed or somewhat agreed that they would be "upset" if their sexual experiences were discussed with others, with only 10% in disagreement. These results imply that sexual relationships among teens are strongly linked to the emotional connections of the relationship. Strikingly, though, those who disagreed, in fact, seem to conform to traditional stereotypes. 75% of those who said that they disagreed were males, a statistic which reinforces the idea that males are both proud of their sexual exploits and hardly affected by the ties of a sexual relationship. Furthermore, the group of those who disagreed contained a disproportionately low number of Asian Americans, a group which traditionally is thought to be guarded about personal affairs and concerned about negative notoriety. Atheists and Agnostics generally regarded as being free from religious ties, formed the largest group of those who marked "Somewhat Disagree" in response. Therefore, though most teens were, in fact, concerned about social consequences of sexual action, those who were not tended to fall in groups traditionally regarded as being nonchalant about sexual expression.

For me to become sexually active, I would first need to be in love .



According to the graph, about half of the teen population agreed that they would need to be in love in order to become sexually active. This indicates a high level of respect for such acts. However, a significant percentage of males compared to females disagreed, reflecting the notion that males do not value sexual activities as highly as females.

I would feel bad about myself if I had sex and then the relationship ended.



The survey asked whether teens would feel bad about themselves if they had sex and then the relationship ended. The majority of students, about 46%, agreed, 26% somewhat agreed, and the remaining quarter of the people were split between disagreeing and somewhat disagreeing. Agreeing meant students were more tied down to the relationship, viewing sex as a deep bond between two people that should never be broken. Disagreeing with the statement meant the student enjoyed sex and the relationship while it continued, but had no regrets if the relationship ended for other reasons. Females seemed to agree with the statement more than the males, since about 63% of those who somewhat disagreed were male, not female. Through the data, it appears that it is easier for males to jump between relationships and not be emotionally affected. For females, however, the emotions still play a huge part, since females seem to be more tied into relationships. Although these are simply the common stereotypes, our results show that it truly is more common for male students not to be tied into sexual relationships as much as women.

Ethnically, about half of those who either disagreed or strongly disagreed were Caucasian. The rest, about 45% of each category, were Asian, while the other ethnicities barely played a role. Of those who disagreed, it is stereotypically sound that Caucasians and Asians made up the majority.

Overall, much of the teenage community claimed they would be hurt if the relationship ended after having sex with their partners, meaning the majority does want a committed relationship in which sexual experiences matter if the relationship were to end.

CALL TO ACTION

Government

- Expand funding for current research to analyze and evaluate Bush's abstinence only program
- Promote teen sexual responsibility and awareness of the emotional consequences of sex much like anti-drug campaigns
- Possibly hold subcommittee hearing in Congress to discuss what SAC found
- Work with State Legislators

Schools

- Provide information on topics regarding sex
- Reevaluate the effectiveness of current sexual education programs to include the emotional consequences of sex
- Send SAC representatives to School Board meetings to present the results of the report
- Suggest training or presentation during Teacher In Service Days
- Extend health class requirement to private schools
- Effectiveness of its programs on sex reviewed by School board

Community

- Break the silence about the emotional consequences
- Make information on the emotional consequences of sex more available
- Make sure teenagers feel heard
- Reexamine effectiveness of pledge programs
- Establish community forum to address questions on the issue

Parents

- Be OPEN
- Know what resources are available for your children
- Understand your children's hormones
- Open discussion about emotions involved instead of blind eye

Media

- Send letters signed by Michael Honda and SAC members to channels such as NBC, ABC encouraging reevaluation of portrayal of teens in primetime TV
- Have Congressman Honda and SAC students record a PSA

MEMBERSHIP

Mentors: Mariel Caballero
Meri Maben

Student Leader: Belal Aftab

SAC Co-Chairs: Karan Lodha
Ryan Miller

Members:

Kristin Barker	Amanda Burns
Sarah Fasbaugh	Anita Gupta
Arundathi Gururajan	Cory Hammon
Matthew Herrick	Julian Hilario Jr.
Kelsey Hunter	Manu Jain
Yuri Ku	Anjali Kumar
Eric Lee	Michelle Lin
Amber Manglona	Garrett Morimoto
Divya Munisipally	Wilson James To
Kim Tran	Mai Tran
Jeanine Trenner	Christina Tsou
Jonathan Weed	Jason Zhu



THE MEDIA AND SEXUAL LEARNING¹

There are numerous studies that illustrate television's powerful influence on adolescents' sexual attitudes, values, and beliefs. In film, television, and music, sexual messages are becoming more explicit in dialogue, lyrics, and behavior. Too often, these messages contain unrealistic, inaccurate, and misleading information that young people accept as fact. Adolescents have ranked the media second only to school sex education programs as a leading source of information about sex.

A recent study found that American children spend more than 38 hours per week using media. By the time adolescents graduate from high school, they will have spent 15,000 hours watching television, compared with 12,000 hours spent in the classroom.

American media are thought to be the most sexually suggestive in the Western Hemisphere. The average American adolescent will view nearly 14,000 sexual references per year, yet only 165 of these references deal with birth control, self-control, abstinence, or the risk of pregnancy or STDs. In a recent content analysis, 56% of all programs on American television were found to contain sexual content. The so-called "family hour" of prime-time television contains on average more than 8 sexual incidents, which is more than 4 times what it contained in 1976. Nearly one third of family-hour shows contain sexual references, and the incidence of vulgar language is also increasing.

Soap operas, which are extremely popular with adolescents and preadolescents, might be one ideal venue for responsible sexual portrayals, yet a recent study of 50 hours of daytime dramas found 156 acts of sexual intercourse with only 5 references to contraception or safe sex. Unmarried partners outnumbered married partners by 3 to 1. On talk shows, sexual themes are common, including unusual sexual habits.

Music Television (MTV) and other sources of music videos often display suggestive sexual imagery. In one content analysis, 75% of concept videos involved sexual imagery, and more than half involved violence, usually against women. Although a recent content analysis found less eroticism in violent videos, experimental studies have found that viewing music videos may, in fact, influence adolescents' attitudes concerning early or risky sexual activity. Greater sexual content is also found in videos that depict alcohol use. Music lyrics have become increasingly sexually explicit as well, and at least 2 studies have shown a correlation between risky adolescent behaviors and a preference for heavy metal music.

Advertising also contains a significant amount of sexual imagery, including the inappropriate use of children in provocative poses. Sex is used to sell most common products from shampoo to hotel rooms. Research shows that heavy exposure to media sex is associated with an increased perception of the frequency of sexual activity in the real world. As a result, television may function as a kind of "super-peer," normalizing these behaviors and, thus, encouraging them among teenagers.

¹ <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics%3b107/1/191>

The Internet offers unparalleled access to hard-core pornography with just a few keystrokes. One recent study found that a child exploring the Internet may be trapped in an adult site by a new marketing technique that disables options such as the “back,” “exit,” or “close” navigation buttons.

According to students surveyed in the San Francisco Bay Area, however, only 8% of seniors fully agreed that the sexual activity portrayed through media accurately reflected the sexual activity at their respective high schools. Looking at a cross-section of ethnicities, while 52% of Christians did concur with the above statement, only 12% of Hindus and atheists and 5% of Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists also agreed.

CONTRACEPTIVE ADVERTISING²

The insertion of socially responsible messages in entertainment media is a potentially powerful way of affecting sexual behavior, because the “selling” of a particular behavior isn't as obvious as it may be in a public service advertisement and, thus, audiences may not be as likely to resist the message. These messages also are more likely to reach and attract attention, compared to public service announcements that are rarely shown at strategic times and are not aired frequently enough. The dramatic formats allow more time for developing more complex messages.

While the media have been used effectively to promote sexual responsibility in other countries for decades, few such opportunities have been seized in the United States. In Europe, three fourths of adult respondents to a recent survey said they learn about STDs from television, books, or magazines, while in the United States only one fourth said they receive this information from the media. In India, Africa, and Latin America, popular soap operas that included plots about family planning and HIV prevention have reportedly increased clinic visits and changed health behaviors.

In a poll by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 86% of adults surveyed supported airing of information about HIV and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) prevention and 73% favored condoms being discussed on television. Despite American adults' willingness to have birth control information discussed and advertised on television, the networks continue to resist. A major reason for this reluctance is that the media are unlikely to publicize controversial messages or content that may frighten advertisers and sponsors away.

So, rather than producing whole shows, U.S. sexual health advocates have been working with the commercial media to incorporate subtle health messages into existing entertainment programming. AIDS awareness messages have appeared on soap operas like “General Hospital,” emergency contraceptive information on the popular drama “ER,” and pro-condom messages on “Friends.”

² http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m2372/1_39/87080444/p1/article.jhtml

SEXUAL EDUCATION

Sex education. It's one of the most complicated things teenagers must deal with, yet it's something that few adults ever want to talk about. But is sex education about knowing the anatomy and physiology of the human body, about the act of sex, about reproduction and family life, or about prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy? Sex is becoming a serious problem among many teens that are unknowingly putting their health at risk; yet, parents will not allow the school to teach about it. Is providing sex education equivalent to giving permission to engage in sex?

Sex educators usually try to avoid telling adolescents whether or not they should engage in sexual activity; rather their focus is on how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STD), venereal diseases (VD), acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), and pregnancy. The problem with this is that, at the present time, sex education as taught in the public schools is incomplete. It does not cover morality associated with sex, sexual dysfunctions and deviations, and the institution of marriage. But at times, the lack of sexual education courses due to parent opposition results in the ignorance of both life-threatening dangers of teen sex and also the possible solutions.

One of the basic questions is, "Do children need sex education?" Seventy percent of high school seniors in the 15th Congressional District of California at least somewhat agree that teaching teenagers about STDs does a lot in preventing teens from having sex and in addition seventy eight percent think that schools have a responsibility to educate their students about sex. After all, for thousands of years, men and women have been having sex without any formal education. According to the Center for Disease Control, each year, 12 million people catch a sexually transmitted disease, with youths accounting for about three fourths of them. The Center for Disease Control also reports that HIV infection is the leading cause of death of people in their teens and early twenties. Additionally, in 2002, there were a total of 425,493 births to teenagers from the age of 15-19 years of age.

Although STDs, including HIV infection and other health problems associated with teen sex, remain an issue in the entire country, many schools are still doing nothing to deal with the very root of the problems: the misinformed choices teens make that could destroy their health and lives.

Some parents reject school plans to have sex education courses for two reasons: 1) They believe that if we teach kids about sex, it will seem like we are promoting sex and that students will start having sex. 2) Parents believe that it is their own responsibility to talk to their kids about sex, and not the school's. But the fact of the matter is that few adults feel comfortable about getting down to the nitty-gritty details of sexuality. A lot of parents are uncertain about the way they are conducting their own sex lives – so then why would they tell their kids how to have sex?

Although concerned parents continue to worry that teaching teens about sex would influence them to start doing it, school officials believe that if students want to know

about sex, at least they'll be learning the correct information from the schools. Many experts and psychologists are worried that in this day and age, teens are being influenced to have sex by the worst and most unreliable sources – the media and their peers.

Sex has become an effective tool used to create popularity: however, teens are being seduced by false appeal. Teens are also turning to their peers for information and instruction. But neither schools nor parents are teaching them how to deal with their sexuality. Although experts worry that though their friends may have good intentions, they are often misinformed.

So if the only way teens are learning about sex is from the media, their peers, and trying it themselves, why is nothing being done to teach them helpful information that they can use to protect themselves from possible dangers?

With regard to the question that should teach sex education, everyone has to play his or her role. Parents have to assume a more responsible role. But sex education is given in every American school, public or private, from grades 2 to 12. The projected 1990 cost to the nation was \$2 billion per year. Teachers are told to give technical aspects of sex education without telling the students about moral values or how to make the right decisions. After describing the male and female anatomy and reproduction, the main emphasis is on the prevention of venereal diseases and teenage pregnancy. With the rise of AIDS, the focus is on "Safe Sex" that means having condoms available each time you decide to have sex with someone you don't know. With the help of our tax dollars, about 76 schools in the country have started dispensing free condoms and contraceptives to those who go to school health clinics.

The role of parents is minimized by American sex educators and sometimes ridiculed. In one of the sex education movies I was made to watch a film called, "Am I Normal?" Whenever the young boy asks his father a question about sex, the father, shown as a bum and a slob, shuns him and changes the topic. Finally the boy learns it from a stranger and then is shown going into a movie theater with his girlfriend. Educators believe that giving sexual information means giving the OK for sex. These educators say that even if your child does not ask any questions about sex, parents should initiate the discussion using i.e. a neighbor's pregnancy, a pet's behavior, advertisement, popular music or a TV show.

Another type of Sex Education program is also appearing in many schools. "Abstinence only" programs take a different approach of educating teens by teaching them the benefits of completely abstaining from sex until marriage. President Bush has proposed doubling abstinence education funding to 270 million dollars for the fiscal year to counter social trends that supporters believe are encouraging teenage promiscuity.

Many studies are now showing that teen sex and health related problems are actually decreasing through out the country and that improved sexual education may be the cause. But as uncomfortable as sex is to talk about, the positive impacts that can result from a little bit of information and guidance have the power to not only deal with the health risks of teen sex, but also possibly do away with them for good.

PARENTS

Parents play an extremely important role in their child's life- at any age. Whether directly or indirectly, they can influence important decisions in their child's life. Teenagers are often in need of guidance and have many options when searching for someone to talk to. So how much guidance are parents giving? How much are teenagers seeking from their parents?

A recent survey conducted by The Shell Poll revealed that eight in ten teenagers rely on their parents for support.³ Although this may be surprising because there has been a common belief for years that teenagers could not turn to parents for advice, there is still the 25% who say they are concerned because they do not have an adult they can talk to about problems and decisions.⁴ This part of the survey addressed teenagers talking to parents about decisions, not necessarily decisions regarding sexuality. But 77% of high school students interviewed in another survey report feeling comfortable talking to their parents about their friends and social lives. These numbers have improved from past surveys but there is still hesitation when teenagers consult their parents on issues about teen sexuality.

Many people also question if teens have had enough guidance when making decisions about sexuality and their relationships. Another survey done by The Shell Poll reports that 68% of teenagers feel that they have had as much guidance and support that they needed when making decisions about handling sex and dating relationships. But a surprising 58% said that they did not have adequate guidance on the issue.⁴

Teenagers need guidance especially from parents or other adults. While many may report seeking advice from their parents, there is still a large number of teenagers who do not receive as much guidance from an adult as they wanted when making those critical decisions.

RELIGION

“Sex: the thing that takes up the least amount of time and causes the most amount of trouble.” -- John Barrymore

Sexual involvement between teens has increased throughout the years. Many believe it's the amount of sex shown on TV and through our media, but it is also the pressures the individual encounters. There are many occurrences that the individual is pressured into having sex, but there are pressures that a teenager feels not to have sex. The pressures not to have sex may come from parents, peers, or other sources, but religion plays a big part in the pressures to not have sex for many teenagers today as well.

Buddhism

One is supposed to abstain from unlawful sexual intercourse and is not supposed to have sexual intercourse with someone who is “still under the protection of father, mother, brother, sister or relatives, nor with married women, nor female

³“Teens Say Parenting Matters Big Time,” <www.countonshell.com/products/poll/poll_teens_parn.html>

⁴“Support, Guidance, and Decisions” <www.countonshell.com/products/poll/poll_teens_guid.html>

convicts, nor, with girls who are betrothed.” Yet, if there is love and consent between the two people who decide to have intercourse and it doesn’t harm either person, then it is permitted. (http://www.buddhanet.net/winton_s.htm)

Catholicism

God intends for sex to involve the person as a whole (body and soul) in a loving, committed relationship, for the reason for having children and the mutual benefit of the spouses. Catholicism says that sex is good, but it is not the ultimate good, therefore, their nuns and priests are told not to participate in the act.

(<http://www.nccbuscc.org/catechism/text/pt3sect2chpt2art6.htm>)

Christianity

There are many quotes in the Bible that say pre-marital sex is wrong. An example is 1 Corinthians 6: 18 – 19: “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own...” It clearly states that one should have sex and this leaves the individual pressured not to have sex for sake of their soul. Yet, if they ask for forgiveness, they will be forgiven if they believe that what they did was wrong.

(http://www.beliefnet.com/features/chastity_chart.html)

Hinduism

It is believed that sexual intercourse is a natural reproductive function and is to be used for bearing a child, therefore, they also believe that celibacy (abstinence) is considered the appropriate behavior for unmarried singles. Intercourse is to draw woman and man together in intimacy to express and nurture love. Hinduism does not condone or condemn birth control, sterilization, masturbation, homosexuality, petting, polygamy, or pornography. Yet, its scriptures do prohibit adultery and forbids abortion except to save a mother’s life.

Islam

”the believers are... those who protect their sexual organs except from their spouses... Therefore, whosoever seeks more beyond that [in sexual gratification], then they are the transgressors.” Qur’an (23: 5-6) It is said not to commit illegal sexual intercourse (premarital sex or adultery) because those who do will be punished and their torment will be doubled the Day of Resurrection. Also, they will abide there in disgrace, unless they repent and believe and do the righteous deeds. (http://al-islam.org/m_morals/toc.htm)

Jehovah’s witnesses

It is said that the people who wait to have sexual intercourse till they’re married is said that they would have more passion for Christ, but those who decided not wait risk the temptation of sexual misconduct. This could possibly lead to disfellowship by their local elders.

Judaism

Sex and whatever acts that may lead up to sex are only allowed after marriage. Sex is not only a means of physical gratification, but the act of sexual intercourse has such an important act between two people that is “requires commitment and responsibility. The requirement of marriage before sex ensures that sense of commitment and responsibility.” (<http://www.jewfaq.org/sex.htm>)

Latter-Day Saints (Mormonism)

The religion states that sex is only permitted only with one’s spouse of legal marriage. The acts that lead up to sex are sinful as well, but over all the act is evil and shouldn’t be done unless wed.

Paganism

This religion has no restrictions on homosexuality, nudity, or premarital sex, but it is viewed as “the generative force in nature and is seen by most pagans as utterly sacred. The physical act of love is to be approached with great respect and responsibility.” (<http://www.witchvox.com/basics/wfaq.html>)

Although there are hundreds of different religions in the world, the small few that were listed shows both the promotion and discouragement of sex. Different religions have different teachings that state whether or not the religion they practice is wrong or not, but the final decision comes from the individual, whether or not their decision is religion based or if it’s what they believe the later consequences might be when they make their decision.

PEER PRESSURE

In a society that emphasizes popularity and social interaction, adolescents and young adults face peer pressure daily. While some forms of peer pressure can positively impact a teen’s decision making, in general peer pressure causes uncomfortable emotions and imprudent decisions. Peer pressure causes individuals to sacrifice their own morality for the sake of their friends and often leads to regrets. In regards to sexual responsibility, teenagers often cite peer pressure as one of the strongest influences on their decision to abstain or engage in sexual activities.

During the high school years, the opinions of friends have a large influence on a person’s ideas regarding sex and decision making. In fact, ninety-four percent of parents believe that their child gets “a lot” or “some” influence from his or her friends regarding “relationships, decision making, and sexual health” (Kaiser 10). Increasingly, the dependence on the advice of peers has lead to positive pressure on teens to gain knowledge of sexual protection, sexually transmitted diseases, and other consequences before deciding to engage in sexual activity. Throughout the nation abstinence groups are gaining popularity and the largest group, True Love Waits, boasts 250,000 members (Farrington). These programs have teens sign pledge cards to promise to wait until

marriage to participate in sexual activity and emphasize self-respect by offering teens alternative dating tips and skills to resist peer pressure to have sex.

Unhealthy peer pressure is still a prevalent problem in high schools. Teens feel pressure from their friends and partners to become sexually active for a variety of reasons. This pressure places unwanted stress and anxiety on teenagers as they struggle to develop their sense of self and an emotional maturity. The Kaiser Foundation found that thirty-two percent of 15 to 24 year-olds felt “a lot” or “some” pressure to have sex, and that adolescents who are already sexually active are almost twice as likely to feel pressure to continue having sex (Kaiser 7). The fact that sexually active teenagers feel pressure to have sex shows the trend that teens may deal with pressure from partners who may come to expect sex. The pressure of friends and partners translates into the statistics found by the Kaiser Foundation that, fifty-eight percent of 15 to 24 year olds say that “there is pressure to have sex by a certain age” and forty-seven percent say that, “if you have been seeing someone for a while it is expected that you will have sex” (Kaiser 11). The expectations that individuals will engage in sexual activity and the age limits placed on the start of that activity can be frustrating for teenagers, especially those in relationships. In a survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Seventeen magazine, regarding pressure, fifty-three percent of 15 to 17 year olds said girls feel “a lot” or “some” pressure to have sex from other girls, eighty-seven percent said “girls feel from boys”, fifty-five percent said “boys from girls”, and seventy-three percent said “boys from other boys”. Teens face situations with their boyfriend or girlfriend where the pace of the relationship may be moving too quickly and without the ability to make prudent decisions and not get “caught up in the moment”, teens may submit to activities of which they are not emotionally ready to engage. In pressure situations, teens should plan ahead by looking for possible problems, like the access to drugs and alcohol, and teens should learn how to assert their feelings to let their partner know if sexual advances are unwelcome (Basso).

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF TEENAGE SEXUAL ACTIVITY

*Is Teenage Sex Legal?*⁵

Are there consequences in the State of California for underage sex*? The answer may be surprising as there is in fact implications and repercussions for having sex as a minor. California penal code section 265.5a states “Unlawful sexual intercourse is an act of sexual intercourse accomplished with a person who is not the spouse of the perpetrator, if the person is a minor.” In other words, teenagers under the age of 18 may not legally have sex. Even if it is consensual, the parents of either party may press charges and the offending party may be sentenced to prison or be forced to pay a fine.

⁵ <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displaycode?section=pen&group=00001-01000&file=261-269>

* the definition of underage is age 17 or younger

⁶ <http://www.etr.org/recapp/column/column1099.htm>

What if any responsibilities does the State of California have?⁶

Prior to 1999, sexual education classes in California were mandated to teach that abstinence was the only way to ensure 100% protection from STIs and pregnancy. A law passed in 1999 authored by Mike Honda and Jim Cuneen states that California teens should receive honest medically accurate information that can lead them to practice responsible decisions in sexual matters in their sexual education classes. This is significant as it addresses the issue that many California teens are sexually active already and would benefit in instruction involving contraceptives.

Refusal Skills
1. Say "NO"- look and sound like you mean it (assertive communication)
2. Repeat saying "NO". You don't have to give reasons
3. Name some consequences. Try to be specific: "I'm not ready" vs. "I don't want to take the chance of getting pregnant."
4. Suggest something else to do. Ex. Movies, restaurant
5. Separate the issues. Ex. "If you love me, you'll have sex with me." Does having sex always equal love?
6. Tell him/her how you feel. Ex.- I will regret it later - Their pressuring you makes you uncomfortable
7. Take the offensive. Ex. "Why do they keep pressuring you?" "Why have this conversation every time you are alone?" "Do they really care how you feel (respect you) or are they just being selfish?"
8. Leave. Refuse to discuss further, end conversation.

(Planned Parenthood)

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Drugs and alcohol use is a severe problem facing teenagers. It is often linked to teenage sexual activity because these substances impair judgment and make teens more likely to engage in activities that they would not engage in if not under the influence. In the Kaiser Foundation report, fifty-one percent of teens age 15 to 17 and forty percent of teens age 18-24 reported that “they are personally ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ concerned...that you might do more sexually than you planned because you are drinking or using drugs” (Kaiser 7). Teens have problems with sex and alcohol use because, “they are less able to cope with the potential consequences of drinking and using drugs which can undermine decisions about abstaining from sex, having protected sex and also trigger irresponsible and dangerous sexual behavior that can change the course of their lives”, and the fact that teens are less likely to use protection when having sex under the influence leads to increases in teen pregnancy and chances of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Foster 49). It is very important for teenagers to avoid drinking while on a date, because impaired judgment on either the girl or boy’s side may lead to rape and other forced sexual activities. Girls, to avoid the possibility of date rape, should stay sober, avoid parties where there is alcohol and drug use, and talk to their date about not drinking before he starts (Basso 198). Drinking and using drugs can lead to unwanted consequences of sexual activity and can cause regrets in teens for making decisions which conflict with their emotions and which could potentially damage their reputations.

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RANDOM FACTS ABOUT STDs:

One fourth of every person infected with an STD or STI is a teenager, accounting for 3 million infections annually. Teens are more prone to an infection or bacterial virus because of reasons such as a weak and immature immune system. Two thirds of everyone infected is below the age of 25, and approximately 65 million people live with an STD in the United States. Few cases are curable when the 15 million new cases of those infected are measured annually.

For Information regarding Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) or Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) please visit the following websites:

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/WOMENSHEALTH/vaginitis.htm>

<http://herpes-coldsores.com/std/>

<http://www.coolnurse.com/std2.htm>

<http://www.afraidtoask.com/STD/index.html>