

Best time for 'The Talk'? Early

By **PATRICE RELERFORD**, Star Tribune

April 6, 2008

Dana Leach looked worried but energized as she left a workshop mainly for elementary and middle school parents about discussing sex with their children.

Leach's daughter is 12 years old and in seventh grade. They had talked about sex before. But after the workshop, she said they'll discuss it again because "you really need to hit this no later than junior high."

Hopkins School District staff members and counselors from a local teen clinic who led the workshop last week said they're grateful for the recent attention caused by a study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that found that one in four teen girls in the United States has a sexually transmitted disease.

School officials weren't shocked by the study and other bad news, including the recent increase in teen pregnancies. In a way, the headlines help them do their jobs. They make parents more aware of a crisis they've watched escalate for years.

While sex education in schools is caught between budget cuts and the debate over sex education, teens are still being teens. So school health officials said their main goal is to help students as much as possible during school and equip parents to discuss sex, too.

Media images and negative peer influences cause some students to develop worrisome attitudes about sex years before their first health class, said social worker Sharon MacDonald. She runs Hopkins' Reduce the Use coalition, which deals mainly with alcohol and drugs but also works to help teens develop healthy relationships.

For instance, many students believe oral sex really doesn't count as sex, and they don't know they can contract STDs such as herpes or chlamydia from unprotected oral sex.

"We tell them that if it ends in sex, it's sex," said Marit Lee-Dohse, a Hopkins High School health teacher.

Hopkins High's licensed school nurse offered this warning: "It's too late [to start discussing sex] when they get to high school," Bobby Pointer said. The parents fell silent.

Josefina Montero, of Minnetonka, said her son doesn't ask about sex, but she doesn't plan to wait until he does. "Now I know what's going on outside of my house."

Clinic talks are in demand

The West Suburban Teen Clinic in Excelsior, Annex Teen Clinic in Robbinsdale, Teen Age Medical Services (TAMS) in Minneapolis and other area clinics with ties to schools assist with customized community outreach programs on request.

And requests are pouring in.

"We go anywhere that people want us," said Emily Scribner-O'Pray, TAMS' community services supervisor. But "there's usually more demand than we have staff to accommodate."

Like its suburban counterparts, the Minneapolis teen clinic co-hosts peer education groups at local schools and helps arrange parent workshops upon request.

"We don't have to drum up business," said Brooke Stelzer, Annex Teen Clinic's health education director. "Schools put us on their calendar," and so do community groups.

Annex served almost 12,000 people last year at its clinic and through school and community programs. It also makes an effort to reach out to boys because they're less likely to reach out to local clinics.

Torey Aspelund and Sameer Adam, both 17, recently participated in a Twin Cities Public Television production called "Sexy Without Sex," in which students from metro-area high schools discussed sexual health. They've taken health classes at Robbinsdale Cooper High School and are familiar with Annex Teen Clinic in Robbinsdale.

"People talk about [sex] all the time," Adam said about why he agreed to be interviewed. Besides, Aspelund said, "it's better to be aware of it than pretend it's not there."

Health officials say students like the Robbinsdale Cooper seniors are several steps ahead of many of their peers. Because Minnesota doesn't have a comprehensive sexual education policy, "every school is different" regarding who is allowed to visit health classrooms or after-school groups, Stelzer said.

Many adults believe talking about sex increases the likelihood preteens and teens will engage in sex. Stelzer said that isn't true.

"It's difficult to make good decisions if you don't have correct information," she said.

Commendable efforts

Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District and Park Nicollet Health Services opened a free medical clinic for district students in 2006 at Burnsville High School's senior campus.

Under state law, Burnsville's Diamondhead Clinic must treat minors with sexually transmitted diseases and conditions related to pregnancy. So far they haven't conducted sexual health outreach programs, Park Nicollet spokesman Jeremiah Whitten said.

Brigid Riley, executive director of the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Planning (MOAPP) commended Hopkins and other districts for partnering with clinics to conduct outreach.

Last month, MOAPP reported that the number of children born to mothers in their teens increased statewide between 2005 and 2006, reversing a 20-year decline. A more detailed report with county-by-county data soon will be available.

Leach also applauded Hopkins officials. She wishes more parents were comfortable with sex education or "stepped up to the plate" to help their kids.

"I think this should start in seventh grade," she said. But "apparently a lot of parents would have problems with that."

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