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AnyBODY

Carolyn Butler

The sex life of teens is still enough to drive a parent gaga

Nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, will make you feel older (and lamer) than discussing the dating and mating habits of today's teenagers.

I mean, it wasn't so long ago that I was young, hooking up and rolling my eyes at my mother, Tipper Gore and any other adult who bemoaned my generation's raunchy clothes, dirty music lyrics and generally loose ways. But once I became a mother myself, I developed a reflex that causes me to raise my eyebrows and gasp every time another adolescent sex-related headline appears: Chlamydia outbreaks in middle school! Oral-sex parties! Mass sexting! Bristol Palin, Jámie Lynn Spears and other babies having babies!

But while it may be our natural, god-given right to freak out about the sex lives of adolescents — and though it does seem as if unfettered access to the likes of Lady Gaga's disco stick, Ludacris's sex room and the wilds of the Internet have helped take burgeoning sexuality to a whole new level — it appears that young people today really aren't any more promiscuous than we were. In fact, in the aggregate they're actually less so, according to a new study from the Centers for Disease



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43 percent
of boys 15 to 19
years old report
having had sex
(down from
55 percent
in 1988)

42 percent
of girls in same
age group report
having had sex
(down from
51 percent
in 1988)

Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.

This survey of more than 2,700 teenagers across the country found that 43 percent of boys and 42 percent of girls between ages 15 and 19 say they have had sex, a figure that's more or less unchanged since 2002 and compares with 55 percent of boys and 51 percent of girls in 1988. The new data, from 2006 to 2008, also showed that contraceptive use has remained steady in recent years, with 87 percent of boys and 79 percent of girls reporting that they employed some form of birth control the first time they had sex.

"The good news is that we've been able to at least hold the line on the number of kids still deciding to wait on becoming sexually active," says Kathy Woodward, medical director of the Adolescent Health Center at Children's National Medical Center. "For those of us who believe in prevention and education, we'd like to nudge that number higher, but at least we're staying the course, especially when you consider all of the media influences out there."

Bill Albert, chief program officer for

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Research shows only mixed results in efforts to tame teen sex

SEX CONTINUED FROM E1

the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, agrees: "I think that many adults look at teen culture as a blur of bare midriffs and think that things are only getting worse [when it comes to sexual activity], but I don't think the data from the past two or three decades supports that." He points out that teen pregnancy is down roughly 39 percent since its peak in 1990, according to other CDC statistics.

Great progress, for sure, but it's not the whole story. Albert admits that despite an overall decline in pregnancies over the last two decades, the stats also revealed a slight uptick in 2005, the most recent year for which there are data. "At the end of the day," says Woodward, the news on teen sex "is really a mixed bag. Many sexually experienced teens are using contraception, for example, but the bad news is they're not using it consistently enough, and the condom appears to be losing some ground, which is a concern in terms of rising teen birth rates."

On this note, she's also alarmed about the significant jump in the number of teens using the spectacularly ineffective "rhythm method" as birth control — now 17 percent of girls, up from 11 percent in 2002. Woodward further points out that another recent CDC report found that one in four adolescent females has a sexually transmitted infection such as human papillomavirus or chlamydia. "Unfortunately, STI rates are also mirroring how we're going to do with HIV rates,



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which have been slowly creeping up, especially for young women," she explains.

Some teens are more at risk than others when it comes to worrisome sexual activity — and it's not always the young people you might expect. For example, last month, researchers from the Medical University of South Carolina reported that overweight girls are more likely than their thin peers to have sex before age 13, to have multiple partners as teens and to have unprotected sex.

In our household, the sex talk at the moment is limited to precocious toddler questions

such as "Mommy, why do you and daddy sleep in the same bed — what do you do in there?" I can gloss over the nitty-gritty issues for now, but I also know that I will be begging for candid communication soon enough, since experts stress that it is key to good teen decision-making. Recalling that I remained tight-lipped on all boy-related matters with my own mother, I can't help but wonder what parents can do when it comes to helping kids open up about dating and mating.

For one thing, accept that it's going to be a challenge, says Christopher Daddis, an assistant

professor of psychology at Ohio State University who researched how 222 teenagers talked to their parents about dating and sex for a recent study in the *Journal of Adolescence*. He found that girls tend to disclose more about crushes, relationships and other dating topics than boys, that both sexes prefer to share such information with their mothers rather than their fathers, and that they were equally reticent to discuss sex, per se, with either parent. Younger teens had a higher level of communication than older adolescents on all topics, and those who reported a greater level of trust with their parents also opened up more about sex — especially girls.

"Really, it comes down to creating this climate where children are going to be comfortable telling you about any issue in their life," says Daddis, acknowledging that keeping some aspects of life private from Mom and Dad is, clearly, a normal part of growth and development. "It's not parents' nagging or asking about their children's sex lives that is good for decreasing problem behavior; it's having the kid voluntarily tell you what they're up to. That's where that information and knowledge needs to come from, in order to make a real difference."

I, for one, am going to start by trying to control my head-shaking and gasp reflex the next time another appalling story about teen sex appears on the evening news, play it cool and take it from there.

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