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Good news and bad news about teens' sex habits

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THE NEWS OUT of Washington late last week was that teenagers are waiting longer to have sex and are using contraceptives when they do.

How do we know this is true? I mean, you know kids.

Researchers for the National Survey of Family Growth, under the Department of Health and Human Services, went into the homes of 3,000 teens ages 15-19 and asked them. And they talked to both boys and girls for the first time.

When the questions got sticky, the researchers handed their laptops to the teens, gave them headphones through which to hear the questions, and let them type in their answers anonymously.

"This is the real deal," said Bill Albert, spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "This is the gold standard for research."

The news on the teen-sexuality front is almost all positive these days.

Teen births are down 33 percent, teen pregnancies are down 28 percent. Sexual activity is down, and the age of first intercourse is up.

Ninety percent of the boys report using condoms, and 83 percent of the girls report using contraceptives.

And many of the teens report using both the pill and a condom to reduce not only the chance of pregnancy, but also the chance of contracting AIDS or some other sexually transmitted disease.

But if you pick through the numbers from this report, you can find some that alarm you.

For example, for the first time since the study began in 1973, more girls (47 percent) reported having had sex than boys (46 percent).

That is probably what science would call a statistical tie, but it flies in the face of the way parents continue to talk to their children about sex.

"The girls are told not to have sex. The boys are told to be careful," says Albert, a parent himself.

That does not keep pace with the other message we are giving our children: "Girls can do whatever boys can do."

This empowerment theme is good in matters of sports, college and careers. But it needs a little filling out when it comes to sex.

"Make your own decisions, but make sure you still respect yourself in the morning," we should tell our girls.

"You don't have to have sex to prove anything to anybody. And you don't have to act on every randy impulse the way boys have been permitted to do for generations."

The fact is, parents are about a generation behind when it comes to dealing with their teenage sons and daughters. They still think girls need to be protected from boys.

The fact is, the pack mentality that we have long attributed to boys is just as present among girls.

Girls are as verbally and physically aggressive on matters of sex as boys ever were. They not only bully their girlfriends on the topic, they bully the boys.

The National Campaign just completed a series of focus groups in Charlotte, N.C., Chicago and Los Angeles, and those observing the teens interact behind the mirrored wall were surprised at how rough the girls were, Albert said.

"Their attitudes and their language were much rougher than the boys," he said.

The National Campaign will release this week results of its own survey. In it, 57 percent of boys said girls were just as sexually aggressive as boys, and 13 percent said girls were more so.

And 51 percent of girls described themselves as at least as sexually aggressive as teen boys.

This attitude might help explain why more girls report having had sex than boys. At the very least, it conjures an incongruous vision of girls as predators.

But there is a flip side to this sexual assertiveness among girls, and it is a good one.

Girls are much more matter-of-fact about carrying condoms. They no longer think it means you are "looking for it." It just means you are prepared.

The fact that girls increasingly take the pill and use condoms speaks volumes. The message that girls need to be responsible for their own sexual health and well-being has gotten through, and it is at least as important as the message that girls need to take charge of their own sexual pleasure.

The bottom line is this: Parents can take some comfort from the fact the federal survey is showing that teens are delaying their first sexual experiences - especially the 15- to 17-year-olds - and they are protecting themselves when they do have sex.

But parents also have to recognize this: The old stereotype of the hormone-driven teenage boy and the virginal teenage girl is as outdated as Lou Christie's old song about lightning striking again.

The night sky above our kids is crackling with that lightning. And it can strike any of them.

Parents can't keep hoping the storm will simply pass them by.