

Let's Talk Month 2003

Sample Op Ed

As teenagers, many of us remember 'the talk'. Perhaps our father nervously pushed a pamphlet about sex across the kitchen table, mumbling a few words about how we should read it and check back with him with questions. Or maybe our mother's 'talk' with us about sex boiled down to warnings like, "You better not be doing anything you are not supposed to!" a response that may have easily been about driving our parents' car rather than sex. In many cases, we did not learn about sexual health, relationships, or how to resist peer pressure, from our parents at all, picking up bits and pieces of the puzzle from friends or siblings.

Today, we know that whether you're talking or not, your children and teens listen, watch, and learn from your own relationships, the way you act with others and care for yourself, how you talk to them, and if and how you answer their questions. Teens themselves are clear about their expectations of their parents; they want their parents to talk to them about sex.

A publication of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, "*Voices Carry*", summarizes teen perspectives on preventing teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. A 17 year old girl writes, "Parents have to talk to their children about sex and tell them what they think is right. Parents are the ones that we listen to most. Even if parents don't think their kids are listening, you'd be amazed at how many really are."

Often, parents skirt the issue about talking to their children and teens about sexual health with the expectation that the schools teach them what they should know. Our children and teens spend most of their days at school, and parents count on the schools to provide quality, factual sexuality education dealing with a range of issues. A national study, released last month, by the Kaiser Family Foundation indicates that a majority of those surveyed think the schools should provide comprehensive sexuality education. Parents expect schools to play an important role in promoting positive sexual health, including information about abstinence and contraception, peer pressure, love, sexual assault, and same-sex relationships.

The findings complement those of the Minnesota Sexuality Education Survey, commissioned by the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention, and Parenting, in which 91% of Minnesotans surveyed believe that comprehensive sexuality education gives youth the information they need to make responsible choices. Survey findings also indicated that Minnesotans disagree with the claims that combining messages of abstinence and contraception sends mixed messages (67%) or encourages teenagers to have sex (80%).

Sadly, while a majority of parents expect the schools to educate their children and youth about sexual health, other surveys indicate that funding for the type of education parents want continues to decrease. Over \$50 million of Federal funding each year can only be spent on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs by the states, prohibiting accurate information about birth control and other issues.

If we as parents are not talking to our teens and the schools run into difficulty providing the sexuality education we want because of political maneuvering, who is talking to our young people about sex? Friends, television, and movies are teaching our children their attitudes towards sex, not parents and loved ones.

We know that teens are less likely to engage in risky behaviors if they feel closely connected to the adults in their lives, at home and at school. Connecting involves communicating honestly, respectfully, and consistently. Every time we ask teens their advice for dealing with teen pregnancy, we hear: adults need to tell us the truth, they need to help us deal with the pressures, they need to respect us and listen to us, and they need to set good examples for us.

October is “Let’s Talk” Month, a statewide celebration encouraging parents to talk to their children and teens about sexual health, values, beliefs and family expectations. Forget about “The Talk”. This is an eighteen-year conversation about love, relationships, values, and sexual health. Talk to sons as well as daughters. Boys need to know that teen pregnancy happens to them too. Parents need to talk to boys and girls about consequences, responsibility, relationships and values. Educate yourself about what is taught about sexuality in your schools, churches, temples, and youth groups. Parents and schools need to work together to assure that our young people have the opportunity to grow up healthy, to learn how to make good decisions, and to develop positive relationships.

Our children and teens depend on us to talk to them openly, honestly, and respectfully. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other caring adult in a young person’s life, consider their future health. Talk to them. Listen to them. Be available to answer all of their questions. Young lives are depending on you.

Nancy Nelson
Executive Director
Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention, and Parenting
1619 Dayton Avenue
Suite 111
St. Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-644-1447