

Let's Talk About Sex

With teen pregnancy making headlines, it's a good time for parents to get their heads out of the sand and get real with their kids about sex.

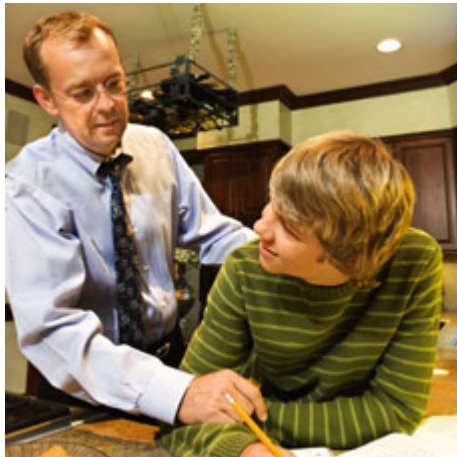
By Laura Beil

First Love

She was 17, coasting through her senior year in a Texas high school, when the breakup came. Her boyfriend, who had pledged his love forever, decided forever had arrived. She spent hours in her room in inconsolable grief. She picked at her food. She fell behind in her schoolwork. On a scale of one to ten, the pain was 100.

Her mother was familiar with the amplified emotions of youth. Still, she couldn't fathom her daughter's heartbreak. Timidly she began asking leading questions: Why was this guy so special? Had they been ... intimate? One day, the girl blurted, "Yes, Mom, I had sex with him."

The two, it turned out, had been having intercourse for more than a year, finding opportunity at his empty house after school. Her mother couldn't bring herself to tell the girl's father.



Teens may seem shy at first, but they want to talk about sex

Could this be your daughter? The latest government figures say 63 percent of high school seniors have had sexual intercourse. And surveys show that about four in ten sexually experienced teen girls say their parents don't know. How could they, when a third of all teens say a parent has never discussed sex candidly with them?

"Parents are like ostriches sometimes," says Claire Brindis, an adolescent health expert at the University of California, San Francisco. "They bury their heads in the ground and say, If I don't recognize it, it won't happen."

But happen it does. In December, 16-year-old Jamie Lynn Spears, popular with young fans of Nickelodeon's *Zoey 101*, revealed she was pregnant. That news closely followed the announcement by CDC officials that in 2006 teen pregnancy rates rose for the first time in 15 years. Add the box office success of the movie *Juno*, a PG-13 tale about a pregnant high school student, and parents have plenty of fresh reasons to make sex a topic of household conversation.

Reality Check: 63% of high school seniors have had intercourse.

The Media's Role

When children shroud their behavior in secrecy, they lose open, caring connections to adults who can help them make thoughtful decisions. These connections are especially important in matters of sex, since the stakes are high and sex seems ubiquitous in the popular culture.

Gone are the days when it was racy for Barbara Eden to bare her midriff on *I Dream of Jeannie*. Today, almost eight in ten prime-time shows contain sexual content, with an average of nearly six sex-related scenes per hour. One Kaiser Family Foundation analysis found that -- at a time when provocative styles blur the lines between child, adolescent and adult -- most of what's in popular teen magazines aimed at girls focuses on appearance, fashion and dating.

Says Sarah Brown, CEO of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, "Teenagers are under a lot of pressure to be sexually active." Nationwide polling by the group has found most boys believe sexual activity is expected of them as teens, and most girls believe attracting boys and looking sexy are among the most important things they can do.

This cultural ideal is potent, says Natasha Ramsey, an 18-year-old editor at *Sex, Etc.*, a teen-

produced magazine and website based at Rutgers University. If teens become convinced that sex among their peers is more common or glamorous than it really is, she says, they may have sex "just so they can feel normal." That's how it was for one New York City girl who says she was drawn to sex at 15, largely to prove her relationship with her first boyfriend (he was older and sexually experienced) was more than a juvenile crush: "I felt I truly did love him."

Like her, most teenagers don't view sex lightly. About half of boys and about four in five girls say they have their first sexual encounter while in a steady relationship, according to a 2006 report from research group Child Trends. About one in four has sex once with the first partner.

Yannick LeJacq, 18, another *Sex, Etc.* staffer, says one concern among high schoolers is "thinking about how they don't want to be virgins when they go to college." Torn between external forces pushing them toward sex, and internal forces pulling them back, many end up worried about doing it and not doing it.

That ambivalence may help explain why about two-thirds of teens who've had sex say they wish they'd waited. "You really can't fully understand it," the New York girl says, "until you make the same mistake."

Adults can play a major part in resolving this inner struggle. Brown's anti-teen-pregnancy campaign has found that kids, asked about the most influential voices in their decisions to have sex, rate parents much higher than their peers or the media. Asked the same question, parents underestimate their importance.

Reality Check: 88% of teens say talking with parents helps delay sex.

The Infamous Talk

Even those who know their power may not know what to say, or how to say it, once their baby becomes a sullen adolescent. They may mentally prepare a quick speech to deliver on the eve of puberty, but the foundation for a child's behavior is laid down in layers, over time, not built in one night at the dinner table.

"The Talk is not the way to think about this," Brown says. "It's really an 18-year conversation." Parents need to make themselves "askable" by sharing suitable information as soon as their kids grow curious about love, relationships and their own bodies.

Take Carolyn Davis, who graduated from a Dallas high school last year. From the time she was 12, her mother talked with her candidly about sexuality. "I used to cringe," Carolyn says. "I would be, like, 'Mom, can you just not talk anymore?' She would totally keep going."

In the end, no matter how much they fidget or roll their eyes, teens want to know someone will find them even when they become hard to reach.

A middle school librarian, Carolyn's mother has seen the impact early sexual activity has. "I really wanted to save her from that," says Carol Davis. She doesn't want her daughter to fear sex as an adult but hopes she won't view it blithely now. So far, her approach seems to be working.

"I know a girl who had a baby when she was 16 or 17," Carolyn says. "She doesn't think further than, 'What am I going to do next weekend?'"

The reasons one teen has sex and another doesn't are as different as each child, but many who aren't sexually active come from homes where conversations about sex are clear and comfortable. Sherri Alexander decided early on to discuss sexuality openly in her house.

When her son, Matt, started sixth grade, the Dallas mom rented the raunchy teen-sex comedy *American Pie*. Then she and Matt watched the whole movie together. "I thought, 'If I watch this with him,'" she says, "then he'll know, hopefully, he can talk to me about anything."

She was right. It was weird, Matt says, watching sex scenes while listening to his mother's running commentary. Yet the high school senior says he now has "an open dialogue with my

mom that keeps on going, about anything, including sex." Above all, he knows his parents expect him not to view sex casually or carelessly.

Matt's attitude isn't unusual. While adults may go gray thinking about a pregnant Jamie Lynn Spears or a book like *Restless Virgins*, last year's tale of sexual recklessness at an elite boarding school, today's teens, on the whole, are making better choices than their counterparts did ten years ago.

Still, upsetting deviations can rise to urban legend. Parents who worry, for example, about the trendy term "friends with benefits" -- something between monogamy and a one-night stand -- should know there is little evidence that it's anything more than a catchy new name for an age-old practice.

Everyone Else Is Doing It ... Or Are They?

In truth, among all high school students, freshmen to seniors, less than half report ever having sex, a big drop from the early 1990s (though even before the CDC's December announcement, many experts worried that the trend had stalled in recent years).

What accounts for the change? Scientists understand less than they'd like. "It's what everybody wants to know," says Dr. John Santelli, an adolescent health expert formerly with the CDC.

For starters, today's teens make up the first generation born and raised under the specter of AIDS. Pregnancy has also become less socially acceptable in many circles. And, some experts say, access to more information makes for better choices.

Those who aren't having sex, meanwhile, are more open about their choice. Brooke Johnson, who is active in Texas's taxpayer-funded Virginity Rules abstinence campaign, says that when she first joined the program, in junior high, some kids teased her. Now, as a senior, "I really don't get a negative response anymore."

But she worries about peers who pin their hopes on romances held together largely with sex. "The signal to kids from the media is that you have to find that special someone," she says.

"You can't let that loneliness push you to the

point where you're, like, 'The only way he'll stay around is if I have sex with him.'"

That's where a parent's voice has power. While it's normal for children to reject their families as they grow into adulthood, Natasha Ramsey, the *Sex, Etc.* editor, believes parents "should really try to talk to their child, not necessarily to find out whether their child is having sex but to find out what their child thinks about having sex."

In the end, no matter how much they fidget or roll their eyes, teens want to know someone will find them even when they become hard to reach.

5 Simple Rules for Parents To Live By

Follow these tips when discussing sex with your kids, and you'll help them make wise choices.

- 1. Don't panic.** If events in the media or real life push the topic up front, don't overreact.
- 2. Don't lecture.** Rather, ask questions to gauge attitudes.
- 3. Ditch the Talk.** One quick, awkward chat won't do. Start a conversation instead.
- 4. Communicate your values.** Kids need to know parents' beliefs.

5. Pay attention to the media children consume. Your influence matters, but know what you're up against.

Oral Sex: Hype vs. Facts

The lurid theory that fewer teens are getting pregnant because they're substituting oral sex for intercourse isn't backed by facts.

"The perception in the media and the culture has been that there's this explosion of oral sex," says Columbia University public health expert Dr. John Santelli.

Not true, he says. Of those ages 15 to 17, 44 percent of boys and 42 percent of girls say they've had oral sex. Data from 1995 (the earliest available) to 2002 show almost no change in the figure for boys. Long-term data for girls doesn't exist, but Santelli has seen no evidence of an increase.