



## EVERYONE'S DOING WHAT?

Sexting. Rainbow parties. Heaven knows what on the Internet. How do you go up against the culture when your daughter's friends are doing things you never even heard of?

Aimee Lee Ball gets some direction from sex therapist Laura Berman (*above*).



**Q:** How is the high-tech world—cell phones, online social networks, the Internet—affecting teenage sex?

**A:** There's a new phenomenon called sexting. A recent survey done by Teenage Research Unlimited found that 22 percent of girls have sent nude or seminude images of themselves to boys on their cell phones, and not necessarily to their boyfriends, even though 75 percent of teens understand that this behavior may be risky. Facebook and other networking sites can get really provocative, and the next tier is the media and MTV, where images of women are very sexualized. So it seems normal to put yourself out there in an overtly sexual way. The social norms have changed, and social access has changed. It's a perfect storm.

**Q:** How can a mother protect her daughter from the dangers of early sex?

**A:** It's natural to talk about the bad stuff: pregnancy, STDs, pedophiles, rapists, death. And that's not to be ignored, but it's also important to talk to her about having a sense of control and pride over her body, and to let her know there are ways she can make herself feel good before she's ready for sex, like self-stimulation.

**Q:** Seriously? Mothers should talk about masturbation?

**A:** If you want to raise a sexually healthy daughter, yes. That may mean attending to your own sexual health. A lot of women grew up with the idea that masturbation is wrong or dirty. I can't tell you the number of women who were told not to wash "down there" with their hands, to use a washcloth—a separate washcloth.

**Q:** When do you start discussing sex?

**A:** From the time kids are very young, even toddlers, you should use the correct terms for body parts and normalize self-exploration, not slap their hands away. And you don't have just one talk. By age 10, you should start talking about safe sex.

**Q:** What about teenagers? How do you reach them?

**A:** I believe in asking a lot of questions: "What do you talk about with your friends?" "Are there any boys you like?" Or you might say, "I was reading this article and it was going on about rainbow parties, where different girls give a guy oral sex, and he sees how many colors of lipstick he can collect on his penis by the end of the night. And that really scared me. I understand how powerful a boy's attention can make you feel, and I want you to have all of that excitement. My hope is that you understand the risks." You talk with her about the "morning after" and feelings of shame and embarrassment if the guy blows her off, or if people are talking about her. You move her through the process rather than giving her a didactic lecture.

**Q:** Isn't a 15-year-old girl going to roll her eyes and say, "I already know that, Mom"?

**A:** You can control a 15-year-old only so much. Sometimes the best you can do is express your fears: "I understand that you are a woman in many ways. You are old enough to make your own decisions, but here's what I'm scared of..." If you're talking about posting sexy photos on the Internet, you can say: "I see how it would be fun, and you're a beautiful girl. But there's no guarantee that the college you want to attend or a prospective employer won't google them. Those pictures are there for time immemorial."

**Q:** What do you think about snooping around in your daughter's e-mail, MySpace page, surfing history?

**A:** As tempting as it is, it's extremely damaging if she finds out. I have three sons, and even though the oldest is only 12, my rule of thumb is: no computers in private spaces. They're in the family room, where I'm nearby, with parental controls up. That's not to say he won't go to a friend's house. And they use code words with each other, like MOS, which is "mom over shoulder." At some point you have to let go, but that means continuing to have the conversation even when they roll their eyes. And it means not being judgmental or punitive. "Tell me anything"—you make that the mantra. **Q**