

# Families Are Talking

## Adolescents Would Prefer Parents as Primary Sexuality Educators

Virtually everyone agrees that parents and caregivers should be the primary sexuality educators of their children—even children themselves.

Facts show, however, that most parents have abdicated their responsibility. Instead, peers and the media have been the primary sources of sexuality information for America's children since the 1940s.<sup>1</sup>

Recent statistics show that just half of adolescents feel they had one "good talk" about sexuality during the past year with their mothers—and only one third with their fathers.<sup>2</sup>

Equally disturbing, a recent survey shows that 72 percent of mothers claimed they had talked with their teens about sex while only 45 percent of the teens felt their mothers had done so.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, parents and teens do not agree on the meaning of a "good talk."

Most of today's parents have little information upon which to develop a "good talk" about sexuality. While growing up, most did not have sexuality education programs

in their schools and most did not discuss sexuality at home with their parents. In fact, most probably learned about sexuality from their peers, a situation leading either to inaccurate or inadequate information.<sup>4</sup>

As part of our work to educate people about sexuality issues, we hope to provide parents and caregivers with information and guidance to help them communicate more effectively with their children about this important subject.

### Sources

1. B.M. King and J. Lorusso, "Discussions in the Home about Sex: Different Recollections by Parents and Children," *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, vol. 23, pp. 52–60.
2. M. Raffaelli, K. Bogenschneider, and M.F. Flood, "Parent-teen Communication about Sexual Topics," *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 19, pp. 315–33.
3. J. Jaccard and P. Dittus, "Parent-adolescent Communication about Premarital Pregnancy," *Families in Society*, vol. 74, pp. 329–43.
4. W. Kyman, "Sexuality Education for Parents," *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, vol. 21, pp. 153–57.

Adapted from "Parents As First Sexuality Information Sources: Do They Make a Difference in Daughters' Sexual Attitudes and Behavior?," by N.B. Moore et al., *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, vol. 24, no. 3.

### FROM THE EDITOR

*Families Are Talking* is a newsletter containing information to help all parents and caregivers talk to their children about sexuality and related issues.



Illustration © 2000 Dominic Cappello

# But Parents Don't Know When to Start Talking, Much Less What to Talk About

When it comes to talking about sexuality with their children, most parents don't even know when to start talking, let alone what they should talk about. Nearly half of parents of 10 to 12 year olds have not discussed peer pressure and sex with their children. A similar percentage have not even considered when it is appropriate for their children to become involved in sexual activity.

—Deborah Roffman, M.S., sexuality educator  
*Sex & Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking about Sex*



Illustration from "Plain Talk for Parents" by Dominic Cappello

## What Is Family?

Families are as diverse as the world around us. Mothers and fathers head some households. Grandparents head others. Some homes have one parent. Some have two mommies. Others have two daddies. The fact remains that all these people are the primary sexuality educators of their children.

## Tips For TALKING to PARENTS

1. **Approach your parents at a good time.** If they're not in a particularly good mood or are real busy, find a better time. You might even want to set up an "appointment."
2. **Start with more general subjects.** Instead of, "I'm thinking about

- having sex with Jenny," you might say something like, "Do you think teenagers should wait until they're married to have sex?"
3. **Use a TV show, a book, or an article as a starting point.** You can even print a story from the SEX, ETC.

- Web site and show it to your parents. Say something like, "I ran across this story and was wondering what you think about it."
4. **Listen.** Your parents are more than likely to help you if you listen to what they have to say.
5. **Do not yell or argue.** You might disagree

- with them, but you should respect them.
6. **If they start lecturing, remind them that you're just asking questions.** You want to be informed and you figure they're the best source of solid info. Hopefully, that'll do the trick. Good luck!

—SEX, ETC. Web site.

## PEOPLE Talk

"Parents educate infants and toddlers about their sexuality when they talk to them, dress them, cuddle with them, and play with them. Older children continue to learn about sexuality as they develop relationships within their families and observe the interactions around them."

*Debra Haffner, M.P.H., author from Diapers to Dating: A Parents Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children*

"I go to my mom for advice whenever I need it because I have confidence in my mom and I trust her. She wouldn't laugh or tell anyone else. I can talk to my parents about any problems that I have."

*Ann Blair, 15, New Jersey*

"I come from a family where I have learned about sex from my friends. My mother didn't mention it to me. And I still don't know what most of sex and love is all about. So I would like to know because I'm only 14 years of age. And I've seen my friends get pregnant. I'd like to know what it's all about."

*Julie, 14, South Carolina*

"Just as I have advocated ending the legacy of silence about sex in our home, I call on community leaders across America, with all their divergent opinions, to end the legacy of silence in society. Teens need conversations about sexuality in its largest context at school, doctors' offices, clubs, and places of worship so that they can acquire the right facts to care for themselves, and the confidence and judgment to make their own decisions."

*Nathalie Bartle, Ed.D., author Venus in Blue Jeans: Why Mothers and Daughters Need to Talk about Sex*

"For advice, I usually go to my parents, teachers, and friends. I'm comfortable talking to my parents. We have open communication. Some of my teachers give me an unbiased perspective and I've grown to trust some of them."

*Blair Silver, 18, Pennsylvania*

— Excerpts from recent books and current Web sites.

# COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

**1. You are the primary sexuality educator of your children.** They want to talk with you about sexuality and to hear your values.

**2. Find "teachable moments."** Make use of TV shows even if you believe they send the wrong message. Say, "I think that program sent the wrong message. Let me tell you what I believe."

**3. Remember that it is okay to feel uncomfortable.** It is often hard to talk about sexual matters. Relax and tell your children you are going to talk to them because you love them and want to help them.

**4. Don't wait until your children ask questions.** Many never ask. You need to decide what is important for them to know and then tell them before a crisis occurs.

**5. Be "ask-able."** Reward a question with, "I'm glad you came to me." It will teach your children to come to you when they have other questions.

**6. Become aware of the "question behind the question."** The unspoken question, "Am I normal?" is often hiding behind questions about sexual development, sexual thoughts and sexual feelings. Reassure your children as often as possible.

**7. Listen, listen, listen.** Ask them why they want to know and what they already know. That may help you prepare your answer.

**8. Remember that facts are not enough.** Share your feelings, values, and beliefs. Tell your children why you feel the way you do.

**9. Talk about the joys of sexuality.** Tell your children that loving relationships are the best part of life and that intimacy is a wonderful part of adult life.

**10. Remember that you are telling your children that you care about their happiness and well-being.** You are also sharing your values. This is one of the real joys of parenthood.

**11. Know what is taught about sexuality in your schools, faith communities, and youth groups.** Other groups can help. It is often helpful when professionals lead talks.

— *Now What Do I Do? How to Give Your Pre-Teens Your Messages*

SIECUS

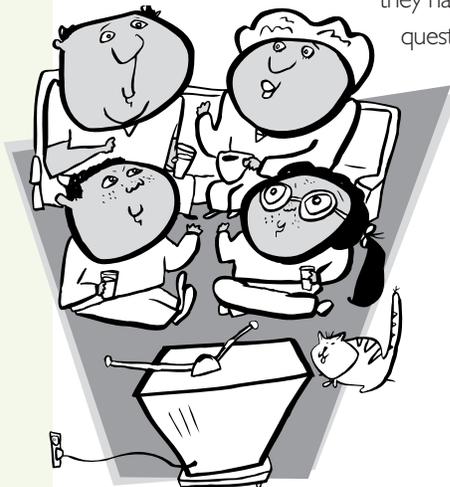


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**VISIT THE SIECUS WEB SITE**

We invite you to regularly visit the "For Parents" and "For Teens" section of the SIECUS Web site (<http://www.siecus.org>) for more information and resources.

**VISIT THESE  
PARENT EDUCATOR SITES**

"Can We Talk?"  
"¿Conversamos?"

information on the National Education Association's parent-child communication trainings on self-esteem, sexuality, puberty, and peer pressure  
<http://www.canwetalk.org>

**Ten Talks**

information on parent-child communication trainings on sexuality, character, violence and drugs  
[www.tentalks.com](http://www.tentalks.com)

Illustrations, except where noted, are from *Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children about Sex and Character* by Pepper Schwartz, Ph.D., and Dominic Cappello.

# Web Sites with Information for Parents and their Children on Talking About Sexuality

**Birds and Bees**

information on birth control, pregnancy, STDs, and links to other sites  
<http://www.birdsandbees.org>

**Campaign for Our Children**

information for both parents and teens on talking about sexuality  
<http://www.cfoc.org>

**Coalition for Positive Sexuality**

information for teens who are sexually active or who are thinking about becoming sexually active  
<http://www.positive.org>

**Go Ask Alice!**

q&a site including information on relationships, sexuality, and sexual health  
<http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu>

**gURL**

information on issues that affect the lives of girls 13 years of age and older  
<http://www.gurl.com>

**It's Your (Sex) Life**

information for older teenagers about pregnancy, contraception, and STDs  
<http://www.itsyoursexlife.com>

**Iwannaknow**

a safe and fun place for teenagers to learn about sexual health and for parents to receive guidance  
<http://www.iwannaknow.org>

**National Parent Information Center**

research-based information on parenting and family involvement in education  
<http://www.npin.org>

**Outproud**

information for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth  
<http://www.outproud.org>

**Planned Parenthood Federation of America**

information on "How to Be a Good Parent," "How to Talk with Your Child About Sexuality," "How to Talk with Your Teen About the Facts of Life," and "Human Sexuality: What Children Should Know"  
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/library/SEXUALITYEDUCATION/DEFAULT.HTM>

**Scarleteen**

advice, articles, and information addressing sexuality and sexual health issues for children and parents  
<http://www.scarleteen.com>

**Sex Ed Mom**

advice, live monthly chats, teaching tips, and video clips for parents  
[http://thriveonline.oxygen.com/sex/experts/sex\\_ed\\_mom/index.html](http://thriveonline.oxygen.com/sex/experts/sex_ed_mom/index.html)

**SEX, ETC.**

information, advice, and resources by teens for teens (and parents, too)  
<http://www.sexetc.org>

**Sex Sense**

advice and quizzes for and by teens  
<http://www.ppsp.org/tpe.html>

**Sextalk**

information on safer sex, self exams, and sexual orientation  
<http://www.sextalk.org>

**SIECUS**

starting place for teens to learn about sexuality issues  
<http://www.siecus.org>

**Talking With Kids about Tough Issues**

encouragement for parents to talk with their children early and often about sexuality issues  
<http://www.talkingwithkids.org>

**Teen Advice Online (TAO)**

information on teen problems through a worldwide network of peers 13 years of age and older  
<http://www.teenadvice.org>

**Teen Scene**

information from the Advocates for Youth Web site  
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/corner.htm>

**Teenwire**

sexuality and sexual health information for teens  
<http://www.teenwire.com>

**Youth Resource**

information and peer support for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth  
<http://www.youthresource.org>



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